

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_212052

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No.

823 / P345

Accession No.

22 47 2

Author

Payne, Robert

Title

Singapore River

This book should be returned on or before the date
last marked below.

SINGAPORE RIVER

A Shovel by

ROBERT PAYNE

Author of

THE MOUNTAINS AND THE STARS
(*Valentin Tikhonov*)

THE SONG OF THE PEASANT
(*Robert Young*)

A YOUNG MAN LOOKS AT EUROPE
(*Robert Young*)



WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
LONDON TORONTO

FIRST PUBLISHED MARCH 1942
REPRINTED JUNE 1942

WAR ECONOMY

*This book is produced in complete
conformity with authorised economy
standards*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

FOR
WANG SHEN SHIH
IN GRATITUDE

The Seal of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud:



THREE POEMS BY LU LUN

I

The east wind blow over the green mountains.
I see a thousand green houses in my dreams,
But when shall I arrive at our meeting-place?
Over the plains float the curling clouds,
Palaces and castles stand in the setting sun;
Who remembers the scholar who fought the Tartars?
Grey-haired, I stand alone at the pass of Ch'in.

II

Dark night. The wild geese fly high.
The Huns are fleeing, fleeing.
O pray for daylight and the cavalry charge!
Let the snow conceal our bows and knives.

In the dark forest the grass is frightened by the wind.
Our pennons gleam among the swallow-tails.
Waving proudly above the army, our standards
Listen to a thousand shouting voices.

In the desert the tents are filled with food.
Now the warriors celebrate the victory,
Drinking and dancing together in iron mail
They hear the thunder of our drums and the mountain rivers.

III

The old soldier journeys along the road.
A thousand li, still without a home.
He searches the horizon for his homestead,
But finds only a buried city.
The autumn wind pierces his golden scars.

I

ALL morning the herd-boys tended the buffaloes at the foot of Liu mountains. They wore red and green scarves, short blue trousers and birch-bark sandals. Half-asleep, they lay on the buffaloes' backs, occasionally singing or playing on their flutes, drowsy with the heat which came beating up from the earth. Earlier in the morning the valley had been blotted out by mist, but now the mist had cleared, leaving the cliffs green and wet, full of mountain streams and silver springs, and down below lay the river and the young shoots of rice like a mirror reflecting the burnished blue sky.

In the Liu valley rain and mist descend without warning. In winter the rain streams down the cliffs, washing out the stones and silting the rice-fields and tea-plantations, and in summer the sun bakes the earth to a yellow crust impressed with the iron footsteps of horses and men. But in spring the earth was still green, and through the long grass of the uplands fishes slipped into the great river below. The sun rose high above the cliffs, and the heat rained down like sharp spears of brass, and when the rice-sparrows came wheeling into the sunlight they changed colour, no longer white or grey, but the deep bronze of the interior of a bell. From the slopes the herd-boys looked down on the walled village of Ai-lin, with its squat drum-tower and small red-roofed temples. Blue-hooded carts came rumbling over the dusty cart-tracks, inaudible until they turned the corners, and the blue coats of the tea-pickers in the distant tobacco fields were clearly visible in the pure, transparent air. Tiger drowsed as he rode his buffalo. The sun grew warmer and warmer on his round forehead and on his legs and hands, while blue midges flew in swarms over the long grasses. He had never known a day in spring so hot as this.

At the foot of the cliffs lay a small temple. The walls were painted red outside, but inside they were white and cool, and there were golden altar-cloths and porcelain vases and a small bronze Buddha. On one side of the altar hung a scroll with the

words: "*Out of the thousand calamities rises the everlasting peace*" Tiger's heart swelled with pride when he saw it, for it was written by his grandfather. He laughed, showing his teeth, and his bare chest rippled with explosions of joy. He was small and slender, with a bald forehead and a long pigtail. He peered into the open doorway, gazing at the scroll with the thick black characters painted on tea-coloured silk, until suddenly the shadows of wild geese, flying high overhead, startled him and made him run into the open where Small Dragon was pointing to the sky and jumping up and down on the buffalo's back.

"It's a bad omen," Small Dragon said. "Someone is going to die in the village, or at least something very terrible is going to happen."

"Not a single person died in the village last year, but the wild geese came all the same," Tiger answered, staring at the bright specks of bronze in the sky.

"Old Mother Baldhead nearly died," Small Dragon said triumphantly.

"She was sick for four days, that's all," Tiger replied hotly. "The doctor pinched her neck and put poultices on her feet, and that was all that happened, because she has got the fish-bone still inside her. The old midwife broke her teeth on a water-chestnut, but that happens ever year. No, they don't bring misfortune."

Tiger climbed on the buffalo and gazed steadily at Small Dragon, who wore a longer scarf than any of the herd-boys and who played the flute better than anyone in Ai-lin. He hoped Small Dragon would not take affront, Small Dragon who was a slave and who lived with his mother in the Green Kingdom of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud, while Tiger lived with his family in the Red Kingdom, where he was usually known as Ti and where he wore a gown and hid his hands in his long sleeves and shuffled patiently over the polished floor, bowing and twittering as he followed grandfather everywhere with writing-brush and ink-stone.

"Tiger, look out, look out!" someone was shouting, and Tiger turned and watched the wild geese wheeling back over the ochre walls of the village. Making a sound like scratching

ice, they came in two straight lines meeting at an apex. Nothing else could be heard, only the strange scratching sound of their wings and the uninterrupted high-pitched whistling. Tiger followed their flight with shaded eyes until they disappeared at last in a solid bar of shadow below the cliffs, but he heard them long after the sound of their wings had died away, for they left a kind of throbbing tremor in the air. He looked up at the sun, and suddenly remembered it was time to go-

"It's time to go," he said regretfully. "There won't be any misfortunes in the village, because the wild geese came back."

"Why must you go?" Small Dragon asked tenderly, holding out his hand and thinking of the Red Kingdom, which he had never entered.

Tiger shrugged his shoulders.

"Grandfather wants me to work," he said, and suddenly he began to run down the slope, tears filling his eyes, while the herd-boys played their flutes and shouted encouragingly after him. When they could no longer see him his pace slackened to a walking pace. The sun shone directly overhead, and he threw a small crab-like shadow as black as the paste of ink in the ink-stone which lay on every shelf of the house. Inside the house he would be imprisoned for the rest of the day, unless grandfather went to visit the neighbours. He walked under the drum-tower, paddling with his hands in order to walk faster, but when he reached the vermilion gates of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud, he held back and refused to go in until he heard his sister calling to him.

There were three kingdoms in the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud. The Green Kingdom faced the north and received the full force of the autumn rains. Here lived the slave-girls, the sedan carriers, 'Chu the gate-keeper and herds of pigs and chickens and snow-white geese. The slave-girls were rarely allowed to leave the enclosure except to fetch water from the village well. In the morning they toiled in the court-yard. In the evening they gossiped under the cedars or listened to the canaries or fed the green trout in the pool or sent messages through 'Chu to the village boys. The Green Kingdom was the province of cooking-pots and wash-tubs, copper-pans and

rice-chests, and of the sons and daughters of the slaves, the small boys who were naked all day and the small girls who wore only red silk trousers. Here everything was spotlessly clean: the copper pans shone like mirrors, and the laundry continued to smell of lavender long after it had been aired in the cupboards. Behind the Green Kingdom and separated from it by a high wall lay the stables where the mules were tethered at night, six dappled ponies with ears as soft as rabbits' fur and short stumpy barrels. These were called 'our camels' until they were required for a journey to the tea-plantations or the mountains when, to encourage them, Meifu called them 'our horses.'

On the other side lay the Red Kingdom, where the Cheong family lived and died and were born again in their sons who resembled each other like twigs of mint. Here the mistress of the house lived in comfort with her slaves, who came running in from their own kingdom to feed the silkworms and prepare meals and carve on the brightly polished floor the pathways which are the reward of generations of established ritual. The Red Kingdom was the province of silk and sleep. Here, too, the bales of tea and gunny-sacks of rice were listed on voluminous rolls of transparent red paper. In summer the silkworms gnawed mulberry leaves with a sound of water falling over high rocks; in winter the charcoal fire threw a soft glow on the panelled walls. At the Feast of Lanterns in spring new scrolls and paintings were hung on the walls, and on the fifteenth of the seventh moon they were as solemnly removed and the walls were left bare until the end of the year. According to the season of the year and the phases of the moon, pilgrimages were made to the neighbouring mountains, children were re-named, slaves were bought and exchanged, food was prepared and offerings were made at Jade Monument Temple.

Until the children grew older, the White Kingdom remained in the sky. They performed frequent journeys to it, but when they returned, they recalled only that it was inhabited by a wise god with a flowing grey beard, who dispensed crystal sweets and smoked opium and painted with an ivory brush on strips of brown silk. In the White Kingdom the walls were of

ash, and there were trestle tables and stools inlaid with ivory and a vast library of books bound in red silk with the titles written on the paper spines. These books were their grandfather's bread and wine. He refused to be separated from them, and when he journeyed to the mountains he was followed by small boys in grey gowns who trudged silently behind him, as Tiger often trudged behind him in the house, bearing on their backs immense sacks of books and in their hands writing-paper, brushes and ink-slabs.

These Kingdoms were three worlds, as distinct as possible. Beyond the court-yard walls, it is true, there were other kingdoms and other kings, and sometimes the children were taken to the strange houses which resembled their own and were yet so dissimilar. Instead of paintings on the walls they discovered cheap colour prints from Canton, and instead of teak cabinets full of fans, they found sandstone figurines and small lacquer tea-tables. As Tiger crept through the vermilion gate, he knew that he liked riding buffaloes with the herd-boys and wandering round the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud, and nothing else.

He sauntered through the house whistling the songs of the herd-boys. The dining-room was a sea of peonies. Taking long breaths he stared until his eyes began to water. Finally he climbed the three steps which led into the kitchen, and asked Chien-ma for his rice-bowl. There seemed to be no one in the house and he decided to eat it in the court-yard with Meifu.

When he reached the court-yard Meifu looked unusually contemplative. She sat in a high-backed stool, her dark hair falling in ringlets over her shoulders. She was ten, nearly five years older than he was. Sheltered within the Red Kingdom and rarely leaving it, she had grown as pale as willow shoots.

"Grandfather says you must never leave the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud without permission," she said without looking up.

Tiger stared, puzzled. The sun beat down on the court-yard and he decided to seek the shelter of Three Bird Tower.

"Let's go and sit in the tower," he said, stuffing rice into his mouth. "Why can't I go out?"

"The bandits have been reported in the mountains," Meifu said, still without looking up.

Tiger was silent. Inside Three Bird Tower all was quiet. A chain of birds' eggs was looped over the brick wall. There were also pieces of coral, green rock, a few discoloured scrolls and in one corner, neatly rolled up, lay the paintings grandfather painted when he was younger. Three Bird Tower was so narrow that only two or three people could stand in it at once, but it was nearly thirty feet high, higher than any other building in Ai-lin except the drum-tower. There were thick walls and on a level with the court-yard a small room, where they were now sitting. The tower was exceedingly simple and quite unornamental. The children, however, found it beautiful and often spent the afternoons there when it rained, or when the court-yard was too hot.

"Why can't I go with the herd-boys?" Tiger repeated. Suddenly he lost interest in his grandfather's refusal to allow him to ride with the herd-boys and he began scraping the brick walls of the tower. The floor was of rammed earth and the walls rose sheer from the ground, but above the small room at the bottom of the tower there were rafters and nothing else. He had never explored the tower before. The rafters could be reached with chairs, but what was there above them?

"Why is it called Three Bird Tower?" he asked suddenly.

"Grandfather says three birds came at a time when the Cheong family was in danger," Meifu answered. "The three birds are the three gods of wind, water and sky. It's all very complicated, and I don't remember anything else. The three birds saved the family—that's all that matters."

There was quiet again, while Ti measured his chances of reaching the rafters. He brought garden chairs and benches inside the tower, and reached up until his finger-tips touched the beams overhead. He knew he would have to work silently. In the Green Kingdom the slave-girls were weaving. He heard the drone of the wind in the rice-fields, where the farmers were watching the grain for signs of disease. Occasionally, when the wind veered south, he heard Small Dragon's piping voice and the soft call of a flute.

"There's a kind of door," he said excitedly, reaching out and touching the rafters. "There's a kind of door," he repeated

stubbornly, listening to the sounds in the court-yard. 'Chu had finished sweeping the leaves, and he knew by the silence in the house that his mother was either asleep or on a visit to the neighbours. "We could climb up if we pushed hard enough," he said, breaking into a slow, diplomatic smile. "If 'Chu has gone, we could take more chairs from the garden."

"He has gone, younger brother."

"Then bring some more chairs."

He was extremely excited. He heard Meifu scampering in the court-yard. He balanced himself precariously on a wicker bench. With one more chair he knew he would be able to reach the door among the rafters. Borer beetles had bitten into the wood. Dust rolled off his fingers. When Meifu brought two more chairs into the tower, he sighed with relief, told her where to put them, climbed up and pushed at the door—it opened so easily that he almost fell down.

"Meifu, come and look——" he shouted excitedly.

A faint light shone in the tower, and by this light he saw spears and small guns and an enormous coffin. The air was musty and smelt of verdigris and some other smell he could not recognise. He pulled himself up carefully; his hands touched something hard and gritty, and he saw that the floor of the tower was covered with white sea-shells.

He touched the lid of the coffin. The dust flew in the air and choked him, and the sea-shells scattered. The coffin was so large that it lay diagonally across the square tower.

"There's a coffin up here," he shouted. "Sea-shells and a coffin and silk flags—" He gulped for breath. There were thin slots in the side of the tower, where the mortar for the bricks had been eaten away. The dust choked him. "Come on up, Meifu," he shouted, but as soon as he opened his mouth the dust filled it.

Meifu climbed slowly up the ladder of chairs. She did everything slowly and with control over her movements. He heard the chairs creaking with a sound like scampering mice. Meifu paused often in climbing, afraid less of falling than the noise her fall would cause. When her head showed through the floor, he pulled her up.

"Look, they must have belonged to our ancestor Cheong

Miii-Huang. He must have come here when he was old," he pointed to the coffin.

"But why all the sea-shells?" Meifu exclaimed with astonishment. "We are at least a hundred miles from the sea,"

There were no windows. He clawed the wall in an effort to climb higher, but he always fell back. On the side of the wall there were thin slots where the mortar was eaten away, but there were also the remains of embrasures, upon which bird-lime and dead leaves had accumulated. As their eyes grew accustomed to the faint light, they scratched at the bird-lime until they could see the court-yard below. 'Chu was still clearing up the leaves. He looked more melancholy than ever. Meifu nearly shouted out when she saw him scratching his head. Evidently he was wondering what had happened to the chairs.

"Get some pieces of wood," Ti remarked as he scratched at the embrasures. Meifu obediently found the broken half of a spear and began cutting into the thick white sediment on the walls. They worked silently for an hour, chipping and scratching, in a passion to revive the ancient glories of the tower. When they were tired of peering through the embrasures, they examined the coffin and the silk banners, which sometimes turned into powder the moment they touched them. The spear-heads were all rusted, the silver plates were coated with a green rind, so that they resembled fruit, and the sea-shells sprinkled on the floor were sharp enough to bite into Meifu's thin cotton slippers.

Suddenly, while looking through the embrasures, Ti tried to shout, but he was so overcome that no sound came from him. Meifu had been talking about the bandits, and now they were coming. The sun was still high in the sky. Along the road they came in a great dust-cloud, thirty or forty bandits riding fast mules, wearing sheepskin coats open all the way down to their blue cotton trousers, with yellow scarves, silver bells on their bridles and decorated saddles. They were racing in a red cloud down the Liu valley, shouting and roaring at the top of their voices, but their words did not reach Three Bird Tower and he was left with a confused impression of voices coming from every direction at once. And then he saw men running over*

the countryside paths, or riding on the wooden saddles of little donkeys, making for the woods of pollard willows. At first he thought the fields were deserted, but later he saw the farmers in their blue coats crawling through the slender stems. Only the herd-boys remained still. They stood with their buffaloes on the slopes, piping hard on their flutes and waving their scarves. At that moment Ti was more proud of Small Dragon than he had ever been.

"Will they kill us?" Meifu asked in a trembling voice.

Ti was too excited to hear her. He almost threw himself down into the room below, scrambling over the chairs, not waiting for Meifu, shouting incoherently something about the bandits, although it might have been about the herd-boys for all the attention he paid to his own cries. Meifu scrambled down after him and carefully replaced the door. Ti rushed into the house, sliding on the polished floors and leaving the mark of his sandals. He ran so fast that he nearly knocked over his grandfather.

"I'm in a hurry," grandfather was saying, pointing to the palanquin which lay in the court-yard.

"Are you going at once, honourable grandfather?"

Grandfather said nothing. He was wearing a sea-blue silk gown with red embroidery—there were male and female phoenixes, and almost as complicated as the designs, there were the Chinese characters for the phoenixes. This was the gown he wore as village-elder, and Ti stared with his mouth open, thinking of the spear-headed staves in the loft of the tower and wondering whether the whole village could be armed in time.

"Where's Ti?" grandfather suddenly barked, and catching sight of Ti he said as he combed his beard: "You must go and hide. 'Chu will tell you where to go."

"I want to fight the bandits."

"In China only the least worthy think of fighting," grandfather said, but suddenly his father appeared in a red gown with a closed overgown and a curious black hat with velvet wings—an unrecognisable father, all movement and sudden flourishes.

"The Emperor has written to the prefects of all the *bsien* to

say that the bandits must be captured alive," his father was saying.

"How can we fight?" grandfather said in a sharp voice. "The slaves are dispersed all over the fields?"

"But we must," father insisted, and then there was a long silence.

Ti was led upstairs by 'Chu into his grandfather's study, where everything was white, the colour of mourning—white tables, white paper scrolls, white flowers and white books with red covers. 'Chu pushed him into a cupboard, where Ti could hardly breathe. His sandals hurt him, and the cupboard was full of grandfather's disused ink-brushes. He felt tired, and his forehead smarted, and he was drowsy with excitement and the thought of the bandits. Suddenly he heard the slaves lifting the palanquin, the vermilion gates opened, there was shouting in the market-place and further away there was still more shouting, but in the dark cupboard, where he could see nothing at all, he fell asleep and dreamed he was riding a buffalo and leading an attack against the bandits.

Two hours later he heard the palanquin returning. Grandfather's blue silk gown rustled wearily along the stairs, and afterwards he heard the sturdy *swish-swish* of his father's gown. What had happened? He wanted to cry out: "Have you killed them all?" but the ink-brushes were clinging to his face and he was sick with anxiety.

Later in the evening, when 'Chu suddenly remembered where he had hidden the boy, Ti asked him what had happened. 'Chu's eyes were red with weeping, and he shivered like the old woman who once fell into Liu river and who had been shivering ever since.

"They came, boy—don't ask me—they came and they took five boys and four girls and a great quantity of silver. Don't shake, boy. They came and set fire to the rice granaries and stole the best horses, Ai-yo, how shall we be able to raise our heads again?"

Ti wandered round the house disconsolately. There was no sign of grandfather. Meifu was weeping. From the Green Kingdom came the wailing of the slave-girls whose children had been stolen by the bandits. 'Chu sat on a mattress shaking

his head. "Don't worry, Tiger," he kept on saying. "The Emperor won't harm us. We can afford to lose the slaves for the sake of peace."

When he went to bed, Ti wept uncontrollably, not because he was frightened, but because the bandits came through the dust-cloud and the villagers were not allowed to fight them. He wept bitterly and ceaselessly, in a passion of remorse and resentment, but when he woke the next morning he thought he had dreamed it all—even the visit to Three Bird Tower—and he could scarcely believe his father when he was told that the village would inevitably be punished for not fighting.

Three moons later a letter on yellow silk bearing the imperial monogram arrived. The Emperor ordered the Cheong family elder, in his capacity as village elder, to pay a fine of seven thousand taels of silver for disobeying the imperial edict and parleying with the bandits. The fine was paid at once, but it strained the Cheong family resources to the uttermost. Nearly the whole village belonged to grandfather, who obtained permission to lend the estates to the prefect in return for five thousand taels of silver. The 'red card' inscribed with the name of the family estates was no longer kept in the White Kingdom, but in the yamen of the prefect in Changsha. The fiefs of the land which belonged to the Cheong family for forty generations were surrendered until the money could be repaid.

The children watched these events without understanding. They saw no connection between the bandit raid and the impoverishment of the family. They listened obediently when grandfather told them that their father was shortly leaving for abroad, but on the day when their father left, after bowing and praying at the family altar, they shut themselves up in their room and refused to come out until grandfather ordered them in a brusque voice.

During the evening they returned secretly to Three Bird Tower, where nothing had changed except that a small thrush had somehow entered through the embrasures. With the same spear-shaft with which he broke the crust of mildew and bird-lime on the walls, Ti opened the coffin and saw an old warrior, with a thick black beard, wearing chain-armour, his head ly

among a nest of red pennons and his feet in copper greaves. There was a gold sash round his waist and a scroll in his bony hands, and a sweet smell like hyacinths lay over the coffin. Afterwards they closed the coffin reverently and unable to bear the excitement they decided to walk in the court-yard. They swore to tell no one of the great coffin, the silk flags, the spears and the armour. It was a secret they kept from everyone, even from Small Dragon; until at last, as spring turned to summer and summer to winter, they forgot about it altogether. Sometimes they saw the great coffin in their dreams, and sometimes, when a flake of snow or a rose-petal fell from the wall, they unconsciously remembered the bird-lime they had scraped from the embrasures and the sea-shells on the floor. But their minds were too young and unformed to bear the impression of these unconscious memories, and immediately after the first footfalls of the old warrior resounded in their skulls, the noise was swept away by the healthy sounds of the real world reverberating outside.

For a year there was no news of Cheong. No letters came to Ai-lin, and the villagers shook their heads whenever An-mei appeared in the street. "Her husband must have deserted her," they whispered as the palanquin passed along the cobblestones. In the tea-shops they sighed over their thimble-cups of flower tea and related the story of how Cheong had married the wealthy heiress and brought dishonour on the village by parleying with the bandits. Then, suddenly, during 'Come Autumn,' when the tea-leaves were being plucked when the rice-grain was being stored in gunny-sacks and the deserted fields shone white as milk in the rain, the drenched postman, wearing a green hood tightly buttoned at the neck, arrived at the Vermilion Gate with a letter for the mistress of the house.

"A letter has come, Mistress!" Chien-ma, the slave-girl, shouted above the roar from the smithy.

An-mei waited calmly in Three Bird Tower with her hands folded on her lap. She knew the postman was coming, and she selected Three Bird Tower as the nearest place to the gate where she could receive the letter. The gold pins in her hair quivered with excitement.

"It's from the exalted person himself," Chien-ma exclaimed breathlessly. She held the envelope in her hand and gazed admiringly at the two red stamps on the upper right-hand corner where, surrounded by oak-leaves and supported on two waving palms, lay the head of a bearded old man. "This must be the sage Lao Tzu," Chien-ma said.

Few letters arrived in Ai-lin. The postman was lean and old, and as thin as a leather strap. He stood outside the gate, waiting for the bowl of rice which would be presented to him later. Meanwhile An-mei gazed at the envelope with the portrait of the sage Lao Tzu on the top right-hand corner, not daring to open it. Meifu knelt at her feet with her plump hands pressed together, overwhelmed with the importance of the occasion.

"Be off with you," Chien-ma exclaimed to the servants who came crowding round the door. "This is a letter from the mistress's exalted husband."

An-mei was so nervous that she could not open the letter, and asked Chien-ma to summon grandfather. He came across the court-yard five minutes later deep in thought, but suddenly noticing the servants he dismissed them all with a quick quiver of his long sleeves. He opened the letter carefully and began reading:

"Singapore, January 8th, 1909.

"I have received your two letters with great sorrow, and know that you have many cares. Furthermore I despair of the dangers that make life unendurable. Gossip is indeed a penance, and my heart is heavy to have you at my side. You say that Meifu has the hot-cold sickness. Let her be kept warm with blankets and give her ox-gall according to the old prescription. Above all, guard well the health of your children and your father-in-law.

"I desire you to come to Singapore. Let all the necessary arrangements be made for the journey. The Hall of the Sleeping Cloud is to be loaned to the younger branch of the Cheong family residing in the village of Chiuming in Amoy. I send four hundred dollars for the journey. Travel by coach to Hsiaohsing and thence to Canton. At Canton make arrange-

ments for the sea journey with the proprietor of the Green Pigeon Inn, whose card I enclose. He is fair-minded and will not charge prohibitive prices. The journey to Singapore takes twelve days during the monsoon. Remember to hide your money in purses attached to your person and make yourself familiar with all difficulties.

I desire you to come to Singapore on the day chosen by the soothsayer. Bring the children and the furniture. I have written separately to my father. Greet for me on your knees. Greet my friends. It is my desire that this journey shall take place soon, for this separation is indeed too long. Greetings and farewell."

Grandfather shook his head and looked over his tortoise-shell glasses at the servants who were once more crowding round the open doorway.

"I have received no letter from my son," he commented. "No doubt the letter has been mislaid on the journey. There are signs that my son has been less improvident than usual. He has written in his own hand. This is a good sign, as I see from the characters that he is assured of some small prosperity and his heart is full of hope." He rolled the thin bamboo paper between thumb and forefinger. "The paper is crisp and well-made—this shows that he weighs quality. Also the downstrokes are heavy—this shows he has imagination and forcefulness."

An-mei's gold pins were no longer quivering. She sat bolt upright in her chair, which had been carefully placed to be lower than grandfather's.

"What is to be done?" grandfather said at last, removing his spectacles and staring straight ahead. "I am an old man. What will happen to me if I go to this barbarous village in the south?"

"My duty is to follow advice," An-mei answered, rising and bowing. "How can we leave all these things?" she sighed, indicating with an almost imperceptible nod of her head the whole extent of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud.

Grandfather left the tower and walked upstairs. He held the envelope in his hand. It seemed to burn his flesh and sear his spirit. When he reached his room he closed the shutters and

laid the letter reverently on the table. In the afternoon the soothsayer was called. An old man with a leather bag made from the udder of a cow, the thighbones of a recently discovered dragon, an immense number of small closely-written books in paper covers. The purple bones were placed in earthenware jars. Grandfather asked why the bones were so small and the soothsayer replied that the dragon had shrivelled with age. Grandfather saw good omens in the dragon on the watermark and the dragon-bones in the jar. The soothsayer asked for a charcoal brazier from the kitchen. This was brought and the dead sparrow was flung on the flames. Then the soothsayer began to chant in a low monotonous voice, and all the while grandfather asked questions about whether the family should go to Singapore, whether they should ride in a carriage or farm-cart, whether there were bandits on the road and what were the auspicious days for the journey. The soothsayer was inhaling the smoke from the charcoal fire; the library was full of the burning odour of feathers. With a circular movement of his hands the dragon-bones were tossed one by one from the jar. From the direction in which they fell, and from which side was uppermost, he foretold the future.

"The omens are auspicious," he said presently. "The Cheong family will be well received in the South Seas. A journey in a junk will be propitious, but beware of wheeled carriages."

Grandfather was fanning himself with his long sleeves. Beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead. His hands were hidden inside the sleeves. The soothsayer begged him to touch the bones so that their strength should pass into him, but his knuckles were white and his hands damp with perspiration, and he delayed until the last moment. Even then his hands were trembling.

"Why has no letter arrived for me from my son?" he asked in a toneless voice.

The soothsayer rattled the bones together. Two bones flew out. The soothsayer read the message: "Thunder and storm are the friends and not the enemies of Heaven."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that the letter will still arrive," the soothsayer answered mysteriously.

The heavy mist was coming closer. Feathers flew in all the corners of the library. The peasants were returning from the fields, crickets chirruped and bull-frogs croaked in the marshes near the river. The soothsayer collected the bones in the cow's udder, and Chien-ma brought flickering oil-lamps, which she laid on the table below the painting of Tien Kuan, the god of happiness.

When the soothsayer was gone, grandfather ordered Chien-ma to burn the still unburnt feathers and to light sweet-smelling tapers. Then he sank back in the chair with his hands clasped in his sleeves, his head on his chest, listening to the noises of the village, the carts rattling down the cobbled streets, the piping of the herd-boys and the voices from the inner court-yard. Grandfather rose and looked out of the window at the waterfalls on the Liu mountain. A boatman with bamboo fish-cages over his shoulder, wearing a green gown and a straw hat to shade his eyes from the moon, was on his way to the river. Grandfather selected an ivory brush and a strip of brown paper without blemish, he prepared the ink-slab and settled comfortably in his chair before writing to his son in characters which somehow resembled the boatman singing through the mist.

When the letter was finished, he laid it near the sweet-smelling tapers and selected a book from his library. It was one of the yellow-backed volumes of the T'ang poets edited by the Emperor Chien Lung. In the fading light he read aloud the poem by Lu Lun which begins: "Dark night, the wild geese fly high." Meifu was chanting in the court-yard. Grandfather was pleased because the tones of her song exactly coincided with the tones of Lu Lun's poem. "To-day there is harmony in the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud," he told himself, then he turned and knelt at the ancestral shrine.

All through the summer preparations were made for the journey to Singapore. From Great Heat to Cold Dew grandfather remained in a turmoil, writing letters and sending parcels to distant relatives and officials. Letters on red paper

were written to the younger branch of the Cheong family in Amoy, inviting them to take possession of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud; and when these written, each member of the family was ordered to send gifts. Grandfather wrote short poems on squares of brown silk, An-mei made parcels of lace and lotus wine and copper pans engraved with the name of the family and of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud, Meifu enclosed ribbons and small cakes for the second cousin she had never seen and Ti spent hours in the library, tracing a specimen of his calligraphy on an enormous sheet of crimson paper. With these letters and parcels were sent rice-plants and porcelain canisters full of the best Ai-lin tea, so that they could compare the products of the Liu valley with those of Amoy. When all these were ready, the postman was summoned from Hsiaoh-sing. He was given wine and rice-cakes, small strips of red paper suitably inscribed were attached to the mail-cart and he was asked to pay special attention to the packages of porcelain, which would easily be cracked on the rough roads. The postman bowed and laughed at An-mei's flattery. After successive cups of wine, he seemed to grow visibly fatter and no longer resembled a leather strap.

"Don't worry, Mistress," he laughed. "The parcels will get there. My mules have never been known to falter. Look at the roads. Under the new provincial governor, they are straight and level. No more, Mistress—thank you for your kindness."

But instead of arriving a week or two later, they were received on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, and were therefore not opened until the ceremonies were over. To make matters worse, a close relative of the Cheong family had recently died in Amoy. It was nine weeks before the postman knocked on the Vermilion Gate with a message from the Cheongs enclosed in a white silk envelope signifying mourning. For weeks the soothsayer had been urging speed. The appearance of the envelope threw An-mei into a fit of grief not wholly connected with her distant relative. But the envelope was accompanied by an enormous parcel wrapped in silks and cardboard, bearing the duplicate seal of the Cheong family, with pink ribbons and tassels, the address written in a delicate feminine handwriting. Grandfather's anxiety disappeared

when he saw the handwriting. He was so pleased with the enormous parcel that he laid it on the family altar and offered prayers for the success of the correspondence between the two families. Even before he opened the parcel he wrote off to Peking to one of his former pupils, enclosing a long letter and a poem of joy. He fussed over the parcel, and behaved like a small boy conscious for the first time of the grandeur of birthday presents. The whole family, including the servants from the Green Kingdom and some of the herd-boys, crowded round him while he untied the parcel, after laying it on the family altar. When the silks and the cardboard were removed there were hundreds of smaller parcels. There were jade buttons in tissue paper, rings of ivory strung together like strings of cash, portraits of every member of the family in Amoy painted by the same local artist; there were oranges and quinces; ribbons and small bales of silk a hand's breadth in length; even a fruit-tree, and a cutting from a pomeloe tree growing in the Hall of Treasured Harmony; ten kinds of brocade; four kinds of pewter; a set of thimble-cups; a long roll of brown paper. This was for grandfather, who was so overcome at seeing the crisp roll bearing the monogram of an early Ching Emperor that his tortoise-shell spectacles became clouded in mist.

"In the early years," he murmured, "we kept up a correspondence with the family. Now we write only on New Year's Day. Is it not a pity that we have forgotten to write regularly?"

The letter from Amoy was written on silk. It began formally and even, grandfather thought, without the respect due to a family elder. There were long phrases of greeting followed by a brief history of the family in Amoy. Gradually the letter grew warmer. The children were growing up. The silk shop had been sold, and three shops selling rice, fruit and curios were being opened in various parts of the town. Their health was excellent. A small son had died, but it was hardly of sufficient importance to be mentioned in a letter. The eldest son had passed his examination in the Forest of Pencils. There remained only two daughters unmarried, and though one spoke of entering a nunnery at the foot of Tien Shan, the other was

travelling in Europe and would return with her husband to be, the Councillor at the Legation in Christiana. All this was new to grandfather, who spluttered with enjoyment and spoke of the Cheongs in Amoy as though they were near acquaintances living in a neighbouring village. At the end of the letter came the formal acceptance of the elder's invitation to take over the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud until the Cheong family had bought back the rice-fields.

During those last days of summer the Liu valley had never been lovelier. The days were hot and long; the river dried up and the mountains turned to bronze, yet the streams still flowed down the cliffs and were taken over bamboos to the rice-fields. During the long afternoons Ti wandered over the uplands with the herd-boys and learned to play on a flute. From high up, the valley shone like squares of emerald green and russet red metal, and further away lay the tea-plantations,, dark brown and golden when the wind rustled the heavy leaves. Ti made a pilgrimage to Green Liu Goddess Temple,, half-way up to Precipice Pavilion. From here, the squares of green and red in the valley became small points—impossible to see the workers in the fields. The heavy summer heat was full of lazy birds and butterflies, kingfishers and great-winged moths. The small temple, with embroidered gold-cloth altar hangings, was cold and fusty; but outside the air was fresh and warm. Ti was alone. He did not know why he was making the pilgrimage. In autumn white flowers like snow-drifts cover the low-lying fields. Now the flowers were beginning to push through the yellow grass in the waste-land. But the most extraordinary thing was that he could see over the mountains another walled village like Ai-lin, with a drum-tower and a white road leading through the valley with the same red and green patches where the rice was growing, and in the distance the same dark brown patches of tobacco and tea. A waterfall flowed above his head like a stream of milk. There were dwarf pines and stunted birch-trees, yellow aconites and pink anemones, and the grass was greener than in the valley. Ti cut a switch of bamboo and flicked at the village. At the foot of the Liu mountains the mist seemed to be sinking into itself, a white sea slowly turning grey and green.

Ti prayed by the altar with all his strength for his father. He could hardly remember his father, who had travelled south to return fortune to the family. Perhaps he had passed through this village on the other side of the mountain, perhaps he had seen many midges villages bigger than Ai-lin. Suddenly the air became cooler. Ti thought it was already winter, when the birds fall dead and the cattle die in harness—a terrible season of deep gloom, but soon passed. He shivered and swung the bamboo cane in the air to keep warm, making a humming noise. He walked slowly to the altar and bowed until his head touched the golden altar-cloths, then he quickly ran down the slope.

There were no longer any birds to be seen, no squirrels ran across the path, he could not see the tops of the mountains and the mist was thickening. Through the gaps in the mist he saw the rice-fields still bathed in sunlight. But already it was almost dark on the mountain, the sun-spangled willows of the morning had become black and full of evil, and the darkness was all the greater because of the blinding blue flashes of lightning which lit up every twig and leaf—and still, through the gaps in the clouds, he saw the white walls of the village like a small white wheel set in the yellow valley. A crack of thunder higher up on the mountain was followed by torrential rain, which bent the willows and rattled on the roof of the temple. Ti shouted to keep up his spirits. He was drenched and cold. The road ran through the forest, where steps had been carved on the slopes, but it was impossible to see them in the mist and the rain. The flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder were continuous, proving that the centre of the storm was near. In Singapore there was neither thunder nor rain. As he ran breathless down the slope, he shouted above the uproar to his father. The scented grass gave off the odour of burning—a tree was split by lightning some distance away, and the odour of burnt wood hung over the whole forest.

Half an hour later, when the forest was thinning out and the rain had stopped falling, Ti heard Small Dragon talking to the buffaloes. The voice seemed to come from close at hand. There was mist on both sides of him—the thick oily mist which hovers at the bottom of valleys. Then suddenly the mist

rolled away; instead of trees creaking under the weight of rain there were curving uplands covered with yellow aconites and red poppies, azaleas and chrysanthemums and the white flowers which come up at the beginning of autumn. Ti wore a grey gown and was soaked to the skin. Small Dragon wore a sheepskin thrown over his shoulders. He was laughing and showing his teeth. Ti's lips were blue with cold. Every time he looked at Small Dragon he was overcome with reverence and admiration. Small Dragon could play the flute better than anyone in Liu valley, he could ride buffaloes more gracefully and knew everything that happened in the valley. When Ti appeared, all the herd-boys began chattering.

"Look, he's wet. There's no rain. He must have been drowned," Small Dragon exclaimed.

"The fox spirit must have seen him," White Lotus turned away and looked down the valley.

At once they all turned away, as if he was something made unsafe for them. The sun began to burn him. From his drenched gown there rose small white tongues of warm vapour.

"I've been to Green Goddess Temple," Ti said, laughing nervously, his voice raised excitedly. "You think I'm a ghost, but I saw a tree struck by lightning."

"What was it like?" Small Dragon said tonelessly without turning round.

"There was a green flame, and the tree split in two," Ti answered eagerly. "You have to swallow hard. The rain chokes you. Look at my gown—all wet," he said in a surprised tone. Thunder still rolled from the mountains, but the uplands were boiling in the sunshine.

"Was it a green flame, Ti?"

"Yes, why?"

"You must have seen the green goddess herself. Did you see the tiger?"

"What tiger?"

"Everyone knows the green goddess rides on a tiger. Do you mean you haven't heard?"

The herd-boys began to turn round. Ti's spirits revived. The gown stuck to his skin, but the sun was absorbing the

moisture from the cloth—the strong sun warmed his clothes, his body and his chilled hands. His lips were no longer frozen to his teeth. Small Dragon laughed and played on his flute.

"So you went up to Green Goddess Temple? All alone? Do you want to ride on the buffaloes?"

Ti felt lonely and inconspicuous standing among the herd-boys on buffaloes.

"Yes, but they are all taken."

"You can come and ride with me."

Ti would never have dared asked to ride with Small Dragon. He climbed on the buffalo's shaggy back in front of Small Dragon, pulling up his gown until his legs hung bare. Small Dragon whispered in his ear: "Are you going to Singapore?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to go?"

Suddenly Ti felt that he would never be able to leave the Liu valley. His wretchedness became complete, and his mind raced backwards to the day when the bandits came to the village. With strange sharpness he saw Ssu-ma Wang leading his horse by the bridle to meet the red and silver palanquin of his grandfather. If only it had never happened! The hot-scented grass and the unbroken leisurely pace of the buffaloes excited him. He could not think or dream. He remembered only that he had banged his head on the altar in Green Liu Goddess Temple and Small Dragon was sitting beside him.

"Why don't you stay, Ti? Do you want to go? There's nowhere else like the Liu valley."

"I saw a village from the temple. I saw it on the other side of the mountains—exactly the same. All white, and roads, and rice-fields, and tea-plantations."

"That's Spring Flower Hills. I have an aunt there."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I've never been there. I only know it's there because my aunt comes to the village for the 'hungry ghosts' ceremonies."

Ti remembered Small Dragon's aunt, a little shrewd quick person with a humpback who had been sold to someone outside the village who favoured hunchbacks. Once a year she came to the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud to her relatives.

"Why does she come back? Is she unhappy there?"

Small Dragon began to murmur some old song.

"When people leave a village, do they always want to come back?" Ti asked.

But there was no reply. He wondered how he would feel when he left Ai-lin. For him the whole earth consisted of high mist-covered mountains with valleys leading to more villages exactly like Ai-lin. They came to a waterfall. The herd-boys dismounted, undressed and slipped under the ice-cold falls. Ti crawled out of his gown and plunged in. The spray from the waterfall fell on the backs of the buffaloes, turning them dark brown and black. Ti jumped up and down in the waterfall. He found a blue pebble with veins on the surface; a pebble as long as his hand and shaped like a fish—a good omen for the voyage. He rolled over and over on the cold stones. Through the waterfall he saw the village in a blinding yellow light, and birds sweeping in undulating curves across the sky. Through the waterfall even the rice-fields were white, and the blue-hooded carts rose high in the air in the smoke of spray. Even the willow-trees beside the falls shone like yellow tapers. His dishevelled hair hanging over his temples, dancing and clutching a blue stone, Ti saw the whole earth through the wheel of the waterfall.

Afterwards, they lay on the grass. Small Dragon rode his buffalo naked, waving his red and green scarf. The other herd-boys emptied their pockets and sucked autumn peaches with their elbows buried deep in the soft earth and their legs waving in the air; they wrestled and tormented one another; slew horse-flies and curled feather-grass in each other's hair, and pulling suddenly, screamed with laughter. It was growing late. The sun sank deep behind the yellow cliffs. Ti crawled into his gown and shivered with a quick intake of breath; it was wetter than ever after lying in the spray of the falls. He climbed up on the buffalo behind Small Dragon, looking at the valley as though he would never see it again, drenched to the skin, whispering to the blue stone while the blood rushed to his cheeks and he clung to Small Dragon with passionate longing. He dreaded the moment when they would be separated.

"What can I do?" he whispered urgently. "Shall I write to you. Small Dragon?"

"If you like."

"I can write three hundred characters."

Ti thought his heart would break. A continuous stream of pony-carts were converging on the drum-tower. Dogs barked, running out from nowhere, yelping and snapping at the wheels of the farm-carts. As they rode home, Ti brooded quietly on the days that had passed, turning them over and over in his mind like some legend too wonderful to believe, and he thought with special pleasure of the soothsayer and the blue-hooded carts rumbling down cobbled streets, of grandfather and his sister Meifu and of lying in the gold straw in the stables with Small Dragon, and an old woman whispering 'Blessed Peace' when grandfather inspected the rice-fields. Some wood-pigeons flew high overhead like ribbons of green smoke. The light faded. An unfamiliar, beautiful valley unfolded itself before his gaze. The white autumn flowers on the uplands were white crystals, the smoke from the waterfall rose straight in the air like wood-smoke. Pennons hung over the drum-tower, which was turning green with age. Through the crowded streets, past the market and the joiner's shop, they rode the buffaloes in silence, their sleep-filled eyes heavy with visions of the mountains, until Small Dragon began playing on his flute, when they woke up and sang at the top of their voices.

"We shall always be friends," Small Dragon laughed and shouted above the roar in the narrow, cobbled streets.

A sharp feeling, half of wretchedness, half of aching joy, swept through Ti. He whispered to the blue stone: "Yes, we'll always be friends."

With these words he rode through the wooden gate-posts where the slaves were sewing under dwarf pines in the Green Kingdom. 'Chu, the gate-keeper, was lighting faggots in a brazier as they came in. The faggots shone with brilliant yellow whistling flames and threw giant shadows of the buffaloes on the walls.

"When are you leaving, Ti?"

"In four or five days. The soothsayer says we must leave by the full moon."

"You can come and sleep in the stables to-night, Ti," Small

Dragon said as he wiped the flute on his scarf. "We'll talk and play chess."

Since the early morning Ti had been conscious of casting his thoughts forward to this time. Now, as the buffaloes ambled along the path between the tiles, Ti felt a desire to travel swiftly away, and as swiftly return. The sleepy voices of his companions sang drowsily in the court-yard. When the great doors of the barn were opened, and the buffaloes tethered, and 'Crm had locked the doors with the enormous rusted iron padlock, Ti turned slowly and walked away.

Small Dragon ran up to him.

"You won't forget. You'll sleep with us in the stables to-night. We'll sing and play chess."

And suddenly, his heart very full, Ti felt that he would never forget this day, this last day in Ai-lin, when the sun sank behind the mountains and the lightning struck the willows with a green flame. The canaries were singing. His grandfather was waving from the library window. The slave-women were preparing meals for their children, who had been his companions on the buffaloes and throughout all his life, lie did not know whether he would ever be able to be separated from them. Above him lay the curving red roofs of the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud against a deep-blue sky sown with stars.

An-mei called him from the court-yard.

"I'm coming," he said with his head bowed.

In his drenched grey gown he resembled a scholar. Grandfather saw him from the window and smiled approvingly.

"Have you had a long journey?" he asked.

Ti thought of his pilgrimage to Green Liu Goddess Temple. He remembered everything that had happened during the day, and many days previously, but he could not think clearly in the darkening twilight. The words of his grandfather seemed to transport him into a rare, trance-like state of mind where everything was seen in a blinding midsummer light, as through a waterfall, when you are young and surrounded by herd-boys in coloured scarves, and he saw himself riding in armour in a chariot, making great journeys against the enemy on the frontiers, and the chariots began to move smoothly and steadily into the night.

"Oh hurry," said Chien-ma, the slave-girl, shuffling into the court-yard. "Your rice-bowl will be getting cold."

"I'm coming," Ti answered impatiently, but he stopped on his way to listen to Small Dragon playing on his flute. "We'll sleep in the stables to-night and sing and play chess," he whispered incredulously. He took the blue stone from his pocket and held it against his cheek. It was wet and cold, but he knew that whatever happened, he had only to take the stone from his pocket and once more he would be at the waterfall with the herd-boys.

II

FOR the rest of the summer the valley lay black and scorched below the mist-covered mountains. No rain fell; long lines of peasants toiled all day to save the grain, the village streets were deserted and even dogs and fowls did not stray, but only moved from the court-yard into the shade of the great stables. But although no rain fell, water came along bamboo pipes from the mountains and the village flourished. The heat turned the trees into dust, the buffaloes suffered from disease and the herd-boys plastered their sores with honey-dew and the urine of mountain goats. The watchman on the drum-tower searched the skies for bandits. On a ceremonial journey to the dried-up river, grandfather Cheong wore his mandarin robes and fainted in the heat.

It was a month before preparations for the journey could be completed. The three or four days had become a week, then three weeks, then a whole month. With every post there came letters from Amoy and Singapore. The young husband from whom all the correspondence had come, and whose delicate handwriting had thrown grandfather into ecstasies of amazement, arrived in a litter to pay his respects. He was tall and slender, with a brown face the colour of a duck's egg and piercing black eyes. His eyelids quivered from too much studying. He walked gracefully with the motions of a stork. At the Vermilion Gate he read a poem of reconciliation, in which he compared the two branches of the Cheong to a pair of

white swallows. The day was very hot. Yellow dust hung over the cobbled roads, but no sweat appeared on his brow. He seemed to be perfectly calm and spoke of grandfather with immense respect, kow-towed before the painting of Kuan-Yin and Tien Kuan in grandfather's library and showed by his behaviour that he was worthy to occupy grandfather's place in the village.

During these last four weeks Ti spent nearly every day with the herd-boys. He learned to play on the flute so well that only Small Dragon played better. Meifu embroidered with An-mei's serving women under the dwarf pines in the Green Kingdom. Grandfather visited the rice-fields and made pilgrimages to the mountains. On the last day, when the courtyard was littered with packing-cases, crates of clucking geese in hampers, great coffin-shaped camphor-wood boxes full of her mother's embroidered silk gowns and fur coats, Meifu saw a shooting star fall with a hissing sound over the Liu mountains. She watched the red sparks melting in the damp air and immediately ran to the family altar, where she knelt down and prayed that their voyage through life would be as splendid as the shooting star. It was growing late. The first hint of autumn was in the air. The clouds were sheets of ice and a cold wind rustled the leaves of the dwarf pines.

She walked silently through the house to the courtyard of the Red Kingdom. This, too, was full of long boxes, crates, hampers of geese, pillows, beds, scrolls and hens. 'Chu, the old watchman, was sweeping the loose feathers and rice-straws from the tiles.

"Yes, this minute, Mistress—not a moment to be lost," he grumbled, thinking that An-mei had come into the courtyard.

Meifu smiled dreamily and thought of the shooting-star.

"Yes, Mistress," Chu muttered, swinging the broom over the cages full of hens, which screamed and cackled in fright. "You leave things to the last minute. Only three weeks ago. How can I accommodate myself to this new world? This is bitter work for an old man. A week ago you made arrangements for leaving, mistress. You invited all the neighbours, you lit sticks of incense at Jade Monument Temple, and what happens? Look at the crates. Another day, just one more day, Mistress."

Meifu curled her feet up and followed the slow, grumbling movements of the old watchman and fell into a doze, from which she was awakened by the appearance of Ti covered from head to foot in rice-straws.

The house was asleep. Behind shuttered windows the slave-girls were whispering. The stars shone like pebbles of ice, and Ti crouched beside her wearing Small Dragon's sheepskin coat. Meifu smiled tenderly and laid her hand on Ti's head. The faint moonlight caught the copper basins and ewers, the wisps of straw on Ti's coat, Meifu's greased hair and black silk trousers. It fell on the blue ribbons tied in a bow over the cackling hens, the red carriage wheels leaning against the wall and the quivering leaves of the pawlonia tree in the centre of the tiled court-yard. Ti held Meifu's hand, thinking she was cold; but when he touched her, she seemed to be shuddering with heat.

"Why are you trembling so?" he asked. "Don't you want to see father?"

"Why can't he come back? If there had been no bandits, we should have stayed here for ever."

She told him about the shooting-star. She gazed at the space in the sky where she had seen it fall, but there were only a few clouds like fishes' fins. Ti showed her his blue stone and hid it secretly in a special pocket Chien-ma had made for it. The old watchman disappeared still grumbling in the house, and they were left alone in the court-yard, where nothing was in its right place, where copper pans lay on wooden beds and scrolls in sycamore wood boxes lay side by side with greased-paper umbrellas and porcelain bowls.

It was still warm. They stayed in the court-yard all night, dozing and sleeping. At the first signs of dawn Chien-ma hobbled on her small feet over the court-yard. She wore red pyjamas and carried a wickerwork basket heaped with water-melons, celery and rice-cake. The basket was decorated with ribbons and strips of red paper. Meifu felt sorry for the slave-girl. She would have liked Chien-ma to accompany them down the river, even though, since her husband died, she would cry at the least provocation.

"Is my bath ready?" Meifu asked in a loud voice.

Chien-ma jumped and her pigtail flew up. Meifu hated the pigtail because she always wore it with a white mourning ribbon.

"Yes, mistress, certainly—this moment," Chien-ma gazed stupidly round the court-yard, dropped the basket and hurried back into the house. They heard her scampering through the corridors on her way to fill the earthenware jar.

"Are we really going so soon?" Meifu asked.

Ti frowned and polished the blue stone with a silk handkerchief. Meifu slipped off the table where she had been dozing uncomfortably all night and wandered into the house. When she reached her bedroom, she stood stunned. Where the bed had been, there was a yellow square on the wall-paper. The small table inlaid with mother-of-pearl, on which she wrote her lessons and read the *Thousand Character Classic*, was not under the window but against the wall, covered with a dust-sheet. Chien-ma was filling the earthenware jar from a copper kettle.

"Are we really going away?" Meifu asked, as she undressed dreamily and rubbed her face against the warm surface of the jar.

"Don't waste time, young mistress," Chien-ma exclaimed roughly. "Get in, and let me unbraid your hair."

"It's much too hot," Meifu answered, blowing the soap-scented smoke away and dipping her fingers in the boiling water.

Chien-ma caught her by the armpits and dropped her protesting in the jar. Meifu crouched with her head above water, her legs doubled under her, her red face dripping with perspiration. Chien-ma poured grey willow-herbs into the jar. Meifu could hardly breathe. The scalding water soaked into her skin until she felt she had become a new kind of balloon. The walls were obscured in a white haze of steam. Chien-ma wiped the perspiration from her forehead and said: "I can hear the carriages, young mistress." The heat was buzzing in Meifu's ears. She gasped for breath and held out her hands for a towel.

"Are you quite sure this is the day the soothsayer said?" she asked, as Chien-ma rubbed her briskly.

Chien-ma knew the names of all the soothsayers in the

village. She knew all the old women with wrinkled lemon-coloured skins who prayed over sheep's hearts. She had disapproved of the soothsayer employed by grandfather, but she believed piously in the truth of his warnings.

"The soothsayer said you should leave at midday, but you must pay attention to the carriage-wheels."

"What's the matter with the wheels?"

"They must be examined at every point in the journey. This is important. I have myself examined them."

"What happened?"

"They are very sound," Chien-ma said with a puzzled expression, "but still—you must be careful."

Chien-ma was so overcome by thoughts of the danger that she began sobbing quietly. To stop her, Meifu said sharply: "Comb my hair, please."

As Chien-ma brushed and combed her hair with vigorous strokes, she asked: "Did you have any dreams?"

"No, but I saw a shooting-star."

"This is a good sign. May your unworthy servant know where you saw it?"

"In the court-yard—last night, just before I fell asleep. At the hour of the sheep."

"Did you go to the family altar?"

"Yes, I prayed for a good journey."

"I must ask the soothsayer what it means before you go."

Meifu's chest was being bound with yellow swathes of silk. The carriages were arriving one by one at the Vermilion Gate. When she was completely dressed Meifu's body lay like a cocoon in swathes of silk, three coats and two pairs of trousers. A warm wind came through the doorway and ruffled the embroidery on her coat. In the court-yard Ti was shouting excitedly. The whole house appeared to be caught up in the general excitement. She heard grandfather shuffling in the library, her mother was giving orders to the slave-girls in a particularly loud, nervous voice and Ti was screaming at the top of his voice. Chien-ma was still crying. Meifu sighed, and taking Chien-ma's head in her hands, began slowly rubbing her forehead against the forehead of the slave-girl.

"Don't worry," she said consolingly. "We'll soon be back. Uncle will look after you."

"Are you sure you saw the shooting-star?" Chien-ma asked urgently.

"Yes, of course. In the court-yard at the hour of the sheep. Please scratch my back."

Meifu wandered out into the court-yard, expecting to find the crates all neatly piled on the carriages. But they were still there, covered with red flower petals and red paper to bring them luck. Workmen were examining the wheels of the carriages. They were found to be strong and dependable for the journey. An air of desolation surrounded the house. Although the new master had not yet arrived to take over the house, the court-yard was filled with his servants, who talked a different dialect and gave orders which no one understood. Ti caressed his blue stone. Meifu, exhausted by the hammering and loud conversations of the workmen, walked back into the house.

"Mamma, may I come in?" she asked at the threshold of her mother's room. She bowed three times quickly, then threw herself into her mother's arms.

They lay on the bed.

"Why is the house so strange to-day?" Meifu asked, smiling through her hot tears.

"Of course the house is strange," her mother said, peering at the tears springing from her daughter's eyes. "Let me see—is this really why you are crying?"

"I don't understand, mamma."

"No, perhaps not, but then you are very young. Don't cry, darling. Your honourable father says the house in Singapore is just as big. What did the soothsayer say? We must leave the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud before midday. Well, that leaves us three hours."

She threw a despairing glance round the bedroom. The grandfather clock was ticking remorselessly in the corner.

"Must we really leave?" Meifu said, gazing panic-stricken at the face of the grandfather clock, where the moon and the planets were shown revolving on a pale green sky.

Her mother made no reply. Meifu contemplated her

slippers, which were larger than her mother's. From the servants' hall came the faint sound of rustling mulberry leaves.

"So we really go?"

"Yes, darling. Be brave. Don't cry again. Really, with ten thousand cares, how can one tell what to do? Listen to your grandfather. Really, this is not the time to play the flute."

More horses came champing and neighing outside the Vermilion Gate. The coachmen spoke in the rough voices of Hunan peasants. The slave-girls were banging wooden clappers together to keep off the horse-flies.

"Grandfather showed me a map of Singapore," Meifu said excitedly. "It's like a leaf—a red leaf—and the sea all round. He says it never rains and everything comes in a ship."

"What nonsense you are talking. You mustn't knit your brows, Meifu. You'll become like Hsi-shi."

"Who was Hsi-shi?"

"She was a princess who murdered the Emperor," her mother answered with horror.

Meifu tried so hard to unknit her brows that the effort became an enduring torture.

"Like a red leaf, did you say?" her mother continued anxiously. "This is a good sign. Like mulberry leaves in autumn? We should have asked the soothsayer."

Suddenly the house grew silent, even the coachmen stopped swearing at the mules. An-mei left the bedroom and hobbled towards the spirit screen, where her father-in-law was bowing before the painting of Kuan-Yin. Offerings of incense and yellow candles were being made; on the table lay yellow apples and a coil of yellow beads. There were also four kinds of dried fruit, meat and fish; five kinds of autumn flowers; and three kinds of yellow stones from the Heaven-sent Milk Quarry. Meifu counted them all in the blaze of yellow candles, which shone on Kuan-Yin's yellow robe. She sighed and one of the slave-girls struck the gong. Her grandfather was telling the ancestors that the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud was being left in charge of a distant relative and begging them to increase its prosperity. He mentioned the bandits, the rise in the cost of maize, the heavy labour of the tea-planters; he mentioned

all the family by name, and the names of the servants and the slave-girls. He prayed for an uneventful voyage and fair winds. Meifu's mother was crying softly. Two thin streams of tears ran down her cheeks. Meifu saw that her grandfather was dressed in ceremonial robes. Ti walked barefoot across the room, bowing continually. Then the gong struck again, a door banged and the mules could be heard neighing by the Vermilion Gate.

The hooded farm-carts were drawn up in a single row. Already they were piled high with camphor-wood chests, earthenware jugs, pillows and beds. The sky was overcast. A cold wind blew along the valley, but there was no sign of rain. In his loose grey gown grandfather was wandering round the court-yard taking farewell of the miniature landscapes with an expression of heart-broken sorrow. His silk shoes muffled his footsteps, so that he seemed to walk like a ghost. He toyed with the porcelain swans and wild geese floating in the mountain pool and sighed as he dipped his finger in the bowls where the birds drank in summer. Gradually the water grew clear again, and he walked off to stand in silent admiration before the poem he had caused to be engraved on the wall in gold lettering to record the many years he had spent in the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud.

The hours passed slowly on leaden wings. The sun-clock burnt to a thin taper; the white ash collected on the dial and the prayer-slips swayed in the wind. At the beginning of every hour the grandfather clock played an unrecognisable tune. Now, instead of crates and wooden boxes, the court-yard was littered with lanterns—lanterns of every conceivable size and pattern, yellow lanterns for the autumn festival, red lanterns for good fortune, green lanterns with phoenix wings for harmony in marriage and small lanterns of delicate Shantung silk in the shape of bats for long life and blessed contentment. Meanwhile the slave-girls were carrying saffron cakes on silver trays round the court-yard, but no one was hungry. Ti was standing in earnest conversation with Small Dragon, who was mounted on a buffalo, from where he looked down at the mules like a great warrior or a huntsman returning from the chase.

The sun shone on the dappled necks of the mules, who

pranced and reared on their hind legs, restless before the journey or because the air was too highly scented. Already groups of villagers stood outside the walls. There were still, however, many ceremonies to be performed. For the last time Ti fed the stone lions on the gate-posts. Meifu helped her grandfather smother the ancestral tablets in straw, before carrying them gently, wound in silk, to the waiting carriage. The portrait of Kuan-Yin was bequeathed to the new owners of the house in the hope that the traditional prosperity would remain within the four walls, but the lanterns were solemnly burnt. They blazed in the centre of the court-yard. Pieces of charred silk and paper whirled high above the curving roofs. In the brilliant yellow flames all the summer seemed to be alight.

The carnage was waiting, but it so happened that one of the mules was discovered to be lame and another was ordered from the stables. The coachmen wore thick padded cotton coats, as though expecting the worst. Grandfather looked apprehensively at the sky.

"Summer is coming to an end," he said in a grumbling voice. "The brightness is going from the Heavens."

While they were waiting for the mule, workmen tapped the wheels and axles again. Chien-ma placed a basket of fruit in the carriage—ripe quinces, golden papayas, melons with hairy skins, green lemons, water-melons, water-almonds and chestnuts wrapped in silver paper. An-mei wore a coat of embroidered silk. Ti wore a goatskin slung carelessly over his shoulder—his last present from Small Dragon who was slowly climbing to the pastures with the herd-boys. After carefully flicking the dust and rice-straws from his cotton coat, old 'Chu bowed to grandfather and presented him with a scroll written in clumsy peasant handwriting and inscribed with the words: "A thousand years of prosperity." Grandfather was deeply moved. He bowed in return, gave the old door-keeper some silver coins and summoned Meifu to help him fasten the scroll to the doors of the carriage. At last the new mule arrived. The coachmen fastened the traces and sat back in their seats, waiting for the order to whip the mules.

But the farm-carts were still being loaded. These were the

same farm-carts which the tea-pickers would use in early autumn to take their gunny-sacks through the Liu pass. For a year the carts were allowed to rot in the bamboo shed, the paint peeling off, the golden lacquer round the wheels falling away. They slumbered among cobwebs and the long silky skeins of bird's spittle. "Whoa, there!" the coachmen cried as the mules reared and bit at their traces. Chien-ma ran into the vegetable garden and plucked the last stalk of crisp celery. Small Dragon was waving his scarf from the brow of a hill and Ti was choking back his tears.

"Is everything ready?" grandfather asked as he sat heavily among the cushions.

He looked at the sky. Heavy clouds were rolling over the Liu mountains. All summer it had been hot and parched; now that they were going there was thunder in the air. One by one the villagers came to make farewell speeches. Scrolls were presented and exchanged, the slave-women bowed low, Meifu blushed continually and still she could not believe that they were really leaving the familiar court-yard. Chien-ma gave her advice on how to dress and comb her hair. Under the weight of cedar-wood and sycamore-wood boxes the farm-carts were creaking.

"Heaven help us if we have to wait all day," An-mei cast a despairing glance at the villagers crowding the narrow street. "How shall we ever get past them?"

It was nearly twelve o'clock, the hottest time of the day in Ai-lin. Meifu was sweltering. The sweet odour of noodles filled the summer air. Suddenly, at a sign from grandfather, the coachmen flourished their whips and the carriage followed by the four farm-carts sailed past the Vermilion Gate to the cheers of the villagers.

The coachmen began to whip the mules into a sudden gallop, and the carriage bounded from side to side of the cobbled road. The streets were lined with villagers, bowing respectfully or cheering wildly. At the market in Grace Street grandfather ordered the carriage to stop, so that he could say farewell to an old tenant who was paralysed in both arms. When he returned, Ti was struggling with his tears and Meifu was openly weeping.

"We'll have lunch at the Three Spring Falls," her grandfather announced as they passed under the drum-tower.

"At Three Spring Falls, did you say?" An-mei asked. "Why, that's sixty *li* away?"

"Yes, yes, but the horses don't need to feed more than twice on the journey. Hsiao-hsing is two hundred and forty *li* away, and we must be there by nightfall."

"It's quite impossible," An-mei said, fanning herself vigorously, although it was cool in the carriage.

"We ought to have left earlier," Ti explained.

"Hush, hush," his mother said, remembering the soothsayer and not daring to pursue the argument further.

After an hour they reached Horseshoe Pass. Below the fir-trees the labourers were out among the root-crops and the tea-planters lay on the green hills between the fields. Meifu saw the smoke of fires. Soon they could smell the reek of burning furze, and as they came in sight of the red-brick temple among the granite slopes, a little below the quarry, the scent of cinnamon and incense flowed over the road. The two mules, with rugged coats and steaming nostrils, with out-stretched necks and lolling tongues and waving tails, slithered up the road, striking sparks from the earth with their iron hooves, swaying from side to side, answering all the coachman's muffled curses with a proud toss of their heads and a slither of rubble under the carriage wheels. Little fires blazed on the hillside. Ti searched for the herd-boys. There was no sign of them.

"Can you see the frost on the earth?" grandfather pointed to the white valleys.

"Yes, Grandfather."

"You're wrong, then," he chuckled. "When the root-crops are taken out, the earth is always white.

"That would happen if the fields were covered with chipped plates," Ti suggested.

It was such a strange suggestion that Meifu recoiled with horror. She forgot that he was only five. At that moment he seemed an old man, older than her grandfather.

"But there's some real frost over there," Ti exclaimed, pointing to the blue hills.

Grandfather peered through the hanging curtains.

"You're quite right," he said, and leaned back with a satisfied sigh.

At the top of the pass they turned into a forest, an immense forest of stunted firs which grew over ancient gravestones. Among the branches golden pheasants darted, and long-tailed orioles, and high above them, as silent as winter starlings, hovered the fierce crested eagles with leather wings. A solitary telegraph pole inclined at an angle, with dead birds hanging on the wires, stood at the summit of the pass. Meifu listened to the strange soughing of the wires, which was more terrible than the Before Han Emperor Graveyard, which lay on either side of the muddy road.

"If you speak into the wires," An-mei said, "your voice will carry over the whole empire."

"Could we speak to father?" Ti asked, with an expression of extraordinary excitement on his round face.

"We haven't time, no time," grandfather answered, and he leaned forward to ask the coachman not to rush the mules, otherwise another mule would grow lame.

When they had gone some miles they came to a clearing, and turning in his box, the coachman told them to look out for the deserted village. The village lay on the grey horizon, where rocks and boulders grew among thorn-trees. Meifu and Ti sat in silence, holding hands. The coachman shouted through the curtain that it was not really a village, but a fortress. Grandfather smiled pleasantly, his eyes half-closed, giving his face the expression it always wore when he heard anything he only half-believed. Then suddenly, as they turned a corner, they saw the crumbling fortress walls rise clearly above the larkspur-blue horizon. Pennons flew from the walls, grey and green, and the coachman explained that the village was still being used by wandering tribesmen, poets and beggars, who stayed there during the night; but during the day no one ventured near, since it was haunted by ghosts who feared the darkness.

"Are there really such ghosts?" grandfather asked, beaming with pleasure as he gazed at the fortress which rose higher and higher above them as they came to level ground.

"Why, yes, your honour," the coachman said, rubbing the sweat from his brow with his long sleeve. "During the time of the Ming Emperors it was a fortress, a famous fortress, as you might say. The marshes have dried up now, but they were over there on the other side of the temple. A famous dragon lived in the marshes. This dragon, your honour, spent every morning in the fortress discussing the arts of war with the conscripts. They say he was an evil dragon—with a blue tail and a monkey's ears and much more nonsense of the same kind. One evening the Emperor arrived on a visit of inspection. The dragon so far forgot himself as to present himself to the Emperor. A dark night, your honour, and the wild geese were flying high. The Emperor, however, was a magician and he forbade the dragon from ever entering the fortress by night, and so it has been to this day—the fortress where the dragon dwells in daylight but vanishes at night."

"Ah-ah-ah," grandfather exclaimed, making the sound he made when smoking opium. "Yes, it's extremely interesting. What happened then?"

"Nothing happened, your honour. That's the whole story."

The mules had fallen to a slow trot. The red horse-cloths were black with sweat, the locust-flies were dancing on their hind-quarters and they ambled over the muddy road in the heat which became more intolerably oppressive each moment. The fortress was less than three *li* away. Grandfather would have liked to visit it, or at least go near enough to see whether there were any inscription on the walls. On the other hand, the heat, after the cold chill in the morning, suggested that it was better to hurry on. He was torn between the desire to see the fortress and the desire to reach Hsiao-hsing before nightfall.

"No, no, we can't wait," he announced gruffly. "I've never heard of the fortress," he continued, taking off his spectacles. "This clearing, for instance—was there always a clearing here?"

"No, your honour, the fir-trees were cut down only last year."

Grandfather lay back in the carriage completely satisfied. When the children looked round, they saw the high walls

disappear beyond the tree-stumps, where the gravestones lay overgrown with berries and feather-grass. The still-living roots of the trees clawed what remained of the stones; and when the wind changed slightly, as it did when they turned off the narrow road into the broad highway which leads to Hsiao-hsing, the pale red stones shone above the aching desolation of stumps.

"The mules have had a rest now," grandfather murmured, and then in a louder voice he said: "Whip them up, coachman, whip them up."

"Tchuk, tchuk, come on, Beautiful Harvest and Summer Pleasure," the coachman roared at the top of his voice, addressing the two mules. Their ears flicked up, their long necks arched and they cantered down the broad chalky highway through a hedge of limes and *wu-tung* trees, while the sweat shone on their flanks and from far-off came the voice of the coachman's son driving the foremost farm-cart.

Meifu turned round for the last time. The walls had entirely disappeared beyond the crest of a hill, but the pennons were still flying; in the middle of the road leading to the gravestones a dog with a bushy white tail and long ears was barking at them. Meifu did not know where it had come from; it was certainly not there when they cantered down the road, and she began to be afraid. It was too late to look round again, and in any case the dog had ceased barking.

The highroad wound through forest and rock. Inside the carriage the curtains gave off an oppressive heat, which continued even when they rode in the shade. The sky was full of clouds, but a pale red sun hung over the green cliffs of forest in the distance.

"There's a storm coming up," grandfather said, gazing apprehensively at the clouds.

An-mei removed the furs and goatskins; she fanned herself vigorously and drank the scented water in the ivory flagon, then she handed the flagon to Meifu. Ti's cheeks were the colour of autumn plum-blossom: hot and red, his face succumbing to a morose smile as he unbuttoned his coat and sank back among the sweltering cushions. The main highroad was full of cart-ruts. Grandfather noticed that the earth had

changed colour, no longer white but dark brown and orange, When he leaned out, he noted with satisfaction the three farm-carts piled high with baggage.

They forded the river below Ping-an. This was a desultory town, perched high on the red basalt cliffs overlooking the river. There was a famous temple of white stone with green tiles, which had been raised to the memory of one of the minor courtesans of the Emperor Chien-lung. Everything except the tiles was white. The walls were white stone, the court-yards had been stamped with lime, so that no one dared to walk in them, except along the narrow path of white stones. In the murky sunshine, with heavy clouds hovering over the distant hills, the temple dazzled them and the white radiance was visible long before the walls were actually seen.

Night came on suddenly as they splashed through the ford. In the greenish-gold light that filtered through the curtains after sunset, grandfather saw the wild geese whistling high above the roofs of Ping-an. "This is a good omen," he told himself. "It entirely cancels the bad omen of seeing the graveyard." While the wheels rocked and the mules floundered in the ford, he gazed contentedly at the sky, searching for more wild geese; but none came. Soon the last flicker of sunset disappeared and the white walls of the temple surrendered to the darkness. Lamps were lit and the coachman searched the dark fields for robbers, while An-mei nervously muttered prayers for their safety. Only grandfather was not dismayed by the sudden approach of darkness. He believed the sooth-sayer; he also believed that wild geese at the moment of sunset is a good omen.

The north star glimmered faintly; Venus shone in her blue-glazed lamp. Ti lay among the cushions, drowsy with heat and sleep. Occasionally a wheel caught on a stump, and one side of the carriage leaped in the air and fell back again, throwing them all in a heap; when this happened Ti gazed at his grandfather with an anxious expression, as though accusing him of making it more difficult to sleep. But Meifu sat bolt upright with her hands folded on her lap; smiling eagerly and expectantly at the trees and the cold mist.

Presently they heard the first rain-drops on the roof. An-mei

reminded them that they had eaten nothing since midday. By the light of the carriage lamps, she opened the wicker baskets, but the dust of the journey had spoiled their appetite. Ti refused the red persimmons but nibbled at water-chestnuts. Meifu shared slices of water-melon with An-mei.

"We ought to have stayed at Ping-an," An-mei exclaimed, peering in the darkness where all the trees resembled soldiers on horseback. "How different it is from the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud."

Then she lay back among the cushions, counting her beads, while Meifu listened to the steady trot of the farm-carts in the distance. The rain fell in soft showers. There was no more forest, no more willows and pine trees. A mist settled on the plains of cut rice, candles gleamed in the mud houses on the slopes, and Meifu wondered what was happening in the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud. Chien-ma, of course, was already asleep; 'Chu was warming his hands over a charcoal fire and the slave-girls were discussing their future husbands. Grandfather was drinking Hsiao-hsing wine from a porcelain vase with a brass stopper. How quiet it was! The rain fell with the sound of distant marching, while Meifu hummed herself to sleep.

Her snores were interrupted by the coachman shouting: "Another *li*, only another *li*, your honour and mistress."

Grandfather cursed softly.

"This jolting does upset the stomach," An-mei exclaimed. "Why doesn't he go more slowly?"

"Because the gates will be closed," grandfather objected.

"And where shall we sleep then?" An-mei asked; her eyes were terror-stricken and shone glassily in the red gleam of candles.

Ti threw a cracker into the muddy field, then screwed up his face, waiting for the explosion, but none came and he went to sleep again. His woollen tiger-cap fell over his eyes. From his warm brown body came the smell of wet wool and sweat. The mist-laden fields raced past and the rain gleamed on the curved roofs in the distance. Grandfather took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face. Although it was raining, the heat had not decreased, the oppressive heat of autumn which comes before winter sets in. Meifu caught

her breath when she leaned outside the carriage, for the air outside was cold and damp, and the rain caressed her burning cheeks. She thought she saw snow in the valley below; she was sure it was snow, until she noticed the moon rising on the walled town.

"So this is Hsiao-hsing," she whispered excitedly to her brother.

"Can you smell the fish?" Ti asked, still half-awake.

"Why fish?" Meifu asked, taking deep draughts of air.

"All rivers smell of fish," Ti said, complacently.

Hsiao-hsing emerged gradually through the moonlight. An explosion during the Boxer rebellion had split the drum-tower in two, and no one had troubled to repair it. An-mei was awake now. She was busy collecting the baskets of food, the fur rugs, the bottles of Teochew wine and scented water. When she looked up, she saw the broken drum-tower like an apparition.

"Is this really Hsiao-hsing?" she exclaimed.

Grandfather, who had been silent for some time, suddenly lifted his head, saying:

"Did you think we had returned to the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud."

Ti burst into loud and uncontrollable laughter. He threw another cracker out of the window. He had not expected it to burst because he had been sucking it for half an hour, and he jumped when it exploded immediately it touched the ground.

"Can you smell the fish?" he said, wrinkling his nose.

Grandfather, who had been frightened by the explosion of the cracker, frowned: "There are two ways of treating boys who fire crackers, and the best way is to sacrifice them to the fox-spirits." Ti snuggled down in the furs and listened to the creaking axle and the muttered curses of the coachmen as the mules settled into a slow trot instead of a fast gallop.

An-mei had expected great difficulty at the gates. For the last four hours, although she had not spoken of it to the children, she had been expecting bandits. But the gates were opened surprisingly quickly by a small boy in a fur cap. The boy transmitted grandfather's polite requests to a man lying

under a flickering oil-lamp in the porch of the gate-house. Meifu caught a glimpse of a pale yellow face pocked with leprosy, a startling face in which the dark patches seemed to be liquid. Grandfather explained his mission, the boy repeated his words and the old man lying on rice-straws in the porch grunted with approval and half raised himself to answer grandfather's bows.

"Honourable sir, your family is well known to us," he grunted and turned away to hide his face. "The Cheong family is well known here. Indeed they have lived here for generations in the Hall of Evening Clouds."

At the thought that there were relatives in Hsiao-hsing whom he had never visited, grandfather became excited, his voice rose and he bowed ceremoniously to the gate-keeper and the gate-keeper's boy.

"What a fine boy you have," he exclaimed. "May ten thousand blessings accompany him in his journey through life."

"Honourable sir, you are welcome to take my poor lodging for the night, but better lodgings are obtainable in Tooth-ache Remedy Street in the House of Four Rafters."

An-mei was already yawning. The ceremonies between her father-in-law and the gate-keeper were in danger of being prolonged indefinitely. Grandfather wanted to know everything about the history of the town, the minerals collected in the mines, the famous rock-gardens and the temples hidden in the bamboo groves up-stream. The gate-keeper wanted to know where grandfather was going, the names of his honourable ancestors and the place where he lived. Meifu had fallen asleep, standing up. She was swaying from side to side like poppies in a spring breeze.

"Look at Meifu," her mother exclaimed. "Come, we must find a 'square cloth' to rest on."

"The decencies must be observed," grandfather whispered solemnly, bowing and rubbing his hands together. When he had related the history of the Cheong family from Ai-lin, the coachman was allowed to proceed through the gates, the three farm-carts rolled up shortly afterwards and grandfather arranged that the coachmen should all sleep in the stables,

so that they could be ready for the journey early the next morning. In Tooth-ache Remedy Street they discovered an inn with a spare room, where everything was neat and scrupulously clean, with earthenware cooking pots arranged neatly in rows over the porcelain stove, and wooden benches against the wall. It was still raining. The stove was lit, although it was warm and the shutters were closed; but An-mei insisted that their clothes should be dried, for the children had spent a long time wandering round the stables with the coachmen. "That's good," Ti said, licking his lips. "Only in Ai-lin can you find such water-melons."

"And the best tea," Meifu insisted as she lay down to sleep.

Grandfather had asked for a bowl of rice. It was brought to him by a handsome young peasant who had succeeded in growing a thin beard; he seemed the most beautiful peasant Meifu had ever seen. She fell in love with him, asked him to open the shutters and giggled with delight when he immediately obeyed her. An-mei lay down with a fur-rug over her shoulders. When grandfather explained that she should have a bedroom to herself, she answered that they were all tired and the decencies would be observed if grandfather found a bedroom for himself and left her with the children.

Meifu slept with one arm thrown over Ti's shoulders. The sweet cloying taste of water-melon made her lick her lips, even when she was asleep. There was no light in the room when the oil-lamp had been turned down. Meifu slept dreamlessly until the moment when she seemed to be flying towards the grave-stones on the hill. The blue dragon with the monkey's ears growled at her and told her not to play during the day. Even in her dreams she knew that this was a bad omen. She struggled away from the dragon's claws, opened her eyes, saw the dark room again and slept dreamlessly until the morning.

When grandfather woke up in the House of Four Rafters, he was hungry, his legs suffered from cramp and his lungs ached for opium. "It's extraordinary," he said, thinking of Meifu, who was always using the word. Cocks were crowing, and a curtain of silver rain-drops fell from the eaves. "Of course we are in Hsiao-hsmg," he told himself, and lay back on the

wooden bed with his eyes closed, while he composed a poem on the safe arrival of the Cheong family in this famous village.

The sky was cloudless but streaked with faint white lines like the imprints of skates on ice. A storm broke during the night. Nothing was now left of the storm save the puddles of clear water in the court-yard and the silver rain-drops falling from the eaves. On the other side of Tooth-ache Remedy Street there were blue dragons and phoenixes on the red-tiled roofs. He was enchanted and walked down into the court-yard.

"It's a very fine morning, very propitious," he exclaimed, rubbing his hands, as Meifu made her bow. Her face was hot and it was evident that she had been racing round the court-yard.

"When do we leave for Canton?" she asked, coming so close that he felt her simmering warmth.

"As soon as the mules are harnessed—any moment now," he said. "We must go and find the stables."

Meifu was struck by the absence of ceremony.

"Have you heard about the bandits?" she exclaimed suddenly as they walked through the court-yard gate in search of the stables.

"What bandits?"

"They came last night."

"No, it's impossible."

"They were on the road, Grandfather. Isn't it extraordinary? They didn't stop us. The dentist says we were going too fast."

"The dentist?"

"The dentist staying at the inn."

"Well, what happened, child. It's all in your head, I suppose. You'll have to tell me, otherwise I won't believe you." He made a mocking frown and caught her hand when she raised it to point to a flock of pigeons.

"I'll tell you, all of it. First they say the bandits were held up by the mist, then they say we were going too fast," Meifu said breathlessly. "I think both are correct, and mamma is quite right to ask the prefect for an escort."

"What sort of escort?"

"A military escort—soldiers—look!"

When Meifu spoke of a military escort her grandfather imagined an army with pennons flying, riding on small white Mongolian ponies and defending the Great Wall against the Hsiung-nu, but when he looked up he saw the soldiers leaning against the wall, bare-foot, their uniforms torn and discoloured, their round peasant faces ugly and unwashed. They were shaking the branches of a mulberry tree and eagerly devouring the sickly fruit. The decayed state of their uniforms and their stupid faces were not calculated to inspire much alarm in the breast of a bandit. Ti was talking earnestly to one of the soldiers and attempting to exchange two green ribbons for a mulberry; the soldiers laughed, hoisted him on their shoulders and spat when grandfather passed on the other side of the narrow cobbled road.

"Are you sure there were bandits?" he asked, paying no attention to Ti.

"Certainly, Grandfather."

They walked in silence. The smell of offal from the dung-hills beside the stables made them quicken their pace. The rain was still trickling from the eaves, but the sky was cloudless, deep blue and the sun painted the red roofs yellow. Grandfather gazed in admiration of an inscription on the wall of a temple: "Erected by Ssu-ehr-chi of Hsiao-hsing. In the spring of the year Chia ming of Pao-sung I collected armies against the barbarians on the northern frontier. For twenty years I fought with my two-edged sword. Forgotten by the Emperor I died in exile." The letters were deeply carved in the red stone.

"The calligraphy is extraordinarily good," grandfather said. He had forgotten the soldiers and the bandits.

"Did you see their spears?" Meifu asked, remembering the lances with blunt steel knives wound on the red shafts with thick cord.

Grandfather shrugged his shoulders.

"The omens are propitious," he repeated. "The good family will suffer no harm from immortal heaven," he quoted softly.

When they reached the stables the mules were already harnessed. The old leper was sitting on a straw bed in exactly the same position which he occupied the night before. The

stable-boys were talking in little groups. The new dung steamed on the court-yard floor, and grandfather held his sleeves to his nose. The leper looked up when he saw grandfather coming along the road. His one eye gleamed and his face lit up with an extraordinarily benevolent smile, although he possessed no lips and his rotting teeth were continually bared. He bowed, a cautious jerking bow from the waist. Grandfather bowed solemnly in return. "The bandits . . ." the stable-boys were saying. Then they looked at Meifu who had suddenly assumed a decent composure with her eyes fixed on the ground. Soon all the stable-boys from all the stables came to see the three travellers who had journeyed through the bandit territory unharmed.

"Which mule shall it be, your honour?" the leper smiled, and supporting himself on a stick, attempted to stand up.

"Don't trouble yourself, honourable sir," grandfather exclaimed in alarm, afraid that the leper would move closer to Meifu. "Which mule shall it be? Why, have the mules suddenly grown lame?"

"Esteemed and worshipful sir, the mules are tired. You will need faster mules for the journey to Canton. Hardly at any cost at all. The merest shaving of money, and I shall supply you with the fastest mules in Kwantung."

Grandfather, who had rarely left the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud except for pilgrimages to the neighbouring mountains, discovered that he could bargain as well as the peasants. He had not eaten. The air was fresh, and he heard the river churning outside the city walls. He examined the mules and found fault with all of them. The stable-boys laughed and the leper coughed and spat blood and stroked Meifu's silk coat with an expression of amused interest at everything that happened round him and especially at everything he did or said.

"It is a great honour, your worship," he bowed as he received the money for the mules. "It is evident that your worship is a scholarly man. A great reader of the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian classics. Perhaps a dweller in the bamboo groves? Or a lute-player at the Imperial Court? So few men of renown come to this worthless city."

Meifu could not take her eyes from him. Wherever he

walked he was accompanied by his small son, who wore only a pair of blue trousers rolled above his knees. The boy was even more beautiful than Ti, with long curling eyelashes and a small round mouth. When the leper half fell in a dung-hill, the boy tenderly held him up, and when the leper smiled, the boy smiled in exactly the same way. The stable-boys looked on, talking excitedly and pointing ironically at Ti, whose woollen tiger-cap was constantly falling over his eyes. At the other end of the stables twelve mules were being saddled for the soldiers.

"Your worshipful highness, a drink of wine," the leper said as he hobbled into the dark cabin behind the straw bed.

When he came out again he was accompanied by the boy bearing a tray of small glasses and the bottle of ink-red Hsiao-hsing pear-wine.

"Let us drink to your immortal health," the leper coughed, and the glass he was holding shot dizzily out of his hand, to fall in the dung-hill where the boy retrieved it. "May you live ten thousand years. May your poems be read in ten thousand times ten thousand households. May you breathe peace like the immortal *kuei* and cast your blessings on the vales of darkness."

Meifu watched all this with entranced eyes. The soldiers were riding through the mud, bearing their halberds with broad blunt knives stuck on the ends, but the expression on the leper's face occupied her attention to the exclusion of the soldiers and the mules chafing on their traces. Although the leper resembled a man who has been long buried, and although he stroked her clothes, he delighted her with his odd movements of his head and his curious rumbling voice. Ti paid no attention to the leper. He was faintly disgusted, and much more interested in the soldiers and the stable-boys.

"You have done us a great honour to come to our unworthy kitchen-midden of a habitation," the leper continued, his one eye glaring into Meifu's face. "From such a beautiful person such an honour is worthy of our respect and betokens a family as pure as white jade."

Meifu did not understand what he was saying, and she was dumbfounded when the leper presented her with a jade ring,

which he slipped over her thin wrist and immediately covered with her sleeve. Meifu bowed slightly, blushing with shame. Ti came to examine the ring and showed not the faintest desire to praise it. He examined it as he would examine a butterfly in the garden. Meifu looked at the great ring and the watch dangling on the blue brocade ribbon, then she ran away and hid behind her grandfather's skirts.

Already the soldiers were mounted on wooden saddles, their feet dangling over the side. Two sedan chairs arrived suddenly, one containing her mother, the other containing a servant of the provincial prefect in red robes with a red skull-cap and a white button. Her mother was hot and breathless; she had been searching everywhere for the children and she was afraid grandfather had become lost in the interminable narrow streets of Hsiao-hsing, which were notable for the number of strangers who mysteriously disappeared in them. The sun was blinding. Ti stood on a dung-hill and watched the quivering blue light on the mountains. He whistled to himself, oblivious of the stable-boys who pulled at his clothes and mimicked the scholarly voice of his grandfather.

"The gates are open, your honour," the leper said with a sweep of his arms, as though inviting them all to partake of the plentiful fields and forests outside.

"How long will the journey take?" grandfather asked anxiously.

"A mere four hours, your honour. With my mules, perhaps three hours or even less."

When the carriage appeared, with the two brown mules as stumpy as noodles, their ears like scarecrows and their heads black with horse-flies, grandfather wondered how they could have looked so sleek in the stables. The sun showed all their deformities, their ragged tails and misshapen teeth and sagging bellies. When they whinnied and their lips drew back, they resembled the leper so closely that Meifu burst out in uncontrollable hysterical laughter. The stable-boys were dancing with delight as they watched the richly curtained carriage drawn by the two spavined mules; and suddenly the leper, watching Meifu's infectious laughter, began to quiver with laughter and his thin bony body inside the rags shook so much

that her grandfather was afraid the bones would crack. Suddenly Meifu grew silent.

Her mother called: "Don't be late. Hurry into the carriage or we'll miss the ship at Canton."

They drove through the walls, over which eight horses could ride abreast, followed by the leper, the twelve soldiers with halberds, the three farm-carts and a crowd of stable-boys. The sun shone on the mountains and threw long, wet shadows of trees and walls. They crossed the humped-back bridge over Lifu river. Grandfather leaned out and waved to the leper, who shouted after them: "Ten thousand blessings on your worship," and the small boy laughed while the sunlight streaked his shoulders with yellow paint. The road shone white between the green fields. Already it was eight o'clock in the morning, the hot sun beat fiercely on the embroidered curtains and dust was beginning to rise from the wet road. Almost before their eyes the mud turned to dust.

"What an extraordinary man," grandfather said, staring at the blue mountains. "A leper—and such politeness; he might have been a scholar. He quoted the verses of Po-Chui like a scholar."

"He probably learnt them from the dancing-girls," An-mei said, and her brows wrinkled.

"He was a cultivated man," grandfather insisted. "Such men are rare and should not be despised. An immortal may very well be a leper, for I have heard that leprosy is derived from the air in high places."

"It is more likely that he caught leprosy from living among dung-hills," An-mei commented with another frown.

The soldiers had slackened their pace. The sun shone on their halberds and the hot dust whirled over them. The coachman had taken an evident dislike to the mules, and he began lashing them with his whip and clucking his teeth. Meifu could see that the mules were distracted with pain. The horse-flies clung to their eyes, already festering with yellow sores; their bones stood out and the skin drooped in folds between their ribs. Shq had never seen such mules. But they raced up the hill with tails flicking like feather brooms, the carriage bumped up and down, and the motion which had

seemed dangerous enough the day before was like a box falling downstairs when they breasted the hill. Meifu pulled the curtains aside and thought: if we outdistance the soldiers, perhaps they will be captured and held to ransom by the bandits. "Yes, yes, go on," grandfather was saying to some interminable tale that Ti was relating. "It sounds as though their immortal essence was imprisoned in the hills." Ti nodded in agreement. On this white stretch of road between the fields where autumn paddy was being planted, the dust rose in columns and far in the distance the soldiers were singing.

During the next four hours the mules covered a hundred *li*, the axle staves creaking like tin cans, the mules dashing madly from side to side of the road to avoid the coachman's implacable whip. Down below a small river wound between pine-trees. There were still no clouds, and the air was as transparent and fresh as in the early morning. When the road was flat the mules obstinately slowed up, while the coachman cracked his whip and shouted with rage; but inside the carriage everyone was at peace, everyone was enjoying the golden-green papayas An-mei was spreading on the lace table-cloth, and grandfather could still taste the sharp-sweet red wine he drank the previous evening. He could not forget the leper. He saw few people and rarely forgot anything of the people he saw; and the leper was far stranger than the priests who occasionally tottered up the twenty-seven stone steps which led to his study under the roof of the Sleeping Cloud. But the most surprising thing was that he had no craving to smoke opium. Under the frail autumn mist the fields of flax and unspent barley below, the rivers and the streams, the mountains moving closer—all these exactly reproduced the joy he experienced with the opium-pipe. An-mei noticed that his breath was sweet and his eyes brighter than at any time she could remember. "He will live for ten thousand years," she said with a pleased expression.

"What did you say?" grandfather asked, looking up with a cautious smile of disapproval.

"I said the leper was quite right in wishing you ten thousand years."

Grandfather smiled, ran his fingers through his white beard and gazed longingly at the mountains.

"I am afraid of ships," he confessed. "They are not like mountains. They go up and down, and do not obey the Middle Way. But a mountain is silent, powerful, it never changes its place, and it enjoys all the beauty of the heavens."

But already the ships were in sight. Canton lay beyond the autumn mist, a wraith of white towers, white walls, white gates; and the ships moored in the upper reaches of the Pearl River shone with orange sails and broad polished decks. Meifu lay curled on the white bearskin, asleep with her hands folded over her face; but Ti was jumping up and down, pointing to the sails and the fields of flax and beans, screaming shrilly when an eagle bearing a grey rabbit in its talons suddenly rose from a copse and hung poised above them. The rabbit was twisting and untwisting in the yellow claws. "There's something wrong," Ti murmured. "Oh, Grandfather, look—it's quite wrong." Ti imagined the rabbit falling away, dropping in the soft earth and then, shaking itself, leaping towards the fields of barley and maize at the foot of the blue mountains. But the eagle was mounting higher and higher in the sky on effortless wings and the rabbit still lay within its talons.

"Did you see that?" he shook Meifu roughly by the shoulders. "An eagle and a rabbit——"

Meifu woke lazily and saw Canton in a cup of mist. The white walls were shimmering. A soft rain was falling on the blue mountains. The coachman was whipping the mules senselessly. The carriage was rocking so much that Meifu, startled out of her dreams, thought at first they were being attacked by bandits. There were moments when it occurred to grandfather that they would swing round altogether and be smashed against the mulberries; and there were other moments when he closed his eyes and thought the shafts would break under the strain. The coachman was racing the mules in the hope that they would drop down dead when they reached Canton. Suddenly the fields dropped away, and they entered a country of small vegetable gardens and mud houses, grey sunburnt roofs, small boats rusting in creeks, and from every direction at once came the indefinable smell of the sea. Meifu,

who had been trying to imagine the sea for the last three months, became more perplexed than ever. It smelt of cabbages, cucumber, chopped chilies, the most precious scents of Pekin and something else. She related all this to Ti.

"What do you think it is, Ti?" she said, her face going pale with concentration.

"Horse-dung," Ti answered truthfully and smiled in triumph.

The sun glistened on the roofs of Canton like the glistening spray from a censer. Above the roofs hung orange sails, prows of ancient teak, masts as high as the Liu mountains. They passed only three horse-carts during the journey from Hsiao-hsing. Here the roads were full of carts loaded with fruit, cloths, green ferns, guano and the rich earth from the base of the mountains. Ti gazed at the white city exactly as though he was about to drop off to sleep, his head nodded and his eyes closed with a kind of thankful bliss.

"What time shall we be there?" he asked his grandfather, unable to bear the excitement much longer. It was difficult to tell how far the city was. It danced and shimmered in the heat-haze and the white walls might be very high if they were a long distance away or very short if they were near.

"Are you hungry?" his grandfather said. "It is the mark of the virtuous man that he should show no desire," he added reprovingly.

Ti was not hungry. He was not particularly entranced with the city. He was drowsy with its beauty and immensity, the brown and white sails and the cup of earth where the city lay. Meifu sucked a peach and spat the skin out in an effort to show that she was unmoved by the apparition of so many tall houses. The farm-carts, the bales of silk tottering madly, came racing up, and the crack of whips frightened the birds from the grass growing between the fields.

"Is this Canton?" Ti asked with a slow, almost diplomatic smile. "I thought it would be much bigger."

"You're never satisfied," his mother smiled indulgently. "Ti always likes wearing clothes too big for him," she confided to Meifu.

"What a small city," Ti said in a morose voice. Then he

said: 'horse-dung' three times and relapsed into dreamy silence.

They entered the great gates at a furious pace, almost knocking over a ricksha. The fat merchant growled at them and spat in the direction where the carriage had been, but they were twenty yards ahead. As soon as they entered the crowded streets, the coachman could no longer ill-treat the mules; so he stood up high in his seat, explained in a croaking voice that the carriage contained the honourable elder of the village of Ai-lin in South Hunan, who was on a visit to his son in Singapore. All the other coachmen were shouting and screaming. The streets were full of people rushing aimlessly in every direction. Small boys were running under the horses to collect the droppings before they fell. Old women fanned themselves at the windows. Old men in rags sat over the chestnut vendors' charcoal fires. Meifu, who had never seen so many people at once, was fastidiously shocked by their strident voices and coarse behaviour. A sedan chair carried on the shoulders of four sweating coolies was blocked by the traffic; no one paid any attention to the four girls sweltering inside. The heat was terrible. The coachman jerked his reins excitedly. "Get out, you mother's rape gutter-dogs!" He lashed his whip above the heads of the coolies and swore savagely. "Get out, street-urchins-asleep-with-your-mothers, lazy scum of leprous swine!" Grandfather listened with his mouth agape.

Then they came to the ships. Beside the huge warehouses the ships lay with their prows pointing to the city like guns, their great sails eddying in the breeze from the opposite shore. Pearl River was wider than the rice-fields in Ai-lin; a greyish-green stretch of ocean simmered and boiled over, while crowds of half-naked children ran between the gunny-sacks on the quay. There were small sampans with palm-leaf shelters athwartships; huge galleons with twenty sail; the smell of spices and curried chicken; the shimmer of molten air above the charcoal fire on deck. The sailors were insolent and sun-burnt. You could tell they were sailors by their rolling gait and the smell of wood from their clothes. They wore black silk trousers spotted with grease-stains; they coiled their

pigtails over their heads like hooligans and sang throatily as they carried the gunny-sacks up the gangplanks. Occasionally they left the gunny-sacks and prostrated themselves before the temple on the forepoop. Incense rose, and mingled with the clouds of white smoke from the innumerable chimneys on shore.

Meifu examined the ships carefully. She saw the long black tillers, a quarter of the length of the ships, the creaking blocks and tackles, the stepped masts, one on the bulwark of the port bow and a larger one abaft, the mainmast keyed on the keel and the small mast on the port quarter bulwarks. Her grandfather assured her that the sails caught the wind, which blew the ship over the waves. But she could not understand how the ship could sail in any particular direction, since the wind was always changing. "They're too big," she thought, craning her neck and watching a small boy climbing the masts. The bales of silk from Szechuan and Hunan meant nothing to her. The coolies toiled in silence, while sweat poured from their bald heads. The carriage came to a pause under a swinging inn-sign and the two mules lowered their heads, whinnied and all the silver bells on the bridles and traces rang out at once.

"Come this way, your worship," the inn-keeper ran out and held the bridle. "Great cargo—ten thousand bales—a long journey—me chicken curry—pomeloes——" The words poured out of his mouth in an incessant stream. "Excuse, your worship. My unworthy restaurant is not fit for your high-born soul. We serve only the dregs of wine and the stewed bones of chicken——"

Grandfather paid off the coachman, who would return with the two spavined mules to Hsiao-hsing. The farm-carts were warned to wait until after the midday meal. Then he smiled at the enormously fat inn-keeper and they all followed him into a small room, where the beams pressed close on their heads and the walls were filled with mirrors. Meifu was hungry; her clothes were covered with dust and she was deafened by the noise of the coolies on the quay.

"Two tumblers of rice wine," grandfather shouted.

The inn-keeper cuffed a serving-boy and disappeared behind a screen. Ti sprawled over his chair with an expression of

acute discomfort. An-mei wiped the dust from her coat and breathed deeply. She was feeling ashamed because the coolies saw her stepping out of the carriage. Grandfather disappeared and returned five minutes later with the news that dinner could be taken in the garden under the pear-trees.

"Yes, yes, certainly," Meifu exclaimed, shivering with heat in the stuffy dining-room. She scowled at herself in the mirrors.

Under an immense pear-tree, on which the fruit hung like ropes of pearls, they presently sat down to a small lunch of Pekin duck, rice and papayas. A thick hum of mosquitoes circled over them, and a white bird flew out of an acacia tree. Half-rotted pears lay about on the grass under the tree, bored by wasps and pecked at by birds, and a faint odour of must came from the purple pears. Meifu behaved perfectly throughout the meal, because she was no longer deafened by the coolies. In the quiet garden, she crushed her teeth in the pears and thought she was once more in the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud.

During the afternoon grandfather went off to see the master of the *Tien Kuan*, while An-mei poured her troubles and grief over the children. She was hot and the mosquitoes troubled her. She fanned herself vigorously, until Ti felt that her arm would break off with exhaustion. Worst of all, she began to be homesick. She read their father's letter over and over again and gazed at the children accusingly, as though they were responsible for the journey. Ti fidgeted on the chair. Meifu sat bolt upright, with her eyes downcast and her hands folded on her lap, sighing faintly, not because she wanted her mother to stop complaining, but because she was enjoying the drowsy heat.

At four o'clock, grandfather returned. He knew nothing of ships. He had never travelled in an ocean-going junk and he was more frightened than the children. The smell of tar and paint clung to his grey gown.

"Just think—four hundred ships," he exclaimed, his eyes wide open and shining like black beads. "There's a small cabin, not fit for a scholar, and a larger cabin for the women and children. Everything is dirty. They haven't swept the

boat for generations. There's so much noise that you have to shout to be heard, and the old rascal wants an extra five cash for the oil-lamps in the cabin."

"Are you sure you found the right ship?" An-mei asked doubtfully. "You haven't made a mistake, have you?"

"An extra five cash!" grandfather exclaimed. "No, I haven't made a mistake. I've paid the money for the voyage. We go on board to-night, but she doesn't leave till to-morrow morning. The silly man took me for a street vendor."

Grandfather was strangely perturbed. The excitement of walking alone through crowds of uncultivated coolies soothed him at the same time that it excited him. Their faces were unrecognisable and they did not smile broadly like the peasants in Ai-lin, and they scowled even when they spoke to one another. The sailors could be distinguished from the coolies by their broad knives with bone handles, but everyone looked alike, everyone wore his hair close-cropped with a small pigtail wound above the left ear, everyone cursed and groaned. Soon grandfather had discovered that he was cursing and groaning under his breath in exactly the same way.

"It's much cooler here," he said fanning himself. "The heat comes off the stone walls. I don't understand how the coolies walk bare-foot. They must be used to it. I ordered a sedan, but no one paid any attention to me. I offered three cash to be taken along the quay, but they jeered at me." He shook the dust off his coat and beamed at Meifu. Ti was carried away by his grandfather's sudden explosions of anger.

"Jeered at you, honourable Grandfather?"

"Yes, indeed."

An-mei lifted a warning hand and said: "Hush, you mustn't ask such questions, Ti."

Grandfather winked and said: "The virtuous man pays no attention to the ill manners of the common people." Then he winked again, patted Ti's head and drank up his glass of Hsiao-hsing wine.

All afternoon they remained in the garden. Ripe pears fell from the tree, the white kitten chased the white birds in the bushes along the wall and grandfather delicately carved a pear into amber-coloured rings. Ti's thoughts strayed in the heat as

he watched the butterflies fanning themselves among the waist-high chrysanthemums. He ceased eating and the faint sickness and shock of unexpected joy at the sight of the sailing-ships returned with increased poignancy when his grandfather spoke of the journey his father had made alone. In a strange way, without deliberation, without even taking his eyes from his grandfather he resolved to build ships like the sailing-ships on Pearl River.

Soon he felt his thoughts fly back to the Vermilion Gate, where old 'Chu was standing with the broom in his hand, waiting for them. It distressed him to think that 'Chu had a new master. 'Chu would have liked to have heard the story of the blue dragon with the monkey's ears, who lived in a clearing beyond the Liu mountains. In his imagination Ti was curled up at 'Chu's feet listening to the stories that poured from the old man's lips; and then again, 'Chu was sitting curled at *his* feet and their roles were reversed. Ti was so overjoyed by this thought that he got up and chased the butterflies.

"Come back, boy, you haven't finished your fruit."

A half-eaten pear lay on the table.

"I've been eating all afternoon," Ti complained. He felt as if he had eaten so much that he could no longer breathe.

It was already evening when they set out in the covered sedan for the *T'ien Kuan*, which lay at the other end of the quay. The inn-keeper gave them fruit in paper bags and presented them each with a chrysanthemum; he bowed and smiled, and every time he smiled it was as though he was proudly acknowledging the fact that a man so fat could bow so well. When he squeezed Ti's face, Ti felt that it had suddenly been brought in contact with mutton fat.

The *T'ien Kuan* lay at the head of a small estuary, with bales of silk in her holds, and more bales of silk were being loaded by the coolies who crossed the narrow gangways under swinging lanterns. The sun had not yet set, but the lanterns were alight. Such extravagance made grandfather groan with despair, for he could never understand how people could waste such a precious thing as oil. But although the sun still shone on the river, there were pools of darkness on the crowded ship, and mysterious thick shadows thrown by the shrouds and ratlines.

A strange smell hung over the deck, compound of tea, cinnamon, silk, wood and something dry and musty. At the head of the gangway a small man with a face like a shrivelled monkey was laboriously counting the bales of silk as they were loaded into the holds. And so many bales of silk and tea had been stowed on deck that there was hardly room to move.

Ti scooped up a handful of earth before he ran along the gangplank. The gangplank swayed ominously under his weight and he caught his breath, thinking he was going to be thrown down into the black water below. Meifu turned her face towards the walls of Canton and breathed quickly, while she told herself this was the last time she would ever see a city in China; but it had hardly changed when she stood on deck. Grandfather held their mother's arm as she ran delicately into the arms of the fat comprador.

"Is everyone fat in Canton?" she asked herself breathlessly.

But the comprador had no time to lead her to the foul-smelling cabin below. He disappeared with a respectful bow, and An-mei was left completely alone while the children explored the deck with their grandfather. Grandfather refused to let them climb the masts; he refused to have anything to do with them except to reprove them continually for disappearing from his sight. Meifu ran madly round the deck. Ti sat on a coil of rope and watched the sun rapidly sinking in a haze of yellow fumes. With strange sharpness he saw the sun sinking in the river, the golden river full of sampans and small junks scuttling between the banks like yellow cockroaches—and somewhere beyond the blue mountains lay the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud, which slept at last in the unbroken stillness of his thoughts. The ecstasy of the journey was forgotten in the vision of masts and ratlines so thin at the mast-head that they resembled spider's webs. His unhappiness at leaving the tiled court-yard was mingled with a curious elation and a savage thankfulness. The smell of the harvest would come, pass away and reappear with the spring; but the smell of a sailing-ship was as unchanging as the sea.

He felt half ashamed of his thoughts as he crouched in the darkness in the shadow of the huge masts. When this mood, like all others, had exhausted itself, he passed into a long

tranquillity. Familiar fields and trees appeared in the darkness, and the lapping of the tide resembled the rustling of the pawlonia tree in the court-yard at Ai-lin. The night was hot. Millions of mosquitoes were finding their way on board. His mouth was parched, and he longed for a drink from his grandfather's water-bottle. People stumbled on deck and threw immense shadows from the red gleams of lanterns. A coolie was humming an old song as he braided his hair. Another knelt by the bulwarks over his opium-pipe. The blue flame of a small stove caressed the woodwork, and more shadows stumbled out of the night.

That night, when the wind came up, the sloping deck was full of men who stared silently and helplessly at the stars, while in the holds, where the women and children were battened down, half-suffocated by the fumes of a spirit-lamp, the silence was disturbed by a continual muttering of prayers. Ti lay with his sister on a wooden bench against a bulkhead. In another corner an old woman was comforting a fever-stricken baby. The baby's forehead was smeared with yellow ointment, its lips were cracked and its small fingers were swollen to the size of sausages. "Be quiet, little dove—go to sleep," the old woman crooned; then the baby slept and very faintly through the hatchway came the muffled voices, orders and the soft tread of coolies loading silk.

At cock-crow the mooring cable slipped in the river with a rustle like a sea-fowl alighting. A soft brown mist rose over the river, and gradually the mist dissolved into a silver sheet stretching from one side of the broad river to the other. Meifu awoke and heard the baby snivelling. On deck her grandfather flung his arms about his shoulders to keep warm. The sun rose over the palm-trees and white roofs and shone faintly, like a spider's web, on the square windows of the Custom House.

In the early morning, with the wind rushing over his face, grandfather wandered under the plaited lateen sails with a Chinese merchant from Amoy. The last crates were loaded from sampans, the last visitors had left when a steam launch came sailing out of the mist towards the junk, which was

already moving into midstream. Out of it tumbled a young girl in her grandmother's wedding dress and a young man in a canary-coloured gown. Then there were old women with faces like sour apples, crusted and clean, in long black skirts and blouses fastened with gold brooches, a priest in grey who counted his rosary made of chicken-bones even while he was climbing the rope-ladder, a middle-aged couple with a remarkably handsome boy of ten, and a scholar whose gown hung in folds over his thin flesh. They tumbled on the deck with expressions of amazement; they pointed to the sails and gasped in the cold air coming down-stream.

Grandfather shivered at their close proximity. The junk was already full. The murmur of the city reached him like a continual sullen explosion of crackers.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked the merchant from Amoy. "Are they content to wait until the last moment? Have they not sense to rest before a journey?"

"This is the new spirit," the merchant said, showing gold teeth. "To save time."

"Incredible," grandfather muttered under his breath, and he looked at these people, the old women with hard sour faces, the handsome boy and the grey priest with an expression of unconcerned amazement, as though he was watching dragon-flies in the late autumn when they have lost their colour and die.

It was autumn still. The mists had died, leaving the walls white and clear. When the steam-launch returned to the wharves, the wake threw the junk into a fit of rolling, so that the empty lanterns swung on the mast-head and the bales of silk, securely fastened on deck, shivered at their moorings. Already they were moving. The prow of the *Tien Kuan* was pointed to the south, where all Chinese compasses point; but this gave him no satisfaction. On the ship, which rolled and received the full impact of the wind, he was already lost. And it gave him no consolation to remember that the mists over Canton reminded him of the waterfalls in the, Liu mountains.

Meifu awoke and saw a rat nibbling the floor-boards. Her first thought was for her watch. It was still there. Then she thought of Ti, who lay with one arm flung over his head and his

legs doubled under him. In the faint drowsy light of the hatchway he looked smaller than ever. She leaned over him and breathed on his face in the furious love for him which always came when she saw him sleeping. Her mother was wide-awake and chattering with the baby whose face was smeared in yellow ointment.

Meifu ran on deck as soon as she heard the hawser grating on the sandy bottom. The green tiles of Canton shone through the haze, there were more ships on the river than she had ever thought possible. There were small sampans with orange sails, little dipper boats hardly larger than earthenware jars and row-boats crawled backwards and forwards over the river loaded with crates of oranges, chickens, papayas, bananas, potatoes, silk and tea. There were chickens, too, on the forepoop of the *Tien Kuan*, and pigs in bamboo crates which made a noise like continual distant gunfire. The river seemed to be alive in every direction. Meifu listened to the subdued squeals of the pigs, the hollow thud of the wind on the sails and the screaming of the tackles in a kind of serene enjoyment; it was as though she had been drugged with wine and carefully prepared and fattened for just such a moment.

"China," grandfather murmured as the shore receded. He lay back against the mast and shielded his eyes against the glare from the river. "What wealth, what wealth——"

"Have you seen the gun!" Meifu asked, pointing to the swivel gun bound in straw on the forepoop.

Grandfather gazed at the gun with an expression of distress, then he lifted Meifu in his arms and pressed her tightly to his breast.

"It must not happen," he exclaimed.

Meifu was confused and alarmed. As soon as possible, she ran away and hid in the small temple, where the incense sticks flickered and the gleam of candles shielded her from the presence of the gun. Among roots of lotuses and water-lilies the *Tien Kuan* sailed into midstream, but she was no longer conscious of movement, only of the sickening look in her grandfather's eyes when she pointed to the gun. All morning she hid in the temple. During the afternoon, when she came on deck, Canton had disappeared and green mud-flats stretched

along the river-bank. At night she returned to the gun and examined it in the shifting light of the candles on the mast-head. It was so tame that she could touch it with impunity. The thatch covered everything except the barrel, and even the barrel was littered with golden straws. Down below her mother was calling her. The wind whistled and the bows of the junk plunged headlong into the rolling sea. Suddenly lights appeared on the horizon. They were more numerous than stars, white and shining. There were no clouds and the faint starlight gleamed on the barrel of the gun, which was pointing in the direction of Hongkong. No one came to man the gun. It stood alone on the deserted deck, where coolies smoked opium and her grandfather read by the light of glass-covered oil-lamps. Meifu was sobbing because she was cold, because the gun was unattended, because her eyes still smarted with the smoke from the joss-sticks and because her grandfather paid no attention to her. Suddenly he got up, flung his robes around him and walked up to her, treading carefully to avoid making the planks creak.

"Meifu, my dove, my precious," he repeated over and over again.

Meifu laid her head on his shoulder.

"What are those lights?" she asked through her tears.

"The lights, eh? They must be the lights of Canton."

"No, we've left Canton, grandfather."

"Then they must be the lights of Hongkong."

Before nightfall the earth and the river disappeared in the ground haze. All day the river had been so close to them that they felt as though they were swimming. Now the haze obscured everything except the lights on shore. They were more numerous than the stars, and they hung in clusters like an immense number of white paper candles. They shimmered in the haze and when the junk sank down in the waves, the white paper candles were suddenly lifted high in the air. The pigs squealed and a chicken jumped on the mainmast. In the covered hold the baby with the yellow grease on its face developed whooping-cough and its mother bowed before the painting of Kuan-Yin whose blue robe was studded with jewels.

A sluggish wind was wafting them southwards to the equator. Meifu held her breath whenever she came on deck. There was a warm rushing wind which smelled of old wine and nearly bowled her over—a furnace wind; and the sea was blue, the deep blue of summer gentians. "The junk must be moving at a tremendous pace," she thought, listening to the masts and ratlines coughing and churning like skeletons in corrugated iron coffins. Suddenly she saw a silver fish skim over the white wave-crests, on and on, flying with a kind of spinning motion, until at last it flashed in the sunlight and wriggled into the waves.

"Grandfather, grandfather," she shouted urgently.

"Yes, yes," he came running up. "Are you ill or sick, eh. Don't cry."

"I've seen a fish—it flies, it flew up, it walked over the sea."

Grandfather laughed. His grey gown, stained with black ink stains, coiled in the breeze.

"Are you sure it was a fish, not a bird?" he asked.

"Yes, quite sure."

He took her to the beaked forepoop, where four of five dead flying fish lay. They had purple eyes, their gills moved and their wings were veined with red. They lay panting on deck while the sea-water oozed from their pale yellowish bodies. Meifu collected them and threw them back in the sea, while the sailors laughed; but they were already dead—she could tell that by the way they flopped in the water and dived tail first, and then came floating to the surface.

Afterwards, lying under the sails, among hemp ropes and casks of fresh water, she listened to the lapping of the waves. An extraordinary thought occurred to her. "To-morrow we shall be in Singapore," she said.

"Are you quite sure?" her grandfather asked.

"Yes, I'm quite sure," Meifu said, squinting at the blue columns of sea which rose over the bow.

But the next day they were still far from Singapore. Ti developed sores on his face, probably from the baby with whooping-cough. When they left the river, they left among other things the floating roots of lotuses and water-lilies. Nothing floated on the China Sea except the grey fins of sharks

and silver-grey porpoises; and there were no birds; and the heat came up from the deck and burnt the boards to soft blisters. They coasted on a sea of blue milk as endless as the Great Wall. At night the sea became phosphorescent. The greenish-blue phosphorescence shone like a ghostly light under the surface. The sailors threw buckets over when they swilled down the deck in the morning. Meifu dipped her hand in the bucket. The water was warm and silky, full of soft yellow flames and sparks like golden fireflies which died away as the sun rose over the horizon. But it was in the evening, when the first phosphorescence appeared, that Meifu was filled with inexpressible delight: when the first pale gleams of phosphorescence drowned the darkness and gave her the illusion of being in sunlight, in a sunlight which came not from the heavens but from the bottom of the sea. The peasants were complaining on deck: "Ai-ya, there are no end to the miseries of China." Bathing in the brilliant light from the sea, Meifu wrinkled her brows, shook her hair and wondered how anyone could talk of the miseries of China.

The island was like a cluster of purple grapes on the horizon. Scorched by the noonday heat, cut off from the sea by white breakers, it rose above the horizon in jerks as the great dark-sailed ship plunged in and out of the waves. The air was sultry, motionless, too heavy even for the flying fish which made sudden jabbing excursions into the air, then fell limply into the hollow of the blue waves. Peering over the side of the ship, Meifu saw yellow sand and red coral, and the shadows of birds wheeling round the mast; and great tortoises smudged their way through the sand. As the island drew closer she saw red cliffs and waving palms, beaches of rippled sand, outrider canoes and a fisherman hoisting a net on bamboo poles. "So this is Singapore!" she exclaimed to the glinting sand and the feathery palms.

"No, there are many islands in the China Sea," her grandfather remonstrated gently.

They sailed to leeward and watched the palms bending away from them. It was growing dark. The heavy afternoon swell rose and continually concealed the island, the wave was like a shield and the sun rocked ominously in its grave. The fisher-

man, after hoisting the nets, collected the baskets on his back and trudged through heavy spindrift sand to the coral rocks on shore. When the sun set at last there was no more island, for the wind had risen, so that they trimmed by the stern and heeled over—away from the silhouette of feathery palm-trees and fishermen wading through sand.

That night Meifu could not sleep for dreaming of the island. She crouched in the leaking hold, staring at the marks of rat's teeth and rat-droppings. The heat was oppressive. The cockroaches had become more numerous than ever, the baby with the greased face was choking and turning green. The keel no longer chopped over the waves, but sank in them slowly with a plucking sound. Overhead the sailors were quarrelling; the continuous click of the mah-jong tablets rose to a shrill clacking as the game drew to an end. When she half-closed her eyes Meifu saw the island again, the stern cliffs, the sand, the fishermen, boats moored to the palms, the hot smell of incense and the breakers. In the merciless sunshine the whisper of the palms came like a fountain of honey poured in her open mouth, so sweet that it became unbearable. Yet she could not take her eyes away, and the surrounding darkness was full of islands and a white mist under which everything sheltered. Through the white mist came silver flying fish and the lug-sails of junks and small boats piled high with mangoes. When she held her breath she heard the waves beating on shore in a melancholy repetition of a single enduring note of music. Suddenly the music died away. The old woman was murmuring to her grandchild: "Be quiet, little dove—go to sleep." Then the baby slept and very faintly through the awning Meifu thought she heard the coolies with their long knives planning a massacre.

Their days were empty and overflowing. Ti gazed at the milk-blue sea with a bored expression, but it was the boredom of a devotee. The wind sprang up; dull clouds appeared, heavy with rain, but no rain came to cool their faces. Meifu sweated so much that her clothes were always black by midday. Of all the passengers her grandfather was the only one who remained unshaken by the heat. An-mei was so hot and bored that she made preliminary advances with the

mother of the boy Goh Seng, who arrived on the boat when they were leaving Canton. While Meifu was sent on deck, it was agreed that Goh Seng and Meifu should be engaged. Meifu paid no attention to Goh Seng. He was handsome and strong, with a thick stubborn neck and his hair was drawn back from his forehead. He wore European clothes which made him look ridiculous. Ti was five and Goh Seng was twelve, so they rarely spoke; and while Ti disliked Goh Seng for walking on deck with the comprador, Goh Seng took an instinctive dislike to Ti for his babyish ways. And at night, when they slept in the hold, Goh Seng turned his face to the wall to avoid seeing Ti.

For four days, since leaving the island, they had been coasting with a beam sea. The heat was suffocating. At night the stars came out one by one to be reflected in the creamy phosphorescence on the water. The cockroaches multiplied. The pigs were continually squealing, as though they had lost hope. Through the square skywell over the hatch, Meifu saw lights—she thought they were the lights of Singapore and decided to explore. She could not see her grandfather on deck, but she noticed that they were approaching land: the dark hulk of land stretched endlessly to windward. The sea was like oil. Heat blistered the paint and the blisters could be heard cracking. Ti lay among sweating cushions in the hold. He noticed that Meifu had gone, stared round the compartment until his eyes rested on the floating wick of an oil-lamp, then he pulled the pillow over his face and fell asleep again.

He woke up with a start. His grandfather was bending over him, holding a candle unsteadily in his hand. A fleck of hot grease fell on his body and he cried aloud.

"Keep still—don't say anything," his grandfather whispered. "Where is Meifu?"

Everyone in the hold was slowly waking up.

"What is it?" An-mei asked tenderly, gazing up at grandfather with sleep-filled eyes.

"Have you seen Meifu?" grandfather asked urgently.

There was the sound of scuffling on deck.

"Don't go! Don't go!" An-mei tugged at grandfather's sleeve; then she looked at the place where Meifu had been sleeping, and suddenly she began to scream.

Grandfather's candle-stump guttered to a feeble, sulphurous yellow and spluttered out. A shadow passed over the hatchway. From the shadow of the bulwarks Meifu saw a man crawling on deck; his head had been cut from his shoulders, but still hung by a bloody thread. A powerful Chinese, naked to the waist, was standing on the foredeck with a gleaming chopper in his hand. He smiled at Meifu, the moonlight rippled on his shoulders and suddenly, kicking his legs high in the air, he jumped down in the foreward well, where Meifu was standing. He did not attack her. The Chinese who had been crawling on deck lay very still; then suddenly his body collapsed and under the weight of the falling body, the head fell away and rolled into the scuppers. The head was terribly ugly and cruel and smiling, and the skin was the colour of gooseflesh. Meifu walked slowly across the deck, treading delicately to avoid the blood, and carefully placed the head near the body.

"Meifu, where are you?" a voice shouted from the deck.

A long-drawn hissing sound frightened her more than her grandfather's words. The axe whistled over her head and stuck in the mast. The moon was disappearing in the clouds; the air was turning cold. Meifu shivered and bit her pigtail. She saw four Chinese running across the deck. They threw themselves flat near the swivel gun, but they did not touch the gun. The excitement was growing threadbare and grey. The cries ceased. And then, like someone raised through a trap-door, the huge Chinese with the rippling shoulders jumped up from the foreward well. There was the sound of scuffling louder than before. There were screams, and then a shot was fired, and something fell heavily on deck.

"Keep quiet, Meifu, don't make a sound," her grandfather was bending over her, his thin beard blowing in the wind.

All at once the deck was covered with coolies and sailors who had appeared from nowhere. They ran with their pigtails flapping and the men in the prow could be seen clearly now with their rifles. Meifu felt a strange excitement, as though something she had forgotten was about to flood her brain; but she knew it was all over. The men were shouting. Grandfather wept quietly and rubbed her head with his knuckles.

"Let's go down and sleep," he said gently.

"What was it, Grandfather?"

"They were playing mahjong, and someone quarrelled. There was a fight, and——"

"Someone was killed?"

"Yes, don't think about it."

Just as she reached the narrow stairway into the hold, she heard the sound of something falling into the water. It did not occur to her that the sound came from the huge Chinese who had been killed. But she knew now that the junk was sailing close to land, she heard the quiver of the teak hull and the grinding of the masts. In the hold everyone was pale and quiet. The old woman who had buried her face in the cushions looked up and smiled; the red lamp, hanging from the oak beams, swung aimlessly and cast a friendly light on the baby with the greased face. Ti was asleep. The rats had nibbled the boards where he slept, so that he was surrounded with faint chips and small dung-hills. The junk, too, stirred like a rat as the wind caught the sails and threw her half over; then she righted herself and sailing parallel to the land, her brow pressed forward, threw her immense weight of sail into the night.

Grandfather came down the stairs. Everyone was staring at him with a guilty expression.

"The wind has lifted," he said quietly.

Meifu did not sleep. However much she tried, she could not wriggle into sleep. In Ai-lin, at the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud, she imagined herself falling into a narrow tunnel whenever sleep did not come easily; but now, as she snuggled down on the red quilt, she thought only of the immense Chinese with the braided pigtail who stood in the foreward well and was fired at. She was sorry for him. Already she had forgotten the man who crawled over the deck like a dog, with his head hanging between his shoulders. She sighed. The cold green sea seemed to flow through her, dissolving her tired body into energy and delight, preventing her from sleeping. She bit the end of her pigtail and tasted the red ribbon tied round the end. Some of the grease from the baby with whooping-cough was smeared on Ti's cheeks. A rat ran cautiously up the wooden frames of the junk; then lost its balance and fell sprawling on the face of Goh

Seng, who looked up, rubbed his eyes, sniffed the feverish moisture-laden air and instantly fell asleep again. "How stupid he looks!" Meifu whispered to herself. In the darkness her grandfather squatted against the bulkhead, his eyes closed as he hummed an interminable Chinese poem.

"Hoah, hoah, hoah," his clear voice made her sit up in surprise. "Hoah, hoah, hoah," he sang in a vibrant voice. The sunlight was streaming through the awning over the hatchway. Meifu raced up on deck to see An-mei, Ti and her grandfather gazing at red cliffs and palm-trees. The hot sun caught her obliquely and one side of her face smarted with the heat. She caught her breath. She seemed to be rising slowly to the surface of an infinitely deep river. There were islands everywhere, green and red, and some of them were so small that the brown lug-sails of a small coasting junk completely obscured them. The air was heavy. The green leaves of the casuarina trees were deeper green than any she had seen before. Meifu stood on tiptoe because the burning-deck blistered her feet.

"Is this Singapore?" she asked for the hundredth time.

A sailor, with a face of brown wood pulp, narrow eyes and a greasy pigtail coiled over one ear, held her in his arms over the bulwarks. How close they were to the islands! They were sailing so close that the overhanging branches of hybiscus brushed against the bulwarks. With her feet dangling overboard, Meifu forgot the swinging stars and the lurch of the prows. She was already in Singapore, breathing the dusty scented air and the angseena trees, enjoying herself with a shrill calmness that astounded her. And then suddenly, when they were surrounded by islands, the red cliffs faded away and in their place stood a white city, white walls, white towers, stone bridges, huge buildings. The *T'ien Kuan* slipped through the junks and sampans in the outer harbour as easily as a ring on the finger. Her high sun-blistered poop shone like a mirror reflecting the burnished deep blue sky. Grandfather gazed at the town with eyes as white as white-berries—the sun shone on them and he kept repeating to Ti: "Yes, yes, look over there, Ti. What can you see? It's bigger than Ai-lin, eh?"

"Where?" Ti asked, narrowing his eyes against the splash of sunlight.

But already he knew where to look. His mother was waving a silk handkerchief, the wind sprang up—a hot moist wind scented with flowers—and she continued to shout hoarsely and incoherently at the men and women in white on the landing-stage.

"May I go down?" Ti asked, pointing to the deck.

Grandfather let him climb down. Meifu ran up to him. She jerked his woollen cap straight, wiped the sweat from his forehead and swung him on to her hip, then she walked down the gangplank.

III

DURING the autumn of 1909 there was an outbreak of piracy in Singapore waters. There was a great drought in Malaya, and typhoid was spreading south from Penang. The revolution in China had thrown the Chinese in Singapore into a ferment, but it was too hot to take politics seriously all day, and the revolutionaries were said to meet secretly in cafe's at night, where they threw dice and played finger-games in the Nanyang Hotel. They behaved in Singapore exactly as they behaved in China. They wore their pigtails well-plaited and put the ends in the pockets of their *bajus*. They worshipped before gilded altars, bought blackwood furniture, polished their floors until they shone like mirrors and smoked opium. On their walls coloured prints of the Child Emperor Hsuan Tung and the King Emperor Edward VII engraved by Japanese printers were flanked with the imperial yellow flag of China and the Union Jack.

In the ship's hold, beside the lighted tapers and the gilt shrines, Meifu thought she was still in China, but she was not so sure that she was in China when she stepped on shore. In the junk she could breathe and there was always a breeze, but here the air was moist and still, heavily scented with angseenna and tanjong flowers, and people pressed close to her, and her grandfather was struggling through a crowd of people she had never seen before.

"Where are we?" she called out to her grandfather.

Everyone was struggling and pushing. No one paid attention to her. She knew her mother was there, because she saw the gold hairpins bobbing up and down; she knew her grandfather was there because she saw the swirl of his grey gown through the legs of a coolie, but when the gown disappeared, she was caught up in a wave of despair. She began to beat frantically on the backs of the people who stood in her way.

"Lend a lantern! Lend a lantern!" she cried, beating with her clenched fist.

"Keep quiet, small girl," an old man wearing only a pair of black silk trousers turned and stared menacingly down at her.

She sighed. Her silk coat was clammy. She held Ti firmly by the hand and dived among the legs to where a patch of grey showed among patches of black and white. She forced her way to her grandfather's side, dragging Ti after her—Ti's cap had fallen over his eyes, but he followed her unprotestingly.

"It's extraordinary," Meifu kept repeating when she reached her grandfather. "How hot it is! Is everyone scented?"

"What's extraordinary?"

"No one talks Chinese."

"Of course they talk Chinese. Listen, Meifu."

Meifu listened. All the voices were guttural, close-clipped and unusually loud. It occurred to her suddenly that they were talking Cantonese. She could distinguish words, but not whole sentences—a boy selling rice, an old man complaining about his landlord, a young woman complaining that she had been overcharged—she could understand these, but she could not understand the conversations going on all round her.

*"The Cantonese are a filthy race,
They fear not Heaven or any place:
They stink of gutters after rain
And wait to drop you in again."*

Meifu remembered the lines and burst out laughing,

"You shouldn't laugh," her grandfather said sternly. "They are talking Cantonese and it is not their fault that their manners are uncouth."

This is all he would tell her, and it made them seem more uncouth than ever. She thought they must come from some part of China no longer ruled by the Emperor. The coolies were darker than ⁵Chu, the darkest man she had ever known. Their faces were wrinkled and sunburnt, and when the sun poured down on them and they laughed and talked exactly like other Chinese, but in a language which she was slowly learning and had not yet completely understood, she became afraid of them: they were not friendly like the tea-planters in Ai-lin, they did not bow and make way from her grandfather and they pushed her insolently into the gutters.

The wind was coming up, a hot-cold wind which reminded her of the time when they were becalmed. The air was hot and clammy, and the wind roared round the corners and fluttered the lanterns. Doors banged, the lantern-chains creaked and the sign-boards groaned on their hinges. The air was more moist than ever, and the angseena blossoms and dark red flame of the forest flowers were falling in cascades from the trees.

"Hurry," her grandfather said, looking up at the sky. "It's going to rain."

There were no clouds in the sky, but a yellow haze hung over the house-tops. Meifu gazed at the houses. She had never seen so many—ridge after ridge after ridge of houses until at last she lost count. The roofs were not flared like the roofs of Chinese houses; they were squat and straight, with red tiles and peeling stucco, they leaned forward, and she thought they would crush her. Suddenly she recognised her father. He had changed. His eyes were large and deep-set; under the black skull-cap his forehead was deeply lined. He was bowing to her mother. One end of his pigtail lay in his coat pocket. As he bowed, the pigtail flew out, and he hastily put it back again. His face was dark like old wood left in the sun, and Meifu noticed that his hands were gnarled and knotted like peach branches.

"Meifu, look at me," he shouted.

She ran into his arms, which were hot and moist like the air. She stroked his face until she thought it had become white again, she snuggled on his shoulders and beat on his chest with her knees, and suddenly remembering that she had forgotten

to make her bow, she escaped from his arms and bowed so low that the blood rushed to her face. Ti was giggling. She watched him bowing jerkily, not in the least ceremoniously; then she laughed and turned to her father.

"It's exactly like the Liu valley," she said.

"Why?"

"Look at the rain."

In the distance the rain-clouds were coming nearer. She could not see them, but she saw their reflection on her grandfather's spectacles. The edges of the cloud were yellow shading into bronze and green. Her grandfather was speechless. "Ah-ah-ah-ah," he exclaimed, in the same tone he used when smoking opium. His pale face was streaming and his hands were idly beating the air in imitation of a paper fan. She looked from one to the other; her father's face dark brown and her grandfather's white like a silk pillow. Then, through the crowd of people on the pavement, she saw horse-carriages racing along the muddy road, with painted wheels and dark green hoods, and on the driving-seats were men with faces like ink, and little white eyes shining from under the silk scarves wound round their heads.

"Are they Chinese?" she asked, pointing to a large brougham led by two skewbalds.

"Meifu must be tired," her mother said.

"No, really, I am not in the least tired. Look at those horses. Are they Chinese? Why are they so big?"

She became frightened. The houses, the horses, the crowd on the pavement, the dark men peering at her from upper windows, the lanterns and the washing hanging on bamboo poles—everything was larger and bigger than in Ai-lin. The ink-faced driver of the brougham flicked his whip over the heads of the Chinese.

"Who does it belong to?" Meifu asked, pointing to the red plumes on the horses' mane.

"They belong to the red-haired devils," her father laughed.

"Yes, yes, I know," Meifu answered, although she understood nothing, "but who do the horses belong to?"

"Meifu is tired," her mother interrupted. "We must take her home."

Her father's face, beardless, covered with greasy drops of sweat, stared down at her comfortingly from an immense height. He smiled, and over and over again his hands stroked her oiled hair. The rain-cloud was coming nearer. The wind whistled. Oil-lamps were being lit behind the shop counters. Grandfather gazed at the street, at the Malays in red *bajus* and coloured sarongs, the Indians in turbans and long white skirts, the Chinese in blue dungarees and sun hats of woven bamboo. His mouth opened to show the red stumps of his teeth, and his hands rose and fell in time with the celestial music he seemed to hear—or perhaps he was fanning himself. It was growing dark. The cloud was already over their heads and throwing out streamers of reddish gold. Meifu tugged at her mother's coat.

"The servants have prepared salted eggs and yams," her father was saying. "Especially for Ti."

"Why especially for Ti?" her mother asked. "We all like them. Where's Ti?"

Ti had disappeared. The moment he saw the brougham he ran into the street. The plumes on the two skewbalds attracted him like a fire. He could not take his eyes away, and ran shouting excitedly in the only part of the street where there were no people, almost under the wheels of an extraordinary cart with two shafts, an old man pulling them. The driver of the brougham flicked his whip, and a lady with a sweeping white hat shaped like the prow of a junk peered from under the green hood and smiled at him, while the ricksha driver cursed. When the brougham disappeared along the esplanade, Ti decided to return to his father. The wind was blowing fiercely. Pieces of coloured paper were swept from the muddy road and hoisted high in the air above the washing-poles, which made a bridge across the narrow street, hiding the sky. His mother stood on tiptoe, shouting his name. Ti crawled through a forest of legs wrapped in black silk. He imagined he was a dog, sniffed the air and still crawling arrived at his mother's feet, at the very moment when his grandfather was explaining that there was a good rice-harvest in Ai-lin, better than for many years past and it was a pity they could not stay to gather it all in.

"A good rice-harvest," his father was saying. "So you know they grow no rice in Singapore."

"My son, you mustn't laugh at my ignorance. How can it be that there is no rice?"

"Our rice comes from Rangoon——" his father continued, but Ti did not hear the rest of the conversation. He was watching the rain falling. The heavy drops of rain were warm and they did not break like rain-drops in China. They fell so slowly that when they touched the ground they formed perfect black circles. Sweat was streaming down his cheeks. He had never sweated so much before. In this close, clammy atmosphere he gasped for breath and felt his clothes hanging limp on him. When he turned up his face, it felt wet and sticky; it was like dipping his face in a bowl of sweet tea. Already steam was rising from his clothes. Through the mist of softly-falling rain he saw the oil-lamps and acetylene flares in the shops like immense halos, and there were rings of light and coloured stars, and people were moving through the mist like blue ghosts. One by one the raindrops fell on grandfather's grey skirt. Ti watched them like someone thunderstruck. Soon the whole skirt was dotted with raindrops, and the embroidered coat grew darker. Then a flash of lightning split the clouds, the thunder growled, and the rain began to fall in earnest. Ti recognised it as rain only because it could not be anything else; it was like standing in the shed where the buffaloes were kept in winter, only much worse. His father was hugging him. The rain poured over his father's skull-cap and down his lean, brown face. Oil-paper umbrellas were unfolded, the pavement simmered and the explosions of the thunder echoed and re-echoed against the tall houses. Rickshas passed in a steady stream. Meifu could no longer see where she was. They were coming to a part of the town where the streets were wider. She recognised the houses of the merchants, all open-work vermillion, lamp-black and gold, with swinging lanterns over the doorway and red candles burning before the ancestral altars; but the candles were very faint and the joss-sticks in metal cups in the doorways fizzled out in the stinging rain. The rickshas were painted and lacquered boldly with dragons and birds and butterflies, the wooden shafts painted dark or silver, and the aprons decorated with phoenixes. But more surprising than the rickshas were the dark-skinned men who sat cross-

legged on trestle beds before the shop-doors; they were beautifully bearded, they had white teeth and small bloodshot eyes, and they held rifles with bayonets. They wore white uniforms and their dark faces were the colour of the gods in the temple.

"Are they there to guard the houses?" Meifu asked.

Her mother nodded.

"So they are afraid of bandits?" Meifu said, thinking it was strange that they should escape from Ai-lin only to meet bandits in Singapore.

Her mother didn't answer the question. She had not seen the Sikh guards in their blue turbans and frayed khaki coats; if she had seen them, she would have been even more afraid of them than of the rain, for they smiled stupidly at everyone and continually waxed the ends of their long curling moustaches. Meifu forgot the Sikhs in admiration of her grandfather's beard, which had almost disappeared.

"How funny—the rain——" she exclaimed, then in a low voice she said: "Grandfather, cover your beard. The rain will swallow it up."

Her grandfather growled and peered at the sky. The rain was falling in sheets. They crouched in porchways, while the rain soaked their clothes and gusts of vapour blew from one side of the road to the other. Cabriolets passed, hoods shining. There were no more rickshas. Through drifts of smoking rain Meifu watched the sailing-boats moored along Beach Road, row upon row of junks and sampans with high poops. Yellow lanterns hung on the prows and boys with long pigtailed struggled up and down the gangplanks. Their sunburnt bodies looked grey and bloodless, and they disappeared when a gust of mist blew all the ships away. Meifu shivered.

"Don't catch cold. Come out of the rain," her father shouted, but instead of obeying his own command, he ran into the middle of the road and stopped a ricksha.

The rain was beating on the tiled roofs; the pavements were the colour of dull unpolished silver. The sunset no longer lay reflected on her grandfather's spectacles. Ti was sobbing. Meifu felt cold and hungry. There was no one in the road except her father and the ricksha boy. They stood near the kerb, talking in loud voices.

"You said it wouldn't rain," she said accusingly to her grandfather.

He looked away. "They told me it wouldn't rain," he murmured, gazing at the pale white sky. "Will it ever stop raining?" he sighed.

"Come on," said her mother. "We're going to take the cart."

"Hurry," her grandfather pushed her into the rain.

Instead of being hoisted carefully and tenderly by her grandfather, she was lifted roughly into the ricksha by her mother.

"Now sit still," her mother ordered, while the ricksha boy, with a round pleasant face, a wide straw hat, a yellow mackintosh and bare legs splattered with mud, fastened the apron.

Suddenly, with a jerk, the shafts were lifted up and she was flung back on the cushions, the wheels creaked and she felt the pavement moving away from her. Her mother was leaning back, puffing and wheezing, staring through the gap above the apron; but Meifu could see nothing, the sky was hidden from her and she sank down into the darkness. The cold dark air seemed to flow through her, dissolving her tired, sweaty body into energy and delight. The rain steamed from her clothes. Her mother's arms were soft and warm, and an overpowering sour-sweet scent came from the cushions. How smoothly they were riding! The road was so smooth that they seemed to be travelling on air. Her mother's warm comfortable body rocked at her side, filling the stuffy moisture-laden air with the scents of China; but a cold wind drove through the apron. "A few minutes ago we were in the blazing sunshine," Meifu told herself. Everything had changed so suddenly. The warm sunlight was exchanged for the gusts of icy wind which filtered through the apron. As they passed the street-lamps the shadow of the ricksha boy swung across the apron, hung there for a moment, then disappeared.

"Where are we going—to the new house?" Meifu asked, listening to the *swash-swash* of the ricksha boy's feet.

"Do you like Singapore?" her mother asked gently, squeezing her warm, clammy hand.

"Please tell me—are we going to the new house?" Meifu repeated breathlessly.

From far-off she heard the crunching noise as another ricksha set out.

"That would be your honourable father."

"Yes, Mother."

They were silent in the ricksha. The wet sand crunched under the wheels, gas-lamps gleamed faintly, the moon was rising and throwing spidery shadows under the palm-trees. The rain ceased and her mother leaned forward to unfasten the apron. When the warm air rushed against her face, Meifu sighed contentedly. Bats and flying squirrels flickered under the gas-lamps. From behind the closed doors, the shuttered windows and the high walls came the click of mahjong tablets, loud laughter and the soft voices of the sing-song girls. The gas-lamps shone on the glossy leaves of mangosteens and mangoes. The streets were full of trees, but the rain had washed the blossoms away. The bull-frogs began to croak.

"How did father come here?" Meifu asked, watching the bubbles of rain falling off the hood.

"In a junk—the same way as you."

"Was he alone?"

"Of course."

"But where did he come from?" she asked in an agonised voice, as a strange thought occurred to her. "Was he here all the time?"

The ricksha boy swung them over an iron bridge. The shafts of dark lacquered wood caught the moonlight. Ti was shouting. Meifu stood up and turned round, holding on to the rails of the hood. Her grandfather waved to her and her father smiled. He looked tired and ill, his clothes still steaming with rain, and his cheeks were hollow.

"He ought to go more slowly," Meifu exclaimed, pointing to the ricksha boy. "He must be tired. Shall we ask him to have a rest?"

"Of course not," her mother answered angrily.

"But why not?" Meifu insisted, her brow wrinkled with astonishment. "Even mules have a rest."

Ti was shouting: "Shall we have a race?"

Meifu stood up again. The wind from the river nearly blew her over. Faint lights shone through the plaited palm-leaf roofs of the sampans moored in the dark river. Other bridges appeared—every hundred yards there appeared to be a bridge over Singapore river. The sampans were moored on the south side, on the north side the stars were reflected as clearly as in the bright cloudless sky.

"Will we be there soon?" she shouted to her father.

Hewaved to her, smiling mysteriously and pointing to the hills.

"We'll soon be there," he said.

Meifu sighed contentedly, sucked the raindrops on her lip and listened to the wheels on the cobble-stones.

The rickshas were nearly abreast. In the light of the gas-lamps she noticed that the other ricksha boy was old and swarthy, dressed in blue cotton trousers rolled to the knees and a coat tied over his chest with string. He wore bast shoes and a wide-brimmed conical straw hat. The skin of his face had shrunk back to the bone, his bare arms were thin and hard and bony. Neither made any sound as they ran. As soon as they left the muddy roads, the *swash-swash* of their feet became inaudible. They were as silent as dolls. The faster they ran, the higher rose the shafts. They hardly touched the ground. Meifu was embarrassed. She asked herself why the younger man should have a mackintosh, while the ricksha boy wore only a loose cotton coat and trousers.

"Be careful—don't lean over," her father shouted encouragingly.

Meifu turned sharply. She had been gazing at the river. She could almost touch her father as the two rickshas ran abreast. Ti was sitting on his father's lap; he clapped his hands and his pigtail flapped up and down. Grandfather's beard had become white again.

"I didn't know you were so close," she explained.

"Well, don't dream so much. We'll soon be there," he said, pointing to the end of the road, where, among dark palm-trees, she thought she saw a white house.

Meifu was already tired. She lay back dreamily in her mother's arms, looking now at the house and now at her flowered silk coat rumpled by the rain, too excited to listen to

Ti who was talking to the ricksha boy. The ricksha boy paid no attention to Ti's excited cries. The river was white under the moon. With half-closed eyes she watched the house coming nearer: a small house, with two storeys and a flared red roof, surrounded by a wooden wall, palm-trees, angseena trees and an immense flame of the forest tree.

"Are you hungry?" her father asked.

"Salted eggs and yams," she whispered dreamily.

Her mother stroked her hair and at the same time whispered in her ear. Meanwhile Meifu looked searchingly through half-closed eyes, so that everything was distorted by a fringe of eyelashes, at the house and the ihaid-servant who was pushing the gate open. As the door opened the bobbing lanterns in the court-yard appeared one by one. And inside the court-yard tables were set with white covers, with silver fruit-bowls, flowers, hot towels, all kinds of fruit. Meifu shaded her eyes and thought she saw rice-cakes and soup-plates, golden papayas, mangoes, melons and small crinkled Swatow oranges.

"Look out!" her father shouted.

The two rickshas were converging towards the centre of the road. Suddenly they crashed. One wheel went spinning in the air. Meifu had a confused impression of sailing towards the moon, of cushions flying and her mother sprawling on the grass. Her father was shouting incoherently. She had been thrown out of the ricksha—she discovered this because she was sitting in a muddy pool under the palm-trees. Her trousers were wet and her embroidered coat splashed with mud. A ricksha boy ran past her and disappeared through the palm-trees—she saw his dark sunburned face, his straw hat, and underneath the straw hat a carefully oiled pigtail wound over his left ear.

Grandfather was kneeling by her side.

"Are you all right, Meifu?"

"Yes, Grandfather. Where's mother?"

Meifu heard someone sobbing. It sounded like an animal being killed. Her grandfather was carrying her in his arms away from the road, towards the river and the sampans.

"Where's Ti?" she asked suddenly. Her voice was urgent.

"Keep quiet, little dove. He'll come back. He has gone to the house to fetch help."

At the thought that Ti should be sent to the house while she was left to stare at the young woman lying on the ground made Meifu burst into tears again. She could not control her tears, she had no desire to control them, because the life in her leaped in a frenzy to be mingled with that other life and because her mother had suddenly been taken from her. The waving palm-trees, ink-black against a sky sown with stars, refreshed her and she cried more easily because her grandfather was comforting her. Through her tears she saw a ricksha lying on its side, and fifty yards away on the other side of the road lay a solitary golden wheel. The Chinese character for a soothsayer flashed in her mind.

"Grandfather, grandfather!" she shouted, but he had already left her to attend to her mother.

"Water, water——" someone was moaning.

"Lift her gently," grandfather was saying. He turned to Meifu. "Go along to the house," he said. "They're waiting for you. Don't cry. A Chinese girl doesn't cry." He tried to keep her away, but she ran up and gazed down at her mother's blood-soaked head, whimpering, making little childish noises of sympathy and fidgeting with her hands, lifting something—she did not know what.

Soon lights appeared, coloured lanterns on bamboo canes, they rose through the trees and danced on the ends of sticks. Ti came running up with a lantern in each hand, followed by three men in white coats and white trousers. Her mother was moaning, but there were long intervals of silence, when she seemed to be dozing. Then once more she screamed for water in a voice which Meifu did not recognise as her mother's.

"She fell from the ricksha, you understand," grandfather was explaining. "She is not herself. Lift her gently and take her to the house."

"What happened?" one of the servants exclaimed, staring down like someone hypnotised at the figure under the palm-trees.

"She fell—the ricksha was going too fast—one of the wheels broke loose—now take her gently to the house."

Meifu followed the procession with unsteady steps, the earth swayed like the junk and all the while the court-yard lanterns

were coming nearer. Ti clutched her hand. His lips were trembling uncontrollably. And just as the tension was becoming unbearable, and Meifu thought she was following her mother's funeral procession, a weak voice said in familiar tones:

"I'm all right. Let me get up now. I hope Meifu hasn't been crying."

"Where are you, Mamma," Meifu forced her way through the men-servants who were supporting her mother and clutched the warm dangling hand, which immediately returned her pressure.

And still holding her mother's hand Meifu walked through the court-yard where the tables were set under silk lanterns, with bowls of fruit and tea-cakes and immense porcelain rice-bowls, up the steps into a bare room lit by flickering candles, where a small Chinese girl in a lavender coloured gown, speechless with excitement, was pulling the ropes of the punkahs overhead. An-mei was laid carefully on a rose-wood chair. Grandfather piled cushions around her head and feet. One of the men-servants bent over her with a scented face-towel, which slowly turned red.

"You must go away now," grandfather said tenderly. "It's evidently a case of acute concussion."

Her mother released her hand. Ti walked beside her down the steps into the court-yard, gravely conscious of his exploit in running for assistance, panting for breath although he had long since recovered it. In the court-yard the air was cold and sticky. A wind came up and the lanterns swung on their wires. Meifu was hungry and tired, but she dared not eat. They spoke in low voices and sat together on a small stool under the flame of the forest tree, listening to the sounds coming from inside the house. Half an hour later a ricksha rolled through the vermillion gate, and a doctor jumped down—a small ugly yellow face like a squeezed lemon, wearing a black gown covered with reddish stains.

"Why do such things happen?" Meifu whispered.

Ti made no reply. The fruit-bowls gleamed under the lanterns, the house was full of activity, men-servants ran through the court-yard with basins of hot water, while the

children gazed longingly at the tables, their hands on their knees and the lantern-light dancing on their faces. At intervals Meifu asked: "Why do such things happen?" and invariably Ti replied: "Say nothing. It's much better. The soothsayer told us to be careful of the wheel."

IV

IN the days when the earth was still molten, a great river descended through Malaya and entered the sea where Singapore now stands. The river flowed over the plateaus of Szechuan and down through the gorges of the Shan mountains, sweeping before it the limestone crust of Asia. In these days, when men used chert and crystal flakes for their weapons, and the earth still quaked under their feet, a fierce wind followed the river to the warmer regions of the south. The ice-cap in the north was breaking. Along the length of Malaya wind and river combined to whittle the limestone rock and hurl boulders the size of England into the sea, where they formed new archipelagoes; and the air was dark with the torrential downpour of rock. Thousands of years later the wind lifted, the river became a small stream, plants began to breathe and men crawled out of their caves to see the sun. On this day, when everything awoke and blossomed, the islands were first seen through the mist and palms grew and the blue sea lay calm.

Of this immense river, more terrifying than the impact which jolted the moon from the earth, there remains the three or four miles of Singapore river, with its concrete walls and buttressed bridges built so low that only the smallest ships may pass upstream. Six hundred years ago, under the Majapahit Emperors, these wharves saw Chinese junks laden with tea, porcelain and camphor from Canton, silks, satins, gold thread and damasks from Fuchow, white cloth from Cambodia and kingfishers' feathers from Khmer. Arabs sailed their dhows over the Indian Ocean to Singapore, the Abyssinians sent embassies, the Moghuls offered tamarinds and elephants, jewels and precious medicines from the borders of the

Himalayas, while the Egyptians sent needles and spectacles, flowers from Palestine, spears from Cyprus, tin from the Caucasus, and the Turks sent slaves and cotton-cloths from Russia and a copy of the Sacred Koran and dust from Arabia. In the holds of their dhows, fastened under iron hatches, lay the tall red-haired muscular galley-slaves they bought in Egypt from the Abassyd Sultans. From the east and the south came Javanese, Boyanese and Klings with spices from the islands. Towards the end of the fourteenth century the Empire of Palembang arose and an expedition was sent against Singhapura, and when the junks and dhows were burnt and the city walls razed to the earth, a hundred races fled north to Malacca. Then Singapore river was lost in the mangrove swamps, and no one came to the island except a few Malays and Chinese traders until the English discovered it and fired twenty rounds of cobble-stone ammunition when a treaty was signed with the rajah of another island. Gradually the river was dredged, and white palaces were raised on the hills. Indian convicts were brought by East-Indiamen from Madras to burn the forests and build warehouses, and once more there flowed to the banks of the slow-moving river spices from the Celebes and silks from China. And every day of the year the sun shone on the Sikhs and Pathans who patrolled the upper reaches, on the Malays who lay asleep in the market-place, on the Englishmen in topees who smoked foot-long cigars in Raffles Square and the Chinese who smoked opium and laboured like slaves.

In the summer of 1909 Cheong Ehr-Sung, the merchant from the Liu valley in south Hunan, built a small house on the upper part of Alexandra Road, facing the river. He called it "The Hall of the Cloud at Rest," because he desired to be reminded of the Liu valley and because the Chinese character for "at rest" differs only slightly from the character for "sleeping." He knew no one in Singapore except a relative from the village of Liucheng in Fukien Province, who died shortly afterwards, leaving him the good-will of a small timber-yard on the river. He spoke no Cantonese, but he prospered. He built a court-yard round the house, but between the court-yard and the river he built more wood-sheds

and timber-yards, until the sweet smell of sawdust filled the house, and grains of sawdust settled on the roof, to be blown away when the Sumatra came roaring up from the south. He spent no money on himself. When he had saved a thousand dollars, he wrote to his wife for the first time since he left Ai-lin, enclosing five hundred dollars for the journey. With the remaining five hundred dollars he bought an electric saw. This saw was his greatest joy. He loved it tenderly. He wept over the dynamo when it refused to function, he crowed with delight when the wheel gave off a soft purr of contentment and the dynamo throbbed on the floor-boards. The saw lay in a small shed near the river, the huge toothed wheel gleaming like silver. Under the wheel, in a pit with reinforced concrete walls, hung an immense counter-balance weight of welded steel strips so securely fastened to the main joist that it would never break apart, even when the wheel was revolving at its highest speed. For many years there had been motor-boats in Singapore river. Motor-buses with white roofs were beginning to appear in the streets, but not one of the timber merchants on the Rochore Canal possessed an electric saw with a twelve-foot radius. He employed a Tamil boy to keep strangers away from his precious wheel, and because the wheel was as precious to him as the broughams and horses of the English merchants, he dressed him in a glossy top-hat, a red velvet jerkin and yellow trousers fastened at the ankles with strips of elastic. The sun beat down on the corrugated iron roof of the woodshed, and there were burning wood-shavings and white-hot splinters everywhere. One morning the Tamil boy appeared wearing only a scarlet loin-cloth. Cheong thrashed him until the blood ran, working himself up into a fury of remonstrance and self-pity. Later he relented and the Tamil boy continued to arrive in a scarlet loin-cloth at half-past six in the morning.

From the moment he arrived in Singapore, he seemed to have entered another world. He could not understand the clammy heat and broken skies. When the monsoon arrived, and the clouds piled up, hot and dusty, he shuddered with apprehension and ran back into the house to pray before the ancestral altar. And suddenly the storm lifted, the sun shone, the air smelt of warm nettles and the bending branches of the

flame of the forest tree rose up stiff and heavy after the onslaught of rain. The flame of the forest tree remained green all the year round. It did not die in autumn like the willows in Ai-lin, which turned black like poppy seeds at the approach of frqst. The petals died, and the court-yard lay hidden under a carpet of blood-red flowers; but three months later more petals emerged from the buds and the wind blew them down again. In Singapore no one regulated his life by the calendar. There were no farmers scrabbling the earth for ten inches of rice or maize. All the four seasons were the same, and every day was like every other day—eternal summer mixed with autumn storms.

At first he could not sleep. The long nights crowded into his days. He dreamed of Ai-lin and the quiet temples. At night he wandered through the empty house with its smell of lime-wash, paint and dragon's blood, peering into the long upper room he had reserved for his father, imagining it as it would be when the family arrived, his father's trestle-tables, his paint-brushes, his scrolls and pigments and ink-stones, looking into the children's room which faced the east and his own bedroom downstairs with the heavily embroidered curtains round the wooden bed. From an upstairs window he looked over the window at the shaded lights in the sampans and the blue gas-lamps in Commercial Square. A Malay fishing *frahu* was putting to sea. A warship in the harbour was ringed with brilliant white lights, and there were more lights on the gangway leading down to the sea. At night the city lay at his feet like an inverted porcelain bowl with candles glowing in the interior, so silent that he heard distant hooters as though they came from his own court-yard. But in the early morning the noise was deafening. Clapper-boys trundled their rice-carts through the cobbled streets, the spirit-presses began to stir and the wheels of buffalo-carts thundered above the voices of the fish-market. Then the teeth of the mechanical saw screamed and he had to shout with all the power of his lungs to make himself heard.

On the day when his family arrived, he* was in an agony of restlessness. The sun was scorching. The air tasted sour, as always before a thunder-burst when the heat gathered up all the clouds over the islands and drove them in white waves high

into the sky; and somewhere in the sky, they reached an ice-cold kingdom where they were torn to shreds and fell on Malaya with a sound like sudden gun-fire. His feet throbbed hotly, his clothes stuck to his body. All morning he was impatient with the workmen, who watched him and followed his movements, and outbursts of brutal feverishness, with a kind of gentleness which added fuel to the flames. Row upon row of sawn timber lay in the court-yard ready to cart away. He found fault with the way they were cut, with the direction in which they lay, with the quality of the wood and the amount of sawdust thrown clear. Chu Ehr took his arm.

"Have a rest, old merchant," he said kindly. "We all have families." Then he sighed and said: "What a nuisance they are! They take all our patience."

"There is no excuse for bad work," Cheong answered. "My workmen must be the best in Singapore, or I shall have nothing to do with the factory."

This threat was so habitual that Chu Ehr brushed it aside.

"Give us time, old man," he said gravely, offering Cheong his handkerchief to wipe away the sweat on which sawdust floated. "Give us time. When the family comes, what a happy time there will be."

The young merchant returned to the cool house. Everything had been prepared. The sun was rising about the roof-tops and burning towards the dark horizon of high buildings in the centre of the town; it flashed on the greased paper windows and the carved panelling of the bedroom. He undressed and poured ice-cold water over his trembling, naked body. He wrung his hands as he prayed before the photograph of his father—a photograph of a beardless student in the Forest of Pencils taken long before he was born. He gazed at himself in a mirror. He was big and broad, the muscles of his stomach like whip-cords. His body was tanned by the sun and dyed to the peculiar dark brown which he associated with all workmen in wood factories. He hoped An-mei would recognise him; he was not so sure his children would recognise him. He half-knelt, half sat on the floor, by a chest of drawers, looking for clean clothes—but when he discovered the smooth silk coat and gown, they smelt of camphor and he knew he would feel

ridiculous in them. So he spent the afternoon wearing only his black trousers, working in the yard harder than he had ever worked before, waiting for the boy who would run down from Signal Hill as soon as the junk was in sight.

The afternoon was cool—an ominous coolness. There were few clouds in the sky, yet the sky seemed to be cracked as though the ice was breaking up. The leaves of the tree became a darker green, the *slap-slap* of oars in the river seemed to come from close at hand. But the most curious thing was that voices crowded round him, he heard conversations spoken perhaps many miles away—not clearly, but as if they had echoed and re-echoed against all the walls of Singapore. This phenomenon happens often before a storm on the equator, but this afternoon it was more noticeable and more penetrating. There were corridors in the air through which the ice-cold wind travelled at enormous speed, and these corridors brought him snatches of Chinese conversation, a Malay love-song, the curses of a boatman and the cries of a fisherman far out to sea. He spoke of this to Chu Ehr.

"It won't be a real storm," Chu Ehr said, rubbing his hands along a teak door-frame. "It will break, certainly it will break—but not a real storm," he repeated, and he continued rubbing his hands on the teak until it shone with his sweat.

Cheong looked up at the white discoloured sky, and then took a ricksha to Beach Road. It was still early in the afternoon. The roads were crowded with hawkers selling chickens, rose-apples, grapes and lotus seeds. Along almost the whole length of the road junks were moored, and there seemed to be no place where another could arrive. At the Hylam Kongs, where the compradores gathered, there were crowds pressing round a notice-board, and his heart began to beat faster—he thought of pirates, water-spouts, typhoons, cyclones, all the perils and disasters of the sea. But the notice only gave a long list of ships due to arrive, and at the head of them all, written in red paint, was the name of the *Tien Kuan*. He waited an hour, two hours. Still the storm did not break. And suddenly the *Tien Kuan* came sailing close to land, the brown sail full in the wind and as beautiful as an orange-petal. She was built of wood, deep and thick—and he saw that it was good wood

planed by hand. He could not speak. He could not hear the voices shouting along Beach Road. He waved his arms in a gesture of defiance to the sky, praying that the storm would not break until his children were safely on land.

"Let them come—don't let them get soaked," he prayed hoarsely, overcome by the strength of the violent emotions which alternately shook him and left him exhausted.

As she came nearer, he recognised grandfather, for he was head and shoulders above anyone else on the deck. His father was holding a small girl in his arms with flapping pigtail and embroidered coat; his wife was waving a white handkerchief.

"Come closer," he whispered to the ship, stretching out his arms. "Come closer, let me see you. *Ai-ya*, what a beautiful piece of wood you are."

At that moment was born his resolution to build ships, but he was not conscious of forming resolutions. He saw the sails bellying, the crowds on deck, the summer haze and the Dutch islands on the horizon like grey daubs of paint on the level plains of blue sea. He saw a gun on the forepoop, and long before the junk anchored a pilot launch crept alongside and took off a man with his arms tied round his back, his head falling forward over his chest. He was lowered down on a thick hempen rope, which swayed with the motion of the ship. From every throat on the boat-quay the Chinese were yelling in derision of the man who was being carefully lowered into the launch. Cheong could not understand what was happening, and he cared nothing at all for the Punjabi policemen, in stiff purple turbans, who formed fours and kept their eyes resolutely on the launch. An-mei was waving frantically. He saw a small boy running along the deck wearing a red-peaked tiger cap, and knew by the way the boy's head was thrust forward that it was his son. He screamed with astonishment and delight, but his full-throated "Voice only once escaped from his lips. Hoarse with excitement, jumping from one leg to the other, with one eye on the sun, he waited for the junk to crawl through the coagulating mass of sampans in the outer harbour until the figure-head came to rest on the shore.

And now it was too late to move forward. The crowd seethed round and past him, a crowd of Cantonese porters and

rubber compradores and fruit-sellers, who attempted to invade the junk and prevent anyone from leaving before they had accomplished their business. Clouds formed, and the sky was aglow with red dust. He tried to push his elbows through the crowd, but it was as though he had jerked his thumb against a steel plate. It was better to remain where he was in the security of the Hylam Kongsí, bounded on one side by four rows of Punjabi policemen and on the other by a stone wall.

Meifu came down the stone steps with Ti swinging on her hip. He recognised her, but she did not recognise him. He recognised his father, but his wife was weeping and her cheeks were suddenly swollen. Then they all disappeared in the crowd. The scent of angseena blossoms filled the air. He shivered in the hot gusts of wind. "All the world is red dust," he whispered in an agony of apprehension and impatience. But about half-past six in the afternoon, when the sky was still clear but covered with a faint reddish haze, he held his son in his arms and smiled awkwardly at his wife, with exactly the same smile as a husband who returns to the bedroom after his baby is born. He fidgeted and was conscious of an overwhelming passion and desire, but it did not occur to him that his desire was granted when he felt his son's rib-bones under the clammy coat or pushed away the red tiger-cap and saw the smooth baldness of his son's beautifully rounded skull. All the way to the Hall of the Cloud at Rest he was impatient. He ordered the ricksha boy to go faster. By the time they reached Alexandra Road, it was already dark and the rain was falling in torrents. Grandfather was sitting on his left, drowsy with the heat and the scent of rain. He held Ti on his knees and hummed to himself in tune to the beating of the wheels on the mud.

"Let's go faster," Ti shouted enthusiastically. "Shall we race them, Father?"

"Oh faster, faster," his father answered, whipping himself up into a furious longing to be inside his own court-yard.

Already they saw the vermilion gates and the tables set in the court-yard. Then the two rickshas converged, and for one shuddering moment remained interlocked, the wheel-spokes quivering, An-mei staring straight in front of her, and

he was conscious that his son's arms were wound round his neck and his cheek lay against his own. Afterwards things happened with such rapidity that he saw them as a moth sees a lantern. There were rings of darkness and even larger rings of intense light. He saw An-mei groaning on the ground, and he knew instinctively that her skull was broken. He beat his breast and wrung his hands and talked in a gentle voice of remonstrance and hope.

Afterwards there was a kind of funeral procession through the lanterns in the court-yard, a procession which wound among the brightly lit tables and mounted the steps into the inner court-yard to the wailing of the servant-girls and the high-pitched screams of Meifu. When An-mei was laid in bed, she did not recognise him. She screamed with pain in the same resonant, breathless note as the mechanical saw. He slept by her bed, listening to her heavy breathing and the lapping of the tide against the wooden walls of the sampans in the river. It seemed to him that he would never be able to recapture his love for her. Even in his sleep, he saw her bandaged head, her hands folded over her breast, her lips quivering and the strange distorted expression in her eyes. His passion for her died and turned into something else. He knew that he would never be able to love or hope again.

In the Hall of the Cloud at Rest the children slept in the same room. In the morning they were awakened by the screaming of the sawmills, which continued all day until an hour before sunset. After washing and dressing, they went to their mother's bedroom, bowed and asked her how she felt. Every day the answer was the same. She was feeling better and she prayed to the Lord Buddha for salvation from her sins. She was convinced that the accident was due to some sin she had committed in a former life. She sighed and turned to the wall, unable to bear the sight of her children's rude health and smiling faces. Nuns came in scarlet gowns and bare feet. Servants entered the bedroom with scented lamps and bronze bowls for the altar—in the warm sunlight the transparent flames were invisible. When the time came to leave their mother's bedroom, they left with a kind of thankfulness

and attempted unconsciously to obliterate from their memories the thought of their mother with her bandaged head and long pale hands spread out on the counterpane.

When grandfather paid visits in the town, Ti accompanied him but Meifu was left behind. Sometimes they went in rickshas and carriages, but nearly always on foot. Grandfather pointed to the shop-signs.

"Never write like this," he said, pointing to the gold and red lettering. "This is not a scholar's lettering. In the first place to use gold is to insult the Emperor. In the second place the merchants have debased their hand-writing and employ forms which have never existed among Chinese scholars."

Occasionally, however, they discovered lettering that pleased him. Then grandfather's eyes lit up, he nodded his head and he was so entranced by the fine calligraphy that he paid no attention to the people bowing as they passed. All the way back to the house he spoke of this lettering in exactly the same tone which Ti employed when he saw a white horse or a large junk at the river-mouth.

"You must learn to write well," grandfather said in an imploring voice. "You must be worthy of your ancestors. Cheong Chu-men was the greatest calligraphist in the Sung Dynasty. Cheong Ehr-sung, after whom your father is named, was the court painter of the Emperor Chien Wen-ti. There is no time when you should not be thinking of calligraphy."

In the great library upstairs, where grandfather's precious books were covered with a thin varnish of sawdust, Ti learnt to write on ruled paper. He wrote steadily and breathlessly, with his tongue peeping through his round, red lips, his fingers black with ink, while grandfather looked over his shoulder and alternately sighed with despair or laughed with pleasure at the thought that his grandson was following the tradition of his ancestors. When Ti wrote, he thought always of the slow-moving buffaloes of the Liu valley. His handwriting possessed the ungainly suppleness of buffaloes as they tread through the autumn mud on their way from pasture. The loops were fat and the legs were firm. The heavy horizontal strokes were the curving backs and the slanting strokes were the buffaloes' ears.

"Your handwriting is rough and shaggy," grandfather said. "You must learn to be more graceful."

Later Ti learned to write like wild geese, but the shagginess remained—the despair of grandfather and the secret delight of his grandson, who remembered Small Dragon every time he dipped the brush in the ink-stone.

Often they spent the long afternoons in the court-yard. Grandfather helped them to build cliffs and mountains from the red earth gathered in a corner of the compound. Within six months they built a perfect replica of the Liu mountains outside An-mei's bedroom window. There were duck-ponds, rice-fields, temples, palanquins ascending the mountain, but no river. They decided to make a river. Grandfather found a copper kettle and buried it among the creepers. When he pulled a string, a stream of water fell along the slopes of the cliffs and flooded the valleys. They built pagodas and red lacquer bridges, and a walled village exactly like Ai-lin, with rice-granaries, a market-place, clouds of cotton-wool floating over the red curving roofs. On the pavements there were even water-melon sellers, vendors of iced drinks, headless chickens a quarter of an inch long were strung on wires and there were tabernacles of scented wines, cloths, silks and jade. In his white silk gown, grandfather fussed over his mountains and rice-fields like a general commanding an army. At night he hung tiny lanterns between the arches of the drum-tower and painted a real moon on the mountains. But the most exciting day of all was when a grey house-lizard with a soft white body and small feet like crocodiles' feet came to explore the valley.

"The dragon has come," Ti shouted in ecstatic delight. "He'll eat the whole village up—you'll see."

Grandfather came running out of the house.

"How is this, my grandson, that you should show such fear?" he exclaimed.

Ti pointed to the dragon, which was already nibbling at the walls. Grandfather scooped the lizard in his cupped hands and placed it on Ti's shoulder. It was white and transparent, with black eyes and a small yellow tongue. It stayed on Ti's shoulder, hypnotised by the warmth of the boy's blood, the

long grey neck arched and the forked tongue flicking in and out, gleaming in the hot sunshine. Ti was delighted. He told Meifu he had captured a dragon—a real dragon, which nearly swallowed up the walls of Ai-lin.

"But you didn't."

"I did," he exclaimed, stamping his feet.

At night he heard the *chik-cbak* of the lizards as they ran along the ceiling in their eternal search for moths and mosquitoes; but he did not think of them as lizards—they were the dragons who rose from the Yellow River in the time of the Emperor Wan, before China was unified and the Chinese were settled in the plains.

Grandfather was talking of Chinese history. He spoke of China as though every blade of grass and every grain of rice belonged to history. The children were introduced to a country shaped like an immense bowl painted yellow, the sea below and a white desert stretching into Mongolia above; and in this immense bowl the Chinese people lived and struggled through centuries of wandering.

"They came from the Caspian Sea," he said gravely, "and they travelled east until they reached the sea. But it's a thing that's never finished, it's like the earth."

He had a way of flourishing his long sleeves, so that they seemed to include the whole of China. As he worked over the cardboard village of Ai-lin and the red laterite mountains, he spoke of Hsiao Ko and Min Huang, who ruled the state of Wei in the Han Dynasty, until the boy saw the warriors in the court-yard, in fine silks, with pennons waving and in their hands smoke-blackened swords like the swords of the gods in the Buddhist temples. But the Han Empire was powerless against the invaders who came from the heart of Russia, and one by one the warriors were slaughtered. As grandfather talked, the old forests of China were cut down to provide the last walls of the defenders, iron was smelted from the earth to provide their swords and chain armour and the tips of their wooden lances, but it was all in vain. A few escaped to the south, where they formed a new Empire which grew again like something sown in the earth that shoots vigorously sunwards; but once more there were enemies and the eternal

combat was renewed on more equal terms. Before the children there was unrolled the whole course of Chinese history like an immense scroll, as unending as the night of death and the day of awakening—warriors, whose faces were blackened with the smoke of battles, and who died in order that the peasants should cultivate rice in peace.

"To-morrow I shall tell you the story of Min Huang," grandfather said, shaking his long sleeves as he slowly climbed the steps to the library.

One day, on the second anniversary of the Revolution, all the men's pigtails were cut off. The order came from the secret headquarters of the Kuomintang in Singapore. At breakfast grandfather came down from the library—an event which occurred only when there was something of extreme importance to discuss. He bowed at the ancestral altar and bade the whole household assemble in the dining-room.

"When the Manchus overthrew the glorious Ming Dynasty," he began, "they ordered the men of the Flowery Kingdom to wear pigtails as a sign of slavery. Confucius said we receive body, hair and skin from our parents. In this way we came to believe that our hair was precious, and just as the body of a superior man will never allow itself to come in contact with sharp or blunt instruments, we refused to allow our hair to be cut. The Revolution has changed all this. I believe that Dr. Sun works for the greatness of our country. Therefore, as a mark of liberation, I ask the men to cut off their pigtails."

There was silence in the room. An-mei had been brought in a wheeled chair. She was crying softly. Grandfather noticed how the colour had returned to her cheeks and how every day she seemed to be getting better. He smiled gently and touched her hand, murmuring in his scholarly voice congratulations on her recovery which were heard by everybody. One by one the workmen entered the room, but the silence only deepened.

"What is the matter with you all?" grandfather continued. Haven't you heard of the Revolution? Seven years ago the Emperor Kuang Tzu ordered the court functionaries to cut off their pigtails. What's the good of a pigtail? I put mine in my pocket? I spend an hour every day putting my pigtail in my pocket, because it is always flying out again?"

The silence was deafening. Meifu could not understand why everyone was regarding each other so uneasily. The workmen wore their pigtails coiled over their ears to prevent them from being dragged into the machinery, but father always wore his long.

"*Sin teefafu*" he murmured. "Body, hair and skin come from our parents."

"I do not order you to cut off your pigtail, my son. I ask you in the name of the Revolution."

"If you are going to cut off your pigtails, we ought to call the barber in," An-mei whispered, while the white-coated servant-girl who attended to her wheeled her into the light. "The neighbours will say the elder of the Cheong family cut off his own pigtail! This has never happened to the family before. I can understand that it needs much thought."

Grandfather interrupted her. He pointed to the servant-girl.

"Please fetch me my scissors from the library—the ones I use for sharpening my brushes."

Ng Ah, the servant-girl, disappeared. The silence grew even deeper. Grandfather smiled nervously. He had not expected this silent opposition from the workmen and from his own son.

"*Sin teefafu*" Meifu's father murmured.

An-mei looked at her son.

"He is very pale," she said slowly. "Without a pigtail he will look like a young calf."

"I have also noticed that he is pale," grandfather said. "Perhaps we should take him more often to the country. Evidently the sea is not good for him—or perhaps he is not often enough in the sunlight."

"I fear he has consumption," An-mei said in an awe-stricken voice. "I have prayed to the gods to make him better, but look—he is still pale."

Ti had never thought that his mother was worrying over his health. He did not feel pale or ill or in any way unlike other children. His long black eyelashes were noticed by everyone who met him, but it had occurred to no one that their beauty was accentuated by his pallor. An-mei held his face in her hands, partly to protect him from grandfather's scissors but

also because she was deeply perturbed over his health. She looked up at grandfather enquiringly.

"Am I well enough to offer incense on Tortoise Island? It is not possible for me to have children. I would like to go, honourable parent."

There was a whispered discussion between her husband and her father-in-law. At that moment Ng Ah descended with the scissors. Grandfather's face was stern and forbidding. He turned to Meifu's father.

"My son," he said, "here are the scissors. Cut my hair near the roots above the ribbon. Cut carefully, otherwise the lotus will fail to blossom."

And this time the silence became so deep that it was unfathomable, a dark pit of silence and expectation which numbed everyone in the room. Chu Ehr was shivering. His great shoulders were quaking in fear, and his face was expressionless like the face of an orange. Grandfather became impatient. "My son, there is no time for taking thought. To-day in Singapore every scholar must be shaven, and every wood-merchant must follow the scholar's example or hide his head in shame."

Grandfather's hair was grey streaked with white. At the end of the pigtail, and again near the roots of his hair, there were thin red ribbons of silk. His son stared at the hair like someone overcome by inexplicable fears.

"My Father, give the order," he moaned.

"I have already given the order."

Snip-snap. The grey pigtail lay in his hand with the single red ribbon hanging at the end. As he touched the pigtail, Cheong was again overcome by inexplicable fears. The pigtail seemed to be alive; it would flower; it would blossom and produce more grey pigtails. He laid the pigtail reverently on the table, where it seemed smaller than it had ever been before.

"Cut mine off, please," Meifu advanced with her head bent low, so that her grandfather could see the place where the pigtail had to be cut.

"Go away, golden flower," grandfather murmured. "Women must keep their pigtails until they are married. This is the old custom. Why should you think it has changed?"

One by one the workmen advanced and their pigtails were cut off by Cheong. At first they argued bitterly in whispers among themselves; then they laughed and giggled and bent their heads low, and waited with a satisfied smile for the moment when the scissors snipped their hair.

"What is the world coming to?" Cheong said seriously. "People lose their hair and everyone laughs."

Ti was the last to have his hair cut. He bent down so low that his pigtail flew in the air. His father tried to cut it while it was still swinging, but missed and had to wait until it dangled over his son's eyes.

"I think it would be a good idea if we went to Tortoise Island," An-mei said, as the pigtail was placed reverently on the table beside eighteen others. "It will do me no harm, because I am beginning to walk again, and Ti is looking very pale too. Look how pale he is without his pigtail."

Ti laughed nervously. He put his hand to the back of his head, and he was surprised to feel only the short stumps of his hair.

"It will soon grow again," he told himself consolingly.

Three weeks later a curious red lacquered carriage like a palanquin on wheels arrived in the court-yard. In the warm moist heat of the early morning the horse steamed, and he was immediately attacked by flies which settled on his nostrils and on the yellow jelly around his eyes. Ti raced downstairs. On the way he met his grandfather.

"We are going to Tortoise Island," he explained. "Your honourable mother thinks she is better."

"Why does she want to go?"

"She prays for children. There are not enough children in the household. So she prays to all the gods, but so far none have returned her prayers."

Ti had never been on the sea since he arrived in Singapore. He remembered the wooded islands, but he could not understand why they were going there to pray. Through the window he saw the silver bells on the horse's traces shaking as the long dappled neck quivered; but the window was closed and he heard only a faint tinkling like the sound made by floating

ice in a glass tumbler. All over the court-yard smoke and steam were rising—steam rose from the horse's flanks and puffs of smoke rose from the smoke from the steam-winch. Grandfather was dressed in the light blue gown he wore when composing poetry. On the stairs, with his beard flowing over the edge of the gown, which was covered with ink-stains, he looked imposing and somehow out of place, as though he had strayed into another world. The smell of opium clung to him, but even more remarkable was the smell of Hsiao-hsing wine. Suddenly it occurred to Ti that his grandfather was drunk. Sometimes he looked exactly as though about to drop off to sleep, his head nodding and his eyes shutting in a kind of thankful bliss.

"Oh, hurry, boy, get the sugar. We must go and feed the horses."

Ti darted into the kitchen and procured a handful of sugar then he followed his grandfather into the court-yard, noticing the pale streak on the back of the gown where a pigtail once hung.

The sun rose over the red roofs and threw a deep shadow under the flame of the forest tree. The dwarf pines were covered with dew. The canary-cage was open, but he heard the canaries singing in the kitchen and later he heard the moans from his mother's bedroom. The horse and the palanquin stood by the woodshed. Grandfather was behaving in an extraordinary fashion, stroking the horse's mane, whispering and pressing sugar into the black fly-covered nostrils. His father appeared in the court-yard clutching brown paper carriers of food in either hand, calling to Ng Ah over his shoulder, his gown curving over his stomach like a balloon; and when he tried to shade his eyes with one hand, all the fruit rolled out of the paper carrier.

He called in a soft voice: "Come and help me pick up the fruit. Your mother will be coming soon. Meifu, bring the cushions. I wish people would have the sense to remember—"

Ti did not hear the rest of the sentence. As he crawled on hands and knees after the pomeloes and rambutans rolling over the tiles, he realised that the woodshed was silent, the doors were fastened, no workmen were coming that morning

although it was Thursday, and that the Tamil boy who looked after the glue-pot in the woodshed was now wearing a red coat of cord, with silver buttons, yellow leggings and a turban, exactly like the Tamils who drove towkays and rich Europeans through the streets of Singapore.

From the noises inside the kitchen it was evident that the nouse was in turmoil. Meifu came running out with a basket laden with still more fruit: plums, quinces, mangosteens, mangoes and even pears, followed by Ng Ah with bowls of rice-dough, joss-sticks and joss-papers in bundles tied together with gold-plaited paper. At last An-mei appeared on the arms of the gate-keeper. She looked pale, but it was impossible to see her clearly under her wide-brimmed straw hat. Ti was still so thunder-struck by the appearance of the horse that he could not think why everyone was preparing for a festivity. Grandfather was slowly returning to his senses. Half-asleep, after a night spent over the opium-lamp, he was gradually learning to put the sugar in the horse's mouth.

"Why are we riding in a palanquin?" Meifu asked, as she placed the basket of fruit on the gilt steps of the palanquin.

"I thought it would please your mother," her father said, one eye closed because the sun was streaming straight down on him and the other wide open to see the effect of his words on his wife.

And suddenly An-mei saw the palanquin and the Tamil coach-boy, and gave a shrill scream of delight. She was so overcome by the sight of the brilliant red wheels and the rich wine-red curtains that she stood quite still and leaned heavily on the gate-keeper, gasping for breath. Her husband swelled with pride. Meifu stood like someone rooted to the ground. Grandfather was tenderly stroking the horse's mane, and only Ti seemed to be entirely unaffected. His mind dwelt on the day ahead—where they were going, how many of his friends would see him driving in the palanquin, what would take place? He had heard of Tortoise Island, but had never seen it. The whole family had been discussing the journey for weeks; then suddenly the discussion had been dropped—probably because everything was arranged. He pondered for a long time on the strange name of the island. The sun was

hot on his face. He wore short blue trousers, a white shirt, sandals and a jade wristlet his father gave him for proficiency in calligraphy. And suddenly he saw a green hairy fruit—a rambutan—one of the fruits which had fallen from his father's brown paper carrier, and he hurried off to retrieve it. When he returned the whole family, grandfather, father, mother and Meifu were sitting under the heavy wine-red curtains.

The coach-boy flicked his whip and the palanquin began to edge its way between the gate-posts as Ti swung himself up the painted foot-board and fell breathlessly on, the floor between them, clutching the rambutan. Inside the palanquin the air was musty. The hot morning sun began to smoulder through the curtains as soon as the carriage began to trot down Alexandra Road. Through the slits in the curtains he saw the sampans riding down Singapore river. Shops, colonnades, wood-piles, buffalo-carts, workmen and coolies, all appeared instantly bathed in the warm transfiguring light of the curtains. Grandfather shook his head gravely and vehemently. Exhausted by the long night over the opium flame, he drowsed with his head on Meifu's shoulder.

"This is extraordinary," An-mei whispered indignantly.

The flies had begun to settle on the fruit. They could not escape from the palanquin, and buzzed in everyone's face. The Tamil boy made clicking noises with his tongue. Meifu felt rather than saw the streets through the curtains, and it seemed to her that the streets were covered thick with red dust, which whirled and danced in a vortex as high as the roof-tops. It was oppressively hot. The horse moved at a walking pace, picking his way. Occasionally a wheel caught the kerb and quivered for a moment on the brink of five-foot deep conduits, where all the day's filth was thrown, to be swept away by torrential rains; when this happened the Tamil boy shouted in an incomprehensible language of his own, which was probably not Tamil, until they were once more travelling on the raised camber in the centre of the road.

An-mei stared at grandfather in bewilderment. It had never happened before that he was drunk. His head shook on his shoulder as if tied there by a single ligament; his blue cap fell off and to keep his balance, and to prevent his

head from falling on Meifu's lap,, he kept throwing one arm in the direction of the leather strap.

"Wake up, Grandfather," Meifu said gently, clapping his hands.

At that moment Ti pulled the curtains aside and saw the white-masted junks, the blue sea, the islands and the summer haze. A great cream-coloured liner, with bunting flying from stem to stern, lay anchored in the harbour pool. Collyer's Quay was crowded with landaus and broughams; on the driving-seats were Tamils with shining black hats, white collars, red velvet coats and yellow breeches. They were more magnificent than the Tamil boy, because they were more stern and resembled impassive decorated machines. The wheels flashed in the sun and the heat beat up from the tarred road, but already they were at Johnstone's Pier, and An-mei was being carefully lifted to the ground. In the strong sunlight grandfather blinked and cried out: "Ten thousand islands—Come here, Ti. Count the islands for me. I read there were ten thousand somewhere."

The sea was calm, immensely blue, rippled with silver waves as far as the grey islands on the horizon. Through the cool corridor of Johnstone's Pier the sun was kept at bay. The children clutched the paper bags full of offerings for the gods, while their father and the Tamil boy half carried An-mei to the boat-steps. Once more they were in the full sunlight. Ti clutched his paper bags and ran down the steps. The launch was already crowded. "Make way there! Make way there!" the boatman was shouting. He wore a long pigtail and his moustache was gummed to his lip. An-mei could not see—the sun was blinding her—and she stepped into the launch, her whole weight on the Tamil boy's shoulders, and he seemed to bend and shrink under the strain. A space was cleared for An-mei. She sat next to an old woman, an incredibly old woman with a face like a dried mangosteen and scarcely any hair at all.

"Where's grandfather?" Meifu shouted suddenly.

Grandfather was standing on the edge of the pier, gazing down at them tipsily with his arms outstretched to prevent himself from falling. An-mei was so overcome with shame that

she turned her head away. .But suddenly he came hopping down the steps, as lithe as a blue-bird kingfisher in his blue gown, and he paid no attention to the shrieks of laughter and fear which came from the crowded benches of the small steam-boat. The family was spread through the boat. Meifu sat next to a fat, sunburnt man, dressed in a white gown, who wore spectacles and a felt hat with the brim turned up all round. His spectacles were so thick that his eyes resembled fishes' eyes. He, too, clenched his hands over paper parcels of fruit and joss-sticks and slowly burning red rice-paper. Meifu felt sure he was accompanied by his wife and children; but among all the wives and children in the boat she could see none who smiled at him.

Ti clasped his grandfather's hand. The sun was hot on his face, so warm that he could scarcely breathe. Nothing stirred, the ships in the harbour were motionless, as motionless as the smoke which hung above the funnels of the cream-painted liner. The sun burnt his bare legs and arms. With one hand he shielded his eyes from the sun, with the other he explored the lukewarm sea, and he watched the minnows flowing through his fingers. Then he kneeled on the benches and looked down at the sheltered growth of white coral, where the minnows evidently lived, for they gathered in black clouds as soon as he stirred the water. Occasionally he would come across coarse threads of phosphorescent grass which waved and shook violently even before he touched them. And suddenly an orange, a small orange with a brown crinkled skin like a potato, fell from the basket of the hairless old woman, and he watched it falling slowly and cleanly through the transparent ice-blue water, growing bigger and bigger, bigger than any orange he had ever seen, until it jumped along the crests of coral and scattered the black swarms of minnows, coming to rest at last at the foot of the fantastic white mountains which seemed to be made of countless small fishes' eyes. There it remained, rolling over on itself, growing larger and smaller according to the motion of the eater and whether he disturbed the surface, an enormous drowned orange which the fish were nibbling at.

"Try it! Try it!" the old woman was pressing a skinned

orange on Meifu. "It won't hurt you. Are you going to Tortoise Island, too?"

And suddenly the boy realised that they were not just sitting waiting for the boat to leave Singapore, they were not sitting in the sun simply because it was pleasant and hot, they were going to the island to pray in the temple for their mother's recovery. Half-rotten fruit lay about on the deck, and a faint odour of what he thought were peppermints or sweetened wine met him when grandfather lurched over and fell against a large woman with mother-of-pearl knobs in her hair. An-mei was staring in the direction of the islands, but there were so many that it was impossible to see the humped-backed, tortoise-shaped island where the temple stood.

It was low tide. The piers supporting Johnstone's Pier were green with slime and covered with small white molluscs like miniature volcanoes. They were hard and brittle, but they could be dislodged with the end of a finger-nail. Taking courage from one successful experiment, he took to dislodging as many as he could see. He began standing on the planks, then kneeled on the bench, then stood up and attempted to reach the small cluster of brittle white flowers that remained. He nearly fell over. At that moment he saw a large *ikan merah* gliding through the waving grasses. The shock sobered him. He did not want to be nibbled at like the orange. The shock also sobered grandfather, for with the eye of his imagination he had seen Ti falling and with the eye of reason he saw that it was his own fault for not paying more attention to his grandchild. Although Ti was sitting comfortably at his side, grandfather was inconsolable and spoke to Ti as he would speak to a friendly ghost.

"We're off!" Meifu shouted, as the propeller threshed the blue water into a white bustling foam.

A bell rang in the little cabin; three or four Chinese sailors were attempting to make their way forward. They wore greasy pigtails coiled over one ear like hooligans. Suddenly the boat lurched forward, out into the sea of ships, her nose pointed to the horizon, and Ti realised for the first time that she was sailing without sails. Someone lifted the skylight of the engine-room. At once the oily heat of the engines rushed out,

a heavy malodorous heat like the heat which comes from piles of filth after rain. So heavy that he gasped for breath and felt a choking sensation at his throat as he began to feel sick; but he swallowed it all back in time and stared round in triumph, very pale, at the crowds of Chinese women and old men and children who were laughing as though nothing had occurred.

The sea was still smooth beyond the breakwater. The boy began to take a deep interest in the islands which appeared to flow backwards as the small boat surged forward. Some of the islands were no more than coral spits with one or two long-stemmed palm-trees. Others rose like dragons from the sea with red scales and silver-green teeth; but the red scales were warm laterite cliffs and the silver-green teeth were the slender traveller's palms. The day grew hotter. Gradually the sky assumed a richer shade of blue and the palms began waving as the south-east wind came over the Dutch islands. Ti scrutinised the passengers and deck-hands. On the raised fore-deck, a Chinese boy of his own age was dangling bare legs in the water. The boy's hair was wet and tangled over his forehead. He wore a white shirt with sleeves rolled above the elbow, pale blue shorts and his brown legs were too long for his body. When the boat dipped in the trough of a wave, a tremendous explosion of spray hid the boy from view, and Ti thought he would never emerge. His heart missed a beat. Gradually the curtain of spray settled, and the boy was revealed, sitting in exactly the same place, still swinging his legs and smiling mysteriously at the sea. Ti drank in the impression of the boy's face covered with salt and spray, his bare throat and drenched shirt which clung to his body. Each impression smote him sharply, so that his heart seemed to be about to burst with its own throbbing. In a strange way, without understanding or deliberation, knowing nothing about the boy, he felt that he had found someone he could confide in and talk to on equal terms.

"What an extraordinarily handsome boy," grandfather said, waking up. "I am sure he must come from Pekin—or perhaps he is a Korean."

Ti was then acutely conscious of the jealousy which drove through him like a rusted knife. He was conscious, too, of his

own physical self—his weakness, his pallor, his constant struggle with his own laziness and inattention at lessons. He was filled with the impression that everything around this strange boy was beautiful, and that everyone was staring at him. He felt absurd, clutching his paper carriers of fruit, while the boy was free of encumbrances. Then suddenly the boy turned round and began an animated conversation with a dark girl who wore a lavender blue coat heavily embroidered with dragons and phoenixes—evidently his sister. They smiled mysteriously, and the salt-spray concealed them whenever the boat broke through the waves.

"They must love one another very much," Ti said aloud, and he was surprised when his grandfather pulled at his hand and led him through the protesting holiday-makers to the foredeck.

Ti was surprised that the salt-spray should be so hot. Through the mist of spray he saw Meifu shouting at him. Whenever the waves broke on the bow, she thought he would be swept away. Meanwhile grandfather was talking to the boy and his sister.

"In Peking the pigeons have flutes on their wings. I remember it, although it's a long time ago. They make a noise like——"

"Coo-coo-coooo——" the boy interrupted, shaking the water from his hair and pursing his small red lips.

"So you come from Peking."

"No, but my mother came from there. She told me about it. This is my sister Tien Hsueh."

Ti stood still and watched, trying to assume a very careless appearance. He was gnawed by jealousy.

"May I ask your honourable name?" grandfather made a slight bow from the waist.

"My unworthy name is Crystal Jade."

"Have you read *The Dream of the Western Chamber** You resemble White Jade."

"The resemblance must be accidental," the boy laughed. "My mother is going to Tortoise Island to worship at the shrine of the goddess of wealth. May I ask why you are going?"

"For the same reason," grandfather replied, and suddenly the deep hollow of an enormous blue wave rose threateningly

above the bow and fell with a crashing impact on the deck. The boy had twined three or four coils of rope round his wrist, but Tien Hsueh could be seen struggling through the spray, her hands thrown out desperately in an effort to catch hold of a stanchion. She screamed and Ti caught hold of her—a thing he had never dared to think of. She lay panting in his arms, her dark eyes full of tears of exasperation, the little printed flowerets on her coat and the embroidered dragons and phoenixes suddenly dissolving and staining the lavender blue coat a darker colour. The red dye was even running over her hands, which seemed to have been dipped in red ink. Her brother laughed, and grandfather watched her tenderly for the first signs of a flood of tears, but none came and the shock soon passed. They were approaching the island. On the rocky peak a Malay shrine had been built, while the Chinese temple stood on an atoll a little way away. At high tide the sea swirls between them, but at low tide there was a long yellow sand-pit connecting them and you could walk dry-shod from one to the other. They were already so close that they could see people walking about, and they heard gongs, and saw the flicker of candles through the willows. Thick smoke was pouring from the incense stove below the Chinese temple, and they heard volleys of crackers being let off, and already the heavy tropical heat was scented with sandal-wood tapers and the fumes of joss-sticks.

"They say a rich Chinese was buried on the atoll," grandfather said, wiping the salt-spray from his beard, "and a rich Malay was buried on-the island."

"I have heard that two Malay girls killed themselves on the island," the boy said, smiling mysteriously, his dark eyes fixed on the smoke which rose in warm clouds. "They were buried by the Rajah and a great shrine erected in their honour. They killed themselves to preserve their chastity."

"How do you know?"

"I have read it in books."

Grandfather looked from the boy to his grandson. There was scarcely any difference in their ages, yet the boy spoke with assurance of things completely outside Ti's experience. Ti was bewildered. It occurred to him that this boy knew

everything—everything without exception. The sun fell on his upturned face, and the boy pointed at the island with an air of authority.

"The Malays worship in the shrine over there. They worship exactly like the Chinese. They light tapers and say prayers, and bow low. I think the Malays must be descended from the Chinese."

Grandfather said gravely: "Your knowledge is in excess of your years. How can it be that the Malays, who are dark, are descended from the Chinese, who are fair?"

"In the course of a long time, honourable scholar, races change. They develop new characters and become new races. The world is never still."

Grandfather was going to ask him how he explained that the Chinese race had continued for many thousand years without appreciable change, when the steam-boat, steam-puffing in silver-grey clouds from the funnel, grounded on the sand-bank and everyone was suddenly jerked from their places.

Ti noticed with delight that there were no other steam-boats in sight. All round them were small sampans and Malay *prabus*. The Malays wore brightly coloured sarongs, gold and yellow and bronze-red; the Chinese wore silks and embroidered coats, and the girls wore flowers in their hair. Already he heard the beggars chanting from the stone steps: "Give alms! Give alms for salvation!" The wailing voice of a woman rose above the chattering crowds: "I beseech ... I beseech . . .", but no one heard what she sought from the gods. Bells hung in silver loops from the trees. The waving sunlight on the water lay reflected on the curving sides of the innumerable yellow boats. The air was still and heavy, so much hotter than in the palanquin that Ti undid the neck button of his gown.

"I suppose we shall have to get out and worship the god of prosperity," the strange boy said. "My family is quite wealthy already. I don't know why they have to worship——"

"Perhaps they want to keep their wealth," his sister suggested.

"But that is quite wrong," Crystal Jade said gravely. "To hold on to wealth is not the sign of a superior man."

"Then you have read Confucius?" grandfather asked.

"My teacher makes me repeat the works off by heart. I do not agree with Confucius in all things. For example, I do not agree that the superior man should teach at court, since this is to paint his own face the colour of his enemies and make him thin-skinned. I am of the opinion——"

But what opinion he held was lost in the clamour of the crowd of passengers who suddenly took it into their heads to leave the steam-boat. The sand was soft and yielding. Wooden boards were thrown down on the sand to act as stepping-stones. Crystal Jade jumped off the boat and slithered ashore, accompanied by his sister. Grandfather followed slowly, pushed forward by the crowd behind. Ti refused to walk on the boards and struggled ankle-deep in the soft sand. Golden grains clung to his shoes. When he closed his eyes, the sun was so bright that it penetrated his eyelids. In the wind the palm-trees showed the silver undersides of their leaves. An-mei was being led from the boat supported by her husband, who held all the paper carriers and baskets of fruit, since Meifu was already ashore, clambering up the rock like a painted monkey.

An-mei's bright eyes shone wickedly. In the steam-boat she had been talking to the young woman, the mother of the two children on the poop. Within five minutes she determined that the girl, Tien Hsueh, should become the wife of her son. In the excitement a rush of colour came to her face, and she no longer looked old and shrivelled when her husband supported her on his arm over the floating planks. The crowd on the island was as dense as the crowd on the boat. The paper sun-shades had to be folded—there was no room for them. At the foot of the rock, below the Chinese temple, all red lacquer and gold lettering under the flaring roofs, hawkers sold iced water and tinned pineapples. Solid blocks of ice, wrapped in sack-cloth, were being sliced by small boys whose faces were blue with cold and whose bare legs were scorched lobster-red by the sun. The steps leading to the temple were packed with people, mostly women, whose lips were already compressed with prayer and whose strange silent faces, heavy with grief or hope, contrasted oddly with the laughter below. There seemed, in fact, an invisible cordon between the two

crowds—those who had come to pray and those who had come to enjoy themselves.

With great difficulty An-mei was assisted up the steps. Smoke rose from the incense sticks and charred pieces of paper wheeled like small birds above her head. Through the grey summer haze more islands appeared in the distance, and she sighed and asked to be allowed to rest and gaze at them, but the pressure of the people below prevented her. And suddenly she saw the temple like a feast of fruit, fruit from Java and Celebes and South China, mangosteens with purple rinds, orange-coloured pomeloes and papayas, cool blue grapes and pale white lotus fruits—such a feast of fruit as she had never seen. The altars and tables were piled high and smothered in baskets and silver vases containing fruit, sometimes skinned, so that the gods could eat without bothering to remove the skin, sometimes painted to resemble some other and rarer fruit, but always fresh and covered with a thin dew, which glistened in the brilliant light beating up from the sea.

"I have never seen——" she gasped, and threw out her hands before the miraculous tables. "Even at New Year's Day, I have never seen so much fruit."

She placed her offerings on the table. In a velvet-curtained cage the goddess stood with ropes of pearls round her neck and so many silk shawls and robes that she would have died of congestion if she had been alive—a small goddess with an ivory face and red lips, unlike the armless god covered in an inch of soot in Tiew Chan Street temple. An-mei knelt, beating her head on the floor. She did not hear the crackers exploding or the cries of the children when the tables over-balanced and all the fruits were shot out over the floor and down the steps, where they were squashed into a soft juicy pulp by the women ascending; while other fruits raced over the rock, past the incense burner and the stall where prayers and joss-sticks can be bought, and fell in a precipitous avenue into the sea. The green apples, heaviest of all fruits for their weight, were followed by bouncing rambutans and slow, lumbering papayas. They splashed into the blue transparent sea and lay on the sand, where the waves rocked them until small boys waded out and dug their teeth in the soft flesh of the fruit which

already tasted of salt and the spittle of fishes. Meanwhile An-mei prayed in a loud voice for sons, and hung a stone on a tree to remind the goddess of her wish.

The four children played on the sand-spit between the two islands. Grains of sand, hot as newly roasted beans, were poured over their toes. They rolled up their trousers, stuffed their socks in their shoes and waded out in the blue sea, and one by one the grains of sand were washed away, leaving their feet white and pure. The sea glittered, and they heard none of the voices on shore, only the strange, golden stillness seemed to ring like the echo of a leaden bell under the waves. Green apples and hairy rambutans, with centres of hard red crystalline juice, floated or rolled on the sand, but they paid no attention to the fruit. They were physically conscious of one another; but they were mesmerised by the sea, and saw only each other's feet softly treading the sand, the wavelets breaking on their ankles and Tien Hsueh's golden ankle-bracelet jumping lazily up and down with the motion of the sea. Tien Hsueh and Meifu walked arm in arm, and Ti walked beside Crystal Jade as if dreaming. Presently they came to a ridge of coral and stared down at the furry waving heads of anemones, red and green, the long antennae curling down as they approached, while the minnows swum in and out of the dark leaves of seaweed and reeds. Across a maze of sand and transparent water they could see the two processions, one in bright red Chinese gowns mounting the steps leading to the temple on the atoll and the other in gold and blue sarongs mounting the steps to the *kramat* on the island. On both the atoll and the island there were gnarled trees and huge bonfires. Trumpets were blaring and cymbals were clashing. From the bonfires on the atoll rose gusts of smoke and the charred leaves of spirit-money. The heat was burning. Everything had a look of burning—the water, the trees, the people endlessly moving up and down the steps—it was as though the earth had been left behind and they were travelling on the sun, at the very centre of a blazing star.

"You know Singapore is called Star Island because the Chinese set their compass to the south," Crystal Jade said at last, looking up. "All Chinese compasses are set for Singapore.

We believe that whatever happens, Singapore is like the Pole Star—it never changes."

"What nonsense!" said Tien Hsueh. "I believe you made it up."

Crystal Jade smiled mysteriously. Meifu gathered minnows in her hands and watched them slide over the coral as they fell. Hanging to the coral, near Tien Hsueh's feet, was a very large anemone, dark blue with a crimson centre. It glittered like an uncut jewel; but they noticed that the fishes avoided it.

"It's poisonous," Crystal Jade said. "If you touch it, you die at once."

Meifu instantly drew back her hand.

"And be careful where you tread," Crystal Jade continued. "If you see a brown fungus like a sponge, don't go near it. They're all deadly. The sea is deadly—only the land is safe."

Ti had never heard anybody talking like this. He shook his head and climbed on the coral. In the distance the white buildings on the foreshore shimmered in the heat-haze. The air was so close that he could hardly breathe. In the still, sun-locked water thousands of dragonflies were suddenly reflected. They had long red bodies and transparent blue wings, which were oddly metallic. They gave off a faint humming noise as they skimmed the water, and sometimes they dashed against the coral, where they lay still, their wings broken, the long red bodies crumpled up like burnt-out joss-sticks.

"They must have come to worship at the shrine," Tien Hsueh said gravely.

"How can you believe it, elder sister?" Crystal Jade said, after a moment. "You know it is all superstition. The Revolution has ended all that. All these shrines should be swept away. Father is right. People spend money on the priests which they could spend better on the poor."

This time Meifu and Ti gasped with amazement simultaneously. For three weeks their mother had been preparing for the one day in the year when pilgrimages are made to Tortoise Island. How could she be wrong? When Crystal Jade spoke, he spoke with an assurance which made them certain

he was wrong, but they could advance no arguments against him. He smiled mysteriously as charred banknotes credited to the Bank of Heaven began to fall all round them. He seized one of the bank-notes, gazed at it earnestly for a moment and then let it fall slowly into the water. Fishes came to nibble at it. It sank lower and lower until it rested on the sand near the dark blue anemone with a blood-red centre. Suddenly the anemone moved, a tiny invisible tongue was thrust forward and the bank-note disappeared in the heart of the curious animal on the sea-bottom which resembled a flower in full bloom.

"It has disappeared," Meifu said, startled by the sudden jabbing motion of the anemone.

Crystal Jade laughed stridently and allowed three or four more bank-notes to fall near the anemone, but none were eaten. It was as though the anemone was no longer hungry.

There was no wind, and they were soon tired of the anemone. The long grasses were motionless. The sun was already turning their faces lobster-red. They climbed over the white coral reef and made for the shore, where there was a clearing between two rocks undisturbed by the worshippers overhead. Crystal Jade dug into the hot sand until he discovered a pair of sand-beetles—they were small and hard, like brown nuts, with long horns and bright black pin-point eyes.

"Shall we race them?" Crystal Jade suggested. "It won't do them any harm. Get some twigs, Ti."

Ti ran off in the direction of the brushwood. There were decayed palms and four or five varieties of climbing plants. The wood was rotten, but the leaves were hard and brittle. Crystal Jade drew four long parallel lines in the sand with his fingers, then he selected a piece of broken palm-leaf rimmed with salt, and began pushing the sand-beetle along the groove he had made.

They all knelt down on the sand, which burnt through their heavy clothes and blistered their knees and elbows. Their faces were intent and silent. The sand-beetles were trying to burrow down into the sand. They would disappear and come up again, facing a different direction; and once, when Meifu's sand-beetle disappeared altogether, another sand-beetle

appeared and continued the race. The sun hung straight above them and they threw no shadow at all.

All morning they played on the sand. Very soon they exhausted the games with sand-beetles and began collecting crabs; but the crabs, too, dug into the sand, and one by one they disappeared. The voices on the island were becoming strained. Smoke still rose from the bonfire of celestial bank-notes, but the shouts of the iced-drink vendors could no longer be heard. Bells were ringing and the cries of the Chinese women praying for children were heard like a faint lament, an interminable whisper like the soft lapping of the waves. Meifu curled up with her head on Tien Hsueh's shoulder. She was half asleep. Through her closed eyelids, she saw red and green lights which became startlingly violent when she pressed her knuckles in her eyes. Ti collected sand-beetles and emptied them into a bottle. There was sand in the bottle, and they immediately began digging into sand. When they reappeared, they looked startled and their horns quivered with excitement—he could almost hear them whispering their disgust because the sand did not go on for ever.

Suddenly they noticed their parents looking down on them.

"Is it time to go, Mother?" Meifu asked with a heart-rending sense of obedience.

"Look at the children!" her father said. "They are as red as lobsters!"

Meifu smiled with a pleased expression.

"Couldn't we stay a little longer, please?" In her cupped hands she held her collection of sea-shells.

"Ti has caught some sand-beetles," she continued, fixing her eyes ravenously on the small sheet of sand where they rested.

"We'll have to go home now," her mother said. "It's not good for young girls to sit in the sunlight. Who do you think will marry you when you are as red as a peasant-woman?"

The two women on the cliff smiled, and Meifu for the first time saw the handsome Chinese lady who accompanied her mother. Crystal Jade was kneeling on one knee and looking up at his parents with an expression of intense concentration. Ti noticed that his mother looked better already. She seemed even radiant, not with health, but with happiness. Her face

was pale and drawn, and there was a great scar on her forehead where the skull had been split open; the scar was concealed by her toque, but the edges showed, and there was a sort of crust below the skin which shone yellow in the sunlight. And then he noticed a tall, gaunt man talking to grandfather in serious tones, a man with immense brooding eyes like Crystal Jade, and he was pleased because it occurred to him that his grandfather had found someone to talk to, for he knew his father took little interest in grandfather's painting and handwriting. And suddenly, as he spilled golden threads of gritty sand between his fingers, everything became clear to him and he saw the whole of his life lying before him like the straight unencumbered wake of a sailing-ship in the harbour. He would grow up and marry Tien Hsueh, and Crystal Jade would marry Meifu. This is what they were discussing while the children were playing with sand-beetles. They were even arranging the details of the marriage, what guests would be invited, how many candles should be lit and what offerings there would be before the ancestral altar.

"We really must go now," Crystal Jade's mother smiled on the children and opened her umbrella.

The steam-boat was waiting for them. Puffs of cloud came from the thin painted funnel, and, more puffs of cloud came from the engine-room. The sea shone with lazy ripples of gold. Suddenly Tien Hsueh whispered excitedly:

"Have you brought the sand-beetles? We could play on the deck."

Ti ran along the floating logs to the waiting steam-boat. There were hardly any passengers on board. He smiled and clutched the bottle to his breast. When they arrived on the boat, he thought, they would be able to continue playing exactly as they played below the cliffs.

Almost before they sat down, a bell rang, there was the sound of pistons throbbing in the engine-room, and a greasy vapour which reminded him of chicken stew came from the engine-room hatch. Ti could not take his eyes away from Crystal Jade's mother. She was small and white, like a doll, with petal-lips and an expression which reminded him of the Goddess of Mercy. Although she was small, she appeared to

dominate everyone on the boat and she was treated with extraordinary deference by the other women.

"They must be very rich," Meifu whispered. "Tien Hsueh told me her father owns all the soap factories in Singapore."

There was quietness on the small steam-boat. Everyone was exhausted. The children were sunburnt. Umbrellas, like balloons, shaded the pathways between the benches, and Ti strolled up and down between the umbrellas trying to find a place where the sun would fall on him and he would be able to see Singapore drawing nearer. The sun threw small shadows. His mother beckoned to him, held his hand for a moment and told him that she was very pleased with the journey and hoped to visit the island a year later.

"Let's go over there," Crystal Jade said, pointing to the foredeck, where there was a coil of rope, a signalling lamp and a small stretch of bare board. "We'll race the sand-beetles."

It was quiet on the forepoop. The wind blew in their ears and made their hair stand up on end. They heard none of the conversations in the boat, only the roar of the wind in their ears and the crumble of the waves against the stout stempost. They shouted to one another and watched the white, almost transparent walls of Singapore advancing over the waves, dipping down when the boat descended in the troughs and rising again triumphantly when they rode the swell. The floorboards hummed like the boards surrounding the mechanical saw. When Ti opened his mouth, the salt air nearly choked him and he laughed to think something so light and soluble as air could drive a huge fist down his throat.

"Have you got the sand-beetles?" Crystal Jade asked, his dark eyes fixed on the apparently empty bottle.

Ti emptied the bottle on the boards. Sand, pieces of sea-shell, sea-weed, a dead dragonfly poured out of the bottle-mouth; and underneath the sand the beetles were stirring, and one by one their horns appeared through the small golden mountains of sand protected by the coaming from the force of the wind.

They lay on their stomachs and followed the movements of the beetles, while the waves rose and buffeted the smooth stemposts. The beetles crawled along the caulked seams of oakum

and pitch. Ti was drowsy with the heat. He threw small pieces of seaweed on their backs and, prodded by the twigs, they raced madly until they thought they were out of reach; then they rested, and their small brown metallic bodies turned slowly towards one another.

"Don't let them come together," Crystal Jade exclaimed. "They'll never race after that. Come on—prod them—they won't move unless you prod them."

He leaned forward and pushed them gently with a thin strip of green bamboo. He was half sitting, half standing on the bulwarks, his black hair waving in the breeze and his dark eyes flickering with some question or other that he was about to ask. But at that moment the boat dipped heavily—he struggled and waved his arms and fell overboard into the white wave which spread from the bow. He seemed to roll over and over in the milky wave, and Ti saw him smiling as he fell, on his lips the half-formed words: "You have to prod them—otherwise they go to sleep." Ti leaned over, stretching as far as he dared, but there was no sign of his companion. Suddenly a sickening jolt vibrated through the boat, through the bulkheads, through the deck-planks and through the caulked seams of the raised foredeck. Ti heard it, and buried his face in his hands. And slowly the engine stopped and the steam-boat swung round, the tarpaulins catching the changing sunlight. As the boat turned, a greater bow-wave than ever ran to join the great blue swell of the sea. Someone screamed—Ti could not recognise the voice. It seemed to come from inside the ship, from the engine-room or from deep underneath the ship, from the sea.

"He's over there!" someone shouted, pointing to a pale face swimming in a nest of blood.

Meifu screamed briefly and covered her mouth with the back of her hand. Crystal Jade's handsome mother slowly folded up her umbrella and gazed in the direction where everyone was pointing. She could not recognise the white face on the water. The boat swung round steadily and slowly, dipping brutally in the troughs of the waves, since she no longer possessed sufficient speed to sheer through them. They were moving by their own inertia. And suddenly the body, surrounded by long red veins like the arms of an octopus, fell from the crest of the

swell into a trough near the side of the boat. Even then Crystal Jade's mother did not recognise him. Tien Hsueh was white and shaking. She leaned forward with her arms outstretched as though about to dive into the sea after her brother.

When Crystal Jade was brought on the boat, his face was seen to be untouched but his body was almost broken in two by the impact of the propeller. In his mouth there was a piece of green bamboo. Tien Hsueh threw herself on his body, which exuded a continual stream of water. She lay close to it breathing into the mouth and nostrils with all her strength, in a wild outburst of grief and compassion; yet she said nothing, and behaved like a capable nurse, quietly breathing into the closed mouth and the nostrils full of water.

The boat's captain, a small red Chinese with a pigtail dangling over his shoulder like a forgotten rope, came running up, but without the air of importance he assumed during the journey. "I can't understand it," he said, "I saw him playing quite happily a moment ago."

Ti remained where he was. He had not moved from the fore-deck. He remembered the nest of blood and the white face and perfectly round head. He knew now that no day was alike, even in Singapore, where every day was the same as every other day. He could not think any more. He could not cry. He was nearly seven, but he felt that he had lived for ever—through all the generations of men and the wanderings of nations. A sort of paralysis came over him. Without looking up, he knew his grandfather was regarding him reproachfully and at the same time with understanding. His heart was full, and he felt that everything that filled his days would be as bitter as this long day spent on the islands. He had been prepared to worship Crystal Jade as he worshipped grandfather, but now there was nothing left to remind him of their friendship except the sand-beetles still sunning themselves on the poop. The sun shone on his lobster-red face and the skin of his hands were already peeling and showing the tender crimson skin underneath. Singapore drew closer—the white bridges, the white walls of the immense city reflected on the blue ocean—and he could only sit back in wonder.

The day was at an end, although the sun was high and threw no shadow.

When would another day begin?

V

NG AH was a tall slender girl from Hunan, who arrived at the Hall of the Cloud at Rest during An-mei's convalescence and remained as second-chambermaid. Her face was like ivory, her hair was oiled and hung in a long pigtail which nearly reached her feet. She wore black silk trousers and her white coat creaked with starch. There were blue ear-rings in her ears and a blue handkerchief she never used was knotted on a bone button at her waist. Every morning she came into Ti's bedroom with a cup of goat's milk and shook the pillow to wake him up.

"Are you awake?" she said, placing the milk on the side of the wooden bed.

Ti rubbed his eyes and remembered that it was his eighth birthday. There would be presents wrapped in red paper, a visit to the temple, red candle offerings to the ancestors, and he remembered that his father had promised to take him into the factory if he was strong enough. He gulped down the milk and looked at Ng Ah through the long fringe of his eyelashes. Ng Ah laughed with her small ivory teeth, and suddenly Ti began shaking with laughter from his rumpled black hair to his toes which wriggled along the smooth teak boards of the bed.

"Pve brought a present for you," Ng Ah said, smiling.

He noticed that she was hiding something under her coat—a small durian. He knew it was durian because the whole room had begun to taste of fish-cake and fresh milk, lobster and sessamine sauce. He closed his eyes and she sat on the edge of the bed, splitting open the shell of the durian and scooping up the green pulp with a spoon. The durian was delicious. It was cool and fresh, and the soft cream trickled in his mouth like heady wine. "You mustn't spoil me," he murmured. In reply she drew him to her breast and poured out still more of the cream into his open mouth.

"How old are you?" he asked after a long pause.

"Nearly twelve," she answered gravely.

The lovely profile lay against the light; behind her the sun shone through the red petals of the flame of the forest tree. She began to hum an old song.

, "Don't sing, amah."

"Why not?"

"Keep still, amah."

She remained still, her head on the wooden pillow.

"When I am older, I shall marry you," he said.

The smoke from the sandalwood spills in the kitchen was pouring upstairs. Rice was being boiled, and he heard his mother giving orders to the third chambermaid. In the next room Meifu was curling her hair; the smell of burnt hair mingled with the smell of sandalwood spills. The sunlight shone greasily on the floor-boards. He was conscious of a deep, painful love for Ng Ah. She tormented him, and he could not bear to have her out of his sight. When his mother called downstairs, he clung to her firmly: "Don't go, amah. Please don't go."

Ng Ah tore herself away, blushing with shame for being late when her mistress called. When she had gone, he lay back and listened to the house-sparrows. He carefully licked the crumbs of durian from his cheeks, then rose lazily, skinned off his night-shirt and splashed in the water from the earthenware jug. Soon he was dressed. He slipped his feet into wooden clogs and raced downstairs to the kitchen, where the maid-servants were serving rice-bowls and cups of chrysanthemum tea.

"You're late," his mother said. "You shouldn't tell stories to Ng Ah. She's too old to listen to your stories."

He sat at the end of the table, hidden from his mother by a great jar of orchids. The powdered rice was simmering, so hot that he began tracing aimless circles in the bowl. His father was reading the morning newspaper; the blurred head-lines were printed in characters totally unlike grandfather's—they had sharp edges and every character was printed in exactly the same way, unlike grandfather's, for he painted the same character in a hundred different styles.

His father read aloud. No one paid attention to him except An-mei, who only pretended to listen out of politeness. In China the menfolk take their meals away from the children. Grandfather remained in his own room and his meals were sent up to him by Ng Ah, but father always shared their meals in Singapore. The children were allowed to remain at table as long as they pleased, or until it was time for Ti to go to school.

During the three years since they arrived in Singapore, they watched their father grow steadily fatter. He generally wore no shirt, only a loose unbuttoned coat. The skin of his chest was dark brown where the sun fell on it, but elsewhere it was the colour of egg-yolk. Usually he was quiet in the morning, preoccupied with the newspaper or the business of the day, but sometimes he discussed the arrangements in the house with their mother, in a gentle tone of remonstrance and acceptance of her orderly futility.

"I've decided to buy the wasteland on Rochore Canal," he said as he reached out for the tooth-picks. "There are two acres. I can buy them for five hundred dollars. I'll build a new woodshed."

"Will the old woodshed be pulled down?"

"No, I'll store timber there. I could just as well have another store of finished timber."

An-mei nodded and made the ghost of a smile. No one had yet remembered that it was Ti's birthday. Ti, having suddenly remembered it, shivered with excitement.

"How much is five hundred dollars?" he asked, his eyes wide-open in astonishment.

His father took a small silver coin from his pocket.

"Think of five thousand coins like this, Ti—all in a row. They would reach Elgin Bridge, or right over to the Harbour Board. The workmen don't approve of the new sheds," he confided to An-mei.

"Why not?" Ti asked.

"You wouldn't understand. It depends on how much wood we can get down the East Coast. There's so much competition, so there's a risk."

"A big one?"

"It's not easy to tell. The price of timber might fall."

At last the rice-bowls and cups of chrysanthemum tea were cleared away. Ti wandered out in the court-yard, where the puffy pouter-pigeons were pecking at the rice scattered on the tiles. Two days previously the gate-keeper said he saw a flying squirrel in the flame of the forest tree. The boy stood under the tree and searched for it until his eyes ached. The door of the wood-cutters' shed was wide open. Many of the splinters thrown up by the mechanical saw were aflame with little yellow tongues of light. They wheeled in the air, burned furiously for a few moments, and then disappeared in the shadows.

Ti ran after his father.

"Did you see the squirrel, Father?"

"I expect it crossed the river."

"You mean—it jumped over the logs?"

"No, flew over. I've seen them fly forty feet."

Ti's face fell. He looked up at his father. His father's face was broad and when he smiled, his eyes were concealed under layers of fat.

"You really mean it?"

"Yes. The river's not very broad here. Why shouldn't they?"

The gate-keeper had said flying squirrels had faces like bats, bushy tails and long leathery bodies the size of a young calf. He followed his father into the woodshed and forgot the flying squirrels in admiration of the workmen who were already busy planing huge logs of chengal and meranti. His father exchanged jokes with the workmen, spat in the sawdust, squatted on his heels and yet never lost his sense of dignity. Ti had long been in love with the woodshed, where baulks of timber were cut into quarter sections for fire-logs. A revolving steel saw cut the wood into foot-long snags, the wood was then chopped into quarters by axe. Stacked against the wall were timbers of all kinds, chengal and camphor, rengas which lost its colour until the surface resembled a dark bruise, and there were white woods stained with lime as smooth as silk. He recognised the blood-red sap of myristica and the black pithy sap of the hardwoods. Here there were doors already built, bundles of staves, roof-beams, trusses and partitions, chair-legs and

stools, and over all these hung clouds of wood-spit and wood-shavings. Ti recognised most of the workmen, because he had often been in the shed. There was Chu Ehr, who had been a farmer in Ai-lin until he broke a foot on a scythe; now he hobbled along the benches and gave orders in a voice that limped like his legs. There was Wong Seng, who had been dying of tuberculosis for forty years and still looked strong, and there was Black Tiger, an old gnarled stick of a man with bloodshot eyes and long black finger-nails. "Run, young master," the others whispered. "He's mad—he'll tear you with his claws." Then Black Tiger would stand still, his mouth would open and close stupidly and he would shout: "Don't let them take me!" Ti ran screaming to his father. Chu Ehr burst out laughing. Soon they were all laughing. Only Black Tiger stood still, his mouth gaped and he clawed the air with his hungry nails.

Still no one spoke of taking him into the carpenter's shed. It was time for school. Ti felt an uncertainty in the air, as though his father might even now remember his promise. He knew this might happen, because it was always happening. No promises were ever fulfilled, and yet there was always a perfect excuse for not fulfilling them. Outside, steam rose from Singapore river. In the tool-shed, the saw-blades were being sharpened. The glue-pot simmered and shed a green flame on the rusty black iron cauldron. His father picked up pieces of green casuarina wood and held them over the cauldron; bubbles of reddish resin boiled up all over the freshly-cut surface.

The broad sweep of oars in the river caught the sunlight. The sky dazzled with warmth and the reflection of countless oars and orange sails. It was growing late. Ti decided to go to school. He ran through the court-yard, nearly knocking over the old gate-keeper, and hurried inside for his satchel. Ng Ah met him on the stairs with grandfather's breakfast tray, he smiled when she passed, but she paid no attention to him.

He stuffed the leather satchel with books and writing materials. The brushes were wet. He dried them and carefully fitted the bamboo tube on the hairs. His mouth was working as he thought of the promises his father had made. As he

passed the woodshed, he saw his father talking with Chu Ehr among smoking braziers and chips of white marble. He did not understand why the shed was floored with white marble chips, or why his father was always discussing how to keep the place clean. It looked better with a greasy floor, and the petrol engine thumping the floor-boards. There was a small red chimney stack with no flues. A Tamil boy, wearing only a red cotton loin-cloth, was in charge of the simmering glue-pot. In the darkness of the shed Ti saw clearly only the red loin-cloth and the whites of the Tamil boy's eyes.

He returned to the house to bow to his mother. He also made a fleeting bow in the direction of the family tablets. Meifu followed him from her window. She saw the great gates open, the heavy dray-carts rumbling down Alexandra Road, then the doors were closed again and Ti hurried to school.

Half-way along Alexandra Road he fell in step with Goh Seng. It was too hot to play. They walked silently, arm in arm. Goh Seng was never allowed in the house when Meifu was there, because they were engaged to be married, but every day Ti was cross-questioned by his sister on her future husband's behaviour. And although Ti disliked Goh Seng's black pock-marked face, he came to like his school-mate because he believed all the stories he told Meifu about him. They threaded through baulks of timber on the wasteland near the river.

"Have you heard about Dr. Sun?" Goh Seng said presently. "My uncle's first concubine says he has been living in Singapore disguised as a pedlar."

Ti was chewing a banana-stalk. The Malay talley-men on the quay were chalking up the rice-bales on the weighing machines. A grey falcon swooped low over the river and flew up again with a red fish beating in its beak.

"Yes, I've heard," Ti said. "My grandfather says it is not true he is disguised as a pedlar."

"How do you know?"

"Because Dr. Sun was staying in our house."

"When?"

"Last week."

Goh Seng whistled. The dark pock-marked face glowed

with pride at the thought that his friend knew Dr. Sun.
"Have you met him?"

"No, we're not allowed to meet him—only, we know he is there when he comes because grandfather shades the windows."

The school-bell was ringing. Outside the doors of the school, red scrolls fluttered and Ti pointed proudly to one of the scrolls painted by his grandfather. The schoolmaster was waiting for them in his ink-stained gown, a little buttoned cap and a long white moustache which gave him the imposing look of a mandarin. The moustache was trained to fall over his chin, but when the wind blew or the gown was folded swiftly, the two strands flew apart and Ti saw a face like a perfectly smooth baby.

At twelve o'clock school was over. Once more the river was full of yellow sampans streaming under the bridges. When the sampan reached the bridge, the men stood up and pressed with their whole weight on the tiers and pushed with their feet; then the sampan slid through in a burst of foam. At every mooring post along the quay there were flower-boxes; and at every window there were more flower-boxes. The sun beat up from the silver river and the red flowers with a blinding intensity which lasted until late in the afternoon.

Over lunch Ti was silent. He thought of his eighth birthday and wondered how soon he would be allowed to see his grandfather—not before evening, probably. Other boys worked on farms or in sewing-shops; they carried water in earthenware jugs, or picked offal from the ground, or herded pigs; but his father refused to allow him to work. Ti stared glumly at his bowl of powdered rice. "Is it because they think I have consumption?" he asked himself, and he thought of Goh Seng working at week-ends in the fishing fleet off Pulau Brani.

"Ti, come here!" his father called from the court-yard. His father wore only a pair of calico trousers; not even sandals. His sunburnt face puckered into a slow smile when he saw his son dashing over the court-yard. He held the boy by the shoulders and looked at the long thin arms and the pale delicate face with the trembling eyelashes.

"Are you happy, Ti?"

"Yes, Father," Ti answered, and his heart burned because he

thought the next words would be about his eighth birthday. "Can I work in the woodshed, Father?"

"Who in the world spoke of working in the woodshed?"

"You did, Father. You said, on my eighth birthday——"

"Did I? It's a long time ago. How old are you now?"

He knew his father was playing. He was like Goh Seng taking chickens to school in his satchel and suddenly beating on the satchel to make them squirm. His father squeezed his arms.

"You're so thin, Ti—you're nothing but a paint-brush." He roared with laughter. "What do you want to do in the woodshed? You should follow grandfather and become a scholar."

"I want to work," the boy said, with tears starting in his eyes.

"So you really want to work?"

"Yes, Father."

"All right. Then come along this afternoon with me."

Ti could never tell how he spent the intervening hour. The workmen were busy long before his father appeared. Once more he followed his father through lines of trestle tables covered in sawdust, once more Black Tiger leaped at him and he saw the white eyes of the Tamil boy in the red loin-cloth. Chu Ehr was waiting for them, bowing and pressing his fleshy hands together. The glue-pot was simmering, and Wong Seng was stirring the brazier.

"My son will work here," his father said.

"Just for to-day, your honour?"

"No, every day—every afternoon. Look at his arms. I want them to grow fat like sausages."

Black Tiger giggled. He lifted his broom, then let it fall. The servant girls were laughing in the court-yard as they swept the sawdust, but Ti was miserable. He was afraid of his father's loud laughter and he was nearly sick with the smell of glue. But when his father left, he knew he would have to work and made himself as inconspicuous as possible. He was told to carry wooden beams on his shoulders, to fetch rice-bowls for the men, to hold one end of a Chinese saw while Chu Ehr twisted the leather thongs which held the curved handles together and most important of all he

learnt to tread softly instead of shuffling through the sawdust.

"Don't let your mind wander," Chu Ehr shouted above the roar of the mechanical saw. "Think yourself in the wood—follow the lines of the grain—work yourself into the fibres—"

Ti removed his coat and worked in shorts. Sweat clung to his skin and sawdust clung to the sweat. When Chu Ehr was angry, the red veins of his temples stood out. He was being constantly angry with Wong Seng, who skimped his work and gave impossible orders to the Tamil boy.

As the afternoon wore into evening, Ti came to possess a carpenter's love for his tools. He loved the red bark of chengal and the greyish yellow bark of camphor. Already he could calculate how much wood was necessary for a door-frame or a stem-post, how much for knees and webs and tool handles. He learned to work round knots and dig under scars and shakes: these were the richness in wood, but useless for the carpenter unless he could set his tee-edge well within the chalk-line. When Chu Ehr saw his work, he said: "Keep your saw level, son. Don't bend wood or saw." Ti felt consoled for the aching agony of his back and the soreness in his throat. He knew now why wood-shavings should never be allowed to float in the air, and why there were marble chips on the floor. His throat was dry and he was continually drinking water from an earthenware jar.

In the court-yard the servants were sitting on the stone steps and talking excitedly. Swallows hung in pairs on the roof-beams. Sometimes as he walked through the dark shadows at the back of the shed, he was surprised to see the metallic gleam of their beaks above the smoke of the glue-pot. Then there was a scurry of wings, feathers brushed his face and he smiled nervously to prevent himself crying out in astonishment.

Late in the afternoon the first timber-boats of the month weighed anchor outside the wood-yard. They were sturdy flat-bottomed lighters with lateen sails stowed under the bulwarks. A small wooden gate was opened in the court-yard wall, and below the gate lay baulk after baulk of timber floating in the river, green with mildew or red with oxide paint. The men on the lighters spoke a harsh fisherman's Cantonese, a guttural tongue which somehow suggested heavy tackles, greasy inner

bottoms and the smell of ox-oil lanterns. Ti whispered to himself in a passionate love for this new unbroken wood, from which only the branches had been stripped.

"They're bringing some heavy wood," Chu Ehr laughed. "Don't let it fall overboard."

"Why not?"

"It's heavy—heavy as lead."

The boy looked at the logs on the lighters shackled to the bulwark with heavy hemp. There were small boys on the lighter; but their conical yellow hats concealed their faces and he saw only their bare legs hanging underneath. Suddenly, when no one was expecting him, his father appeared dressed in an embroidered lavender blue gown. Ti guessed he was on his way to see Dr. Sun. His father walked over the floating timber and jumped gracefully on the lighter. He picked at the wood with an iron stick.

"This wood must be allowed to season," he told Chu Ehr. "I have heard that the English prefer kiln-dried wood to seasoned wood. Where can we get these kilns? The timber must be seasoned in the sheds, and not left in the river."

Chu Ehr was continually bowing. He pressed his hands together awkwardly because the Tamil boy was tugging at his sleeve, and he smiled and said: "What is this new thing called 'kiln-dried'?"

"The wood is stored in a great heat," his father explained. "That is all I know. We must ask -the Chamber of Commerce."

The old men on the lighter, with decayed teeth, dirty loose-fitting coats and cotton trousers, were bowing continuously.

"*Ai-ya*, it's heavy on the oars," they kept repeating.

Chu Ehr shook his fist at them threateningly.

"Get back to work, there," he shouted. "Only the lazy workman complains."

The oldest of the old men, his face so dark that he resembled a monkey with piercing black sloe's eyes, bowed until his head almost touched the boat.

"Your unworthy servant asks for his perquisites," he chanted.

"What perquisites?"

"We're paid by piece-rate, your worship. How can we live? So many boat-loads, so many cents."

The steam-winch grated, whistled, came to a pause. Dust rose, and the white gulls skimmed the river in search of dead fish floating on the surface. Ti felt sick with apprehension. He thought the boatmen would throw his father into the river. His father was still picking the wood with his iron-pointed stick. The boatmen laughed, and the sun streaked their bare chests, and their ribs showed like bamboo cages.

"We're starving, your honour," they laughed, as though it was a tremendous joke. "We're only skeletons. Look, your honour. All bone, and just a thread of flesh."

His father cleared his throat and began to speak. Ti became conscious of his father's ridiculous position on the lighter, in a blue lavender gown and blue skull-cap, his face shining with soap and the iron stick hanging uselessly in his left hand.

"Every day the costs are rising," his father said in a mincing voice. "The return on our money is less than twenty per cent. The firm of Cheong is not accustomed to being beaten in commerce, neither is it accustomed to reward its workmen with mean profits. Our chop is on all the best timber in Singapore. Let us strive until it is on all the timber and until we have reached a return of forty per cent. Then you shall have an increased bonus and the business will show good profits."

This speech was accompanied by the dumb-show of Chu Ehr, who blew out his cheeks and made confused movements with his hands.

"We're not paid enough," the old boatman said when the speech came to an end.

"What do you mean? In China you receive two cents an hour."

"In China the perquisites are customary, your honour. Look at my children. They are starving."

They stood up, with their immense conical hats in their hands. They had fleshy legs, full bellies and chests like boxes, their dark eyes peered from under thick eyebrows. They resembled their great-grandfather and they all looked well and prosperous.

"Poor children," Ti's father consoled the weeping old man. "They are like lean asses. No mother's milk has touched their lips. They suffer from the complaints of their

elders." He turned away, motioning to Ti to accompany him.

"But what about our perquisites?" the old boatman, who was so overcome by the mental picture of his starving children that tears dripped from his watery eyes, shouted and ran after father.

"Of course you shall have them," the lavender-blue gown spoke to the boatman, and Ti suddenly realised that his father was talking to them *with his back turned*. He was crestfallen. Such a thing had never happened before. Then he remembered the ricksha boy standing in the court-yard, and he saw his father disappearing through the small gate in the court-yard wall, scampering through the dust of the wood-yard, between trestle-tables and smoking braziers, and he realised that his father had an appointment with Dr. Sun, which could on no account be missed.

Then he was gone, the small door was carefully closed and the ricksha could be heard bumping along Alexandra Road. And suddenly everything had changed. The place was familiar, but curiously altered. The river flowed and bore sampans on its smooth breast, but it was no longer only the river: it was the frame for things that were happening, the motionless hub of a wheel around which all things revolved, and would revolve as long as he breathed. Heavy logs were being hauled ashore to be stored in the sheds; the winch grated and screamed, while grey cormorants swept low over the river. "This is chengal wood," the old boatman said, but Ti did not hear. He stood in the sunlight, bare-foot, in short flapping canvas trousers, wondering why his father spoke first so harshly and then so amiably to the workmen; and for the first time he realised that there were men who worked for money and lived in small huts and knew nothing of the comfort and slow ritual of life in the Hall of the Cloud at Rest.

That evening, exhausted by his work in the yard, he walked into his grandfather's study. The night was very dark and far-off noises could be heard easily. The windows were closed and shrouded with some dark material. A small oil-lamp shone on the table. His grandfather lay on a wicker-work chair huddled near the window, with a shawl over his knees. He was talking

in a soft tone. Ti overheard the words: "The old Empire was doomed by the inefficiency of the mandarinates. Can your excellency be sure that the new Republic will not be similarly doomed?" The oil-lamp caught the embroidery on Ti's gown. Suddenly, his grandfather stood up and sprinkled salt on the oil, so that it burned brighter. No one spoke. Ti heard the maidservants in the court-yard and felt the dark night pressing on his sunburnt skin.

"It's my grandson," grandfather whispered, when the oil-lamp was spluttering with a blue flame. "Come here, Ti."

On a second wicker-work chair sat another old man, younger than grandfather, with a blanket thrown over his shoulder. The room was unbearably hot. The old man wore dark glasses and it was impossible to tell the expression on his face. Ti knew it was Dr. Sun, because it could be no one else. He bowed low again, first to his grandfather and then to the stranger.

"This is our grandson," grandfather said, "and this is his eighth birthday."

The stranger smiled weakly and did an extraordinary thing—he held out his hand and placed it on Ti's head, where it remained for a long time. Perhaps Dr. Sun was blind? Perhaps he was thinking deeply and his thoughts could travel all over his body and even into Ti's head. Ti's upper lip quivered uncontrollably. On the table in front of him lay a map of China and a sketch of a painting of the flame of the forest tree.

Now, as the oil-lamp flickered higher, the boy saw through the dark glasses of the man whom he recognised as Dr. Sun and whom he persisted in regarding as a stranger. He saw the dark eyes full of life and tenderness; he saw the yellow jaundiced skin, the pale lips, the low forehead and beetling eyebrows; he watched how the man seemed to be in great pain, and the lips curled continually to prevent an escaping sigh. And suddenly Ti knew that they had been talking about him, discussing his consumption and the weakness that prevented him from studying for long periods. He blushed and felt the weight of Dr. Sun's hand like a crushing blow.

"I have heard you were in Singapore, honourable visitor," he stammered.

There was a long silence, during which the hand was slowly raised from Ti's head.

"We have been talking about you," Dr. Sun said in a voice like honey. "You begged your father to let you work. One day you will work with the new China."

"This is so, honourable guest."

"And I shall see that you have intelligent work to do."

There was silence again. The lamp flickered and died down to a small blue flame. From afar-off came the noise of a ship's hooter. Time and distance crept away, while Ti stood beside the wicker-work chair. By standing a little to one side he could see the bloodshot eyes and flat peasant nose of Dr. Sun, and looking down he saw the doctor's hands crusted with deep blue veins. His eyes were large, like the eyes of Malays, and the whites were a sickly yellow with jaundice.

"Your grandfather has presented the movement with twenty thousand dollars," Dr. Sun said at last. "With this twenty thousand dollars he intended to return to the ancestral estates, but fate has decreed otherwise and the money will be spent in creating the new China of our dreams. The new China owes much to the sacrifices of your family, which prefers to work from the four seas rather than return to the four-square earth of your fathers."

Ti could not understand this speech, but he bowed nevertheless and his hair still felt the impress of the doctor's hands.

Dr. Sun rose and walked to the window.

"In which direction is China?" he asked, pulling aside the heavy curtains.

"Over there," Ti answered, pointing to the wall where the painting of Tien Kuan caught the blue light of the oil-lamp.

For some reason he began to think of Ai-lin. His heart ached and he thought of the drum-tower and the turrets and the cobbled streets covered with mule-dung. The walls of Ai-lin were yellow and pitted with age, but they were dear and familiar to him. At dusk only a few candles glimmered in the dark streets of Ai-lin. At night Singapore resembled a brilliant display of fireworks.

"So China is over there." Dr. Sun pursed his lips and addressed grandfather:

"Shall we ever see the new China?"

"Heaven will not prevent us," grandfather said.

Ti was still dreaming of Ai-lin. He followed the herd-boys from the pasture and climbed with them to the waterfalls. The warm bright autumn in the Liu valley passed away, and he lay huddled with the herd-boys in the straw against the cold. Except for the steady roar of the spirit presses in Alexandra Road, the house was very quiet. Down below lay Singapore like a copper cauldron seething and sweltering in the summer heat. Through the flame of the forest tree they saw curving roofs without chimneys, and between the roofs small dimly-lit streets, and there were other streets full of gleaming lanterns and still others lit by blue gas-light. Beyond the fishing nets, beyond the harbour pool and the junks moored near the islands, a faint line of red lights shone on the horizon.

"Are they islands?" Dr. Sun asked, pointing to the horizon.

"They are the Dutch islands, your excellency."

"So nothing here belongs to the Chinese?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps this is as it should be, since in China, where everything belongs to the Chinese, there are always wars."

"This is a country at peace," grandfather said after a pause.

"There have been no wars in Singapore since the Ming Dynasty—a terrible tragic war when the island was laid waste and the earth turned the colour of blood. To this day they say no rice will grow on the island."

"China is poor," Dr. Sun said. "The south country is rich. China is full of warring tribes. The south country is policed by the British, who punish more or less faithfully those who disobey the law. Here even the tigers are tame," he smiled and the boy saw his gleaming teeth.

The wind rose. Ti was sure he saw the flying squirrel—he would swear he saw it in the morning. The shaded lanterns on the sampans glowed fitfully. The wood-piles in the court-yard shone like gold-dust under golden lanterns. Meanwhile Dr. Sun still stood by the open window, peering into the dark immensity of Singapore, where gas-lights shone and sampans floated on the dark water and the solitary familiar lives of the Chinese ebbed and flowed in unsanitary ill-lit streets.

"What is it like in China, honourable visitor?" Ti asked.

"China is a hundred years behind the times," he answered. "China has awakened, but the dragon's eyes are filled with sleep. When China calls you, you must go to her, because the need is so urgent. The old order by which a man dedicates his life to the worship of his parents is not finished, but it is superseded by the new devotion to China. China awakens. One must suffer for her. It is written in 'The Great Learning'—'One must search into the nature of things, extend knowledge, make purpose sincere, regulate the mind, cultivate virtue, rule the family, bring peace to the world.' You ask me what it is like in China, but I tell you to love China, for China is like a dragon who has lost her wits and there is no hope for her unless men will sacrifice their lives for her sake."

The door opened and Ng Ah entered with cups of chrysanthemum tea. Dr. Sun sipped the tea and smiled at the tall, slender girl who stood with head bowed, waiting to be dismissed.

"Where do you come from?" he asked gently.

She told him that she came from southern Hunan, from a village near Ai-lin; her father was dead; her mother worked in the fields in Singapore carrying trucks of earth from and to the reclaimed land near the Harbour Board. Dr. Sun stirred the chrysanthemum tea.

"This is good," he said. "One must work, and every thought must be turned to China. A servant works as much as a mandarin or a scholar or even a revolutionary."

Afterwards Ti could never explain the sweet shudder which ran down his spine. The maidservant was crying. Why should she cry when an old man, sick with jaundice, with dark glasses and a low forehead, leans forward and speaks in the precise tones of a scholar. The white chrysanthemum petals in the little cups curled in the steam. "Work for China." The words danced madly in his brain like the interlaced letters of a scroll in a high breeze.

Grandfather began to bow to the stranger. Every day his grey gown grew shabbier and more threadbare. Every day his face became more careworn. He still smoked opium, but now the doses were smaller and colour was beginning to flow back

to his cheeks at the same time that deep lines appeared on his forehead. When he saw the two old men bowing, Ti's eyes gleamed as they gleamed in the afternoon when, allowed to push a wooden frame into the mechanical saw, he watched the gold shavings fly off the steel rim.

"We shall work together for China," grandfather said, but to the boy China was a country which existed beyond the sea, it was not real like the herd-boys in Ai-lin or the woodshed.

Then Dr. Sun was gone. A hooded ricksha appeared in the court-yard. Hot steam still continued to pour from the cups of chrysanthemum tea, but the chair where the Chinese leader had been sitting was empty. As he heard the ricksha boy swinging the ricksha round, Ti felt safe at last, safe from the vigilance of the old man with jaundiced eyes, safe from the weight of enormous hands on his head, safe from the sweet shudder which streamed backwards and forwards along his spine. Ng Ah's voice was husky and her hands shivered as she carried the tray downstairs. At last grandfather returned, bringing with him the scents of the garden.

"What were you painting, Grandfather?"

"The flame of the forest tree. I have promised to give it to Dr. Sun before he returns."

"It's not finished?"

"In the T'ang Dynasty, painters travelled to the Tien Shan with their paint-brushes, but they did not set brush to paper until they returned to their native villages."

Underneath the painting lay the letter grandfather had been writing up to the moment when Dr. Sun entered his room. Now he opened the door of a small iron safe on the table and brought out the wet clayey lump of red paint which served to colour his two seals—the square seal of jade on which his own name was carved and an oblong seal of ivory with the name of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. At the foot of the letter he printed the characters of his own scholar's name—Han Dynasty Pilgrim.

"Han Dynasty Pilgrim was the name given me by my master when I was a student in Pekin," he explained. "It signifies that he thought me worthy to enter the great past of China's history, but I would prefer now to be worthy of her great future."

"How long ago was the Han Dynasty?"

"Nearly three thousand years ago."

"Has China changed since then?"

"Didn't you hear Dr. Sun? He said China never changes."

When Ti went to bed, his ears hummed with all the conversations he heard during the day. The figure of Dr. Sun merged with the laughing boatmen, and he saw his grandfather wandering through China with his paint-brush, but never painting. He remembered that everyone had forgotten his birthday. There were no presents, no red candles, no ceremonies, no rice-cakes flavoured with cinnamon and no cooked sweets and lotus wine. Instead he had been blessed by a man with dark glasses who stroked his hair and spoke to him as though he was much older. As he removed his clothes, chips of wood and powdered sawdust came from the hem-band of his trousers. He laughed, collected them in a small heap and promised himself that he would light them on the family altar.

Half an hour later he was awakened by a disturbance in the court-yard. He jumped to the window and saw a ricksha boy bowing in the rain. His father was invisible. There were shouts and hysterical laughter. He heard Meifu whimpering, and imagined that she had fallen in Singapore river, and the ricksha boy had pulled her out of the water. His father was saying: "How dare you touch my daughter with your filthy hands," and his mother broke in with nervous questions and called shrilly to the gate-keeper, who stood on guard over the ricksha. Ti returned to bed. A sampan was gliding down-stream. In his dreams he followed the sampan to the open sea.

VI

WHEN Meifu awoke early on her brother's eighth birthday, the morning was green and gold and she saw the sunlight streaming through a small mangoe tree. Ng Ah pulled the curtain aside and said: "Hurry up. It's time for your rice-bowl." Meifu opened her eyes slowly. Bees were humming and buzzing against the window-pane; She was still drugged with sleep and thought she was floating on a raft which the waves were

pushing towards land, but the raft never reached the islands. "Hurry up, hurry up!" Ng Ah repeated, staring at the lovely face.

Meifu yawned and sat up in bed. She smiled dreamily and dangled her bare feet over the side of the bed.

"Help me up, please," she smiled, and waited for Ng Ah to lean forward before she threw her whole sleepy weight on the maid-servants' shoulder.

Ng Ah carried her unprotestingly to the large saucer-shaped bath and undressed her mistress swiftly. The two girls were the same age, but extraordinarily unlike each other. Ng Ah was tall, her hair was brushed back smoothly from her forehead and her starched coat could be heard creaking from the other side of the house. Meifu was plump, and her ringleted hair fell in grape-clusters over her shoulders. At home she wore silk coats and silk trousers embroidered with blue peonies and chrysanthemums, but Ng Ah always-wore plain clothes, black or white, and possessed no embroidery, only blue ear-rings.

The bath was lukewarm. Spices and scents were poured in, but it remained lukewarm. She looked forward to the moment when the curling irons would be ready. Her brother was already downstairs. He opened a door, slammed another, climbed the mangoe tree and then walked aimlessly in the direction of the woodshed. Meifu saw him from the window. From time to time he glanced up, saw her and smiled.

"What shall we do this afternoon?" Meifu asked. Suddenly she remembered it was Ti's birthday. "Will there be any celebrations?"

Ng Ah shook her head again.

"The honourable master must be asked for his opinion."

"Our honourable master will probably forget. He always does. He is buying a new wood-shed on the Rochore Canal. Ng Ah, listen to me and don't stare out of the window." Meifu was growing impatient. "Please powder my face and see whether the curling irons are hot enough."

Ng Ah turned round, saw her young mistress jumping into her silk trousers and suddenly remembered the curling irons. She ran downstairs, creaking breathlessly, sliding her hand on the banisters so that it was hot by the time she reached the

kitchen. The curling irons were red-hot. She blew on them, cursed herself for dreaming and promised that as soon as Meifu's hair was curled, she would light a sandalwood spill before the image of Kuan-Yin. An-mei was already eating her breakfast.

"Have you taken the breakfast for the honourable elder," An-mei asked doubtfully.

"Not yet, just this minute, mistress," Ng Ah answered. "The young mistress must have her hair curled."

"The young mistress must wait until the elder has his breakfast."

Ng Ah fetched the tray with the sour milk and the rice-bowls—both Ti and his grandfather had been advised to drink sour milk by the Chinese doctor—and hurried upstairs. She was out of breath when she reached the landing. The family elder was already awake. He was sitting by the window patiently painting the flame of the forest tree. Ng Ah knew he had been painting a single branch for six months. She bowed as she laid the tray on the table, and again as she walked backwards from the room; then she flung herself downstairs, picked up the curling irons, blew on them, so that her thin cheeks filled out, filled a small canister with oil-water, blew again on the irons and ran upstairs. She was quite out of breath when she reached Meifu's room after first going through Ti's bedroom. She sighed and waited patiently for Meifu to be angry, and she was surprised when Meifu said nothing at all. Meifu was glad when her hair was curled. Nearly every morning she looked forward to the curling with pleasure. This morning nothing pleased her.

"What shall we do this afternoon?" she repeated.

Ng Ah thought of the wood-piles which, although outside the court-yard, were considered a part of the house; and therefore they were allowed to walk through them. Many planks had been thrown against the wall, forming a tent. For half an hour, when the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, was dozing in the late afternoon, and when the sound from the woodshed became unbearably monotonous and tiresome, they concealed themselves under the planks and spoke of southern Hunan or exchanged intimacies about the future.

"Hurry, please!" Meifu said, picking a flame of the forest flower from the floor and slipping it in her hair.

Ng Ah bound the red ribbon in her young mistress's hair and then, with a powder-puff of feathers, rubbed white powder on her face to prevent her from turning brown in the heat.

Meifu did not know why she asked Ng Ah to hurry. For her time had no meaning, for there was nothing to do in the house. The days passed like coloured spindles of silk. Time did not move backwards or forwards: it was the frame of her daily existence, which would become unbearably monotonous without Ng Ah. Now it was daybreak, and she lay in bed waiting for the first footfalls on the stairs. Now it was morning, and she lay sprawled on the floor over her copy-book, and in the evening she was still sprawled there, writing characters on ruled paper, reading aloud or simply gazing at the ceiling and waiting for Ng Ah to comfort her. Life flowed like Singapore river, sometimes full of painted sampans, sometimes empty. She was conscious that life was sweet and Ng Ah extremely long suffering. Meifu gazed at herself in the mirror. Before her face was powdered, it had been brown like a pheasant's egg; now it shone like white paste. The sun was coming over the court-yard wall now, glaring on the lime-wash of the houses and stable-yards, and making tinsel patterns on the coloured groins of the roof. Meifu looked along the pathway leading to the woodshed. Chu Ehr was rubbing his hands while Black Tiger swept the leaves which descended during the night's rain.

"There's two sessamine cakes in the kitchen for you," her mother said, when she came downstairs. Meifu walked into the kitchen where the cook was sweeping rice-grains in the pannier kept for the chickens; she returned with two sessamine cakes and gave one to Ng Ah. Then they leaned over the table, with their legs doubled up under them, chewing sessamine cake, sipping rice, keeping up an uninterrupted flow of conversation and paying no attention to An-mei who complained about the heat. Her forehead was covered with the red spores of prickly heat; there were chilblains on her fingers; there were more spores of prickly heat on her shoulders. Her hair was brushed back from the forehead and wound in a tight bun; in

the tight bun four golden pins with knobs as big as China oranges stood firm like sentinels.

"Your honourable grandfather is busy to-day," her mother said. "He will be unable to give you your lesson."

Meifu pulled a face. There was nothing to do. She sighed and gazed longingly at Ng Ah, as if she expected a miracle from the starched maid-servant whose mouth was so full of rice that it fell in a gentle cascade from her mouth. Meifu thought of all the things she could do during the long morning in front of her. They could help the cook to collect wood from the court-yard; they could attempt to read the newspaper, or one of the Chinese story books with lurid covers; they could sit in the sun under the mangoe tree and perhaps even climb the tree and search for mangoes.

"I want you to spend the morning cutting up silks," An-mei interrupted her thoughts.

"But they are already cut, honourable Mother."

"No, the new ones. The basket is full of them."

"Which basket, Mother?"

"Oh, Meifu, how many times have I told you not to spill the rice down your cheeks? When you laugh, you spill rice."

Meifu blushed and looked hotly at her mother. There was nothing she could say. Ng Ah was held up as a model to be admired and copied.

"Yes, Mother, yes Mother," Meifu said, bowing, and to cover her shame she ran out of the kitchen to the small cubby-hole upstairs where the silks were kept. Ng Ah followed her. In one hand she held the scissors and in the other the patterns they were to follow.

The long morning passed among coloured silks and skeins of thread. The immense curtain was made of thousands of small strips of silk, all the same size and shape, all sewn together with the appropriate thread. With pins in her mouth and pieces of silk looped in a scarf over her wrist, Meifu sewed the red strips into the shape of the character for 'bad' and the green strips into the shape of the character for 'good fortune.' Ng Ah lay curled up on the floor beside her, breathing heavily with the effort of concentration or singing in a gentle voice the tea-planters' song. From time to time An-mei came in, watched

them in silence and silently departed. Once she came in with small bowls of flower tea. Meifu gulped the tea, because she was thirsty—the air was full of silk flock and threads which somehow entered their tight-closed mouths.

"It's nearly finished," Meifu said, laying the silks on her knees and rubbing her eyes with her fists. "What does my honourable Mother want it for?"

"It's a present for the monastery."

"Oh, that! Then she might at least make them more complicated. We could make curtains with the life of Buddha."

"But how?" Ng Ah leaned forward eagerly.

"It's so easy," Meifu exclaimed, wrapped up in her own visions. "The birth of Buddha and then his death, and in between all his adventures with the bright spirits."

Ng Ah cupped her chin in her hands. Downstairs she heard Ti returned from school.

"Ti could help," she suggested.

"How could Ti possibly help?"

"We would make him stand up and then we would draw him on the silks."

"Goodness, how terrible," Meifu curled her lips and shuddered when she heard Ti bang his satchel on the kitchen table.

The kitchen bell rang. She heard her grandfather hobbling on the landing. He smiled at her through the open door, bowing slightly, then he disappeared in the direction of the lobby where he kept his manuscripts in camphor-wood boxes to prevent them from being eaten by the white ants. Clouds of smoke came upstairs from the kitchen.

"Must we stop now?" Meifu sighed; then she folded the silks carefully and followed Ng Ah downstairs.

As usual dinner was passed in loud, deafening chatter. An-mei- screamed at the kitchenmaids, grandfather cross-examined Ti on his school-work and from time to time his father interrupted with a question, directed to no one in particular, on the weather.

"It's hotter than it has been for many years."

"Yes, surely, honourable Father. The schoolmaster says the *Stories of the Szechuan Frontier* are not fit to read. Goh Seng

had a chicken in his satchel and he banged it against his knee. I'm sure it's dead."

"This time last year, I remember, we were in the middle of a heatwave."

"The price of wood is constantly rising. The forest compradores have no understanding of the difficulties."

"What difficulties?"

"The heat is so terrible that if two people sleep together they become joined together as if they were glued."

This remark of Meifu's was greeted with silence, an ominous silence which was only interrupted by Ng Ah, who tactfully dropped a rice-bowl.

"How could you possibly know?" An-mei asked.

"Sometimes in the afternoon, honourable Mother, I sleep with Ng Ah."

There was a sigh of relief and the conversation continued round the table. An-mei made ineffectual protests. She could not understand the love between the two girls and constantly referred to Ng Ah as 'the slave girl.' Meanwhile Ng Ah smiled, her white coat creaked, the handkerchief fluttered from the bone buttons at her waist and she smiled tenderly at Ti, whose lips and long eyelashes were dusted with rice grains.

"Shall I have lessons in the afternoon?" Meifu asked, when the bowls of fruit and sessamine seeds were removed from the table.

"Honourable grandfather says he will spare you half an hour."

Meifu smiled happily. In her dreams grandfather always appeared as a courtier in Peking. He was so wise that the Emperor himself, the Supreme Person, came to beg advice; and grandfather answered roughly, with stories from the Classics demonstrating how the people may be enabled to live in peace. In return grandfather was granted special privileges; his own peacocks and Manchurian ponies were allowed to live within the imperial precinct.

"Write carefully, Meifu—more carefully, still more carefully. Your brush-strokes are not entirely formed yet. Your arms are fatter than Ti's, but Ti shows more strength in his lines."

So the hour passed, while Meifu copied the characters from

the rubbings her grandfather once made in northern Hupeh. The characters were strong and vibrant; the writer was a recluse who lived in a cave among dragons.

No one visited, no one even heard of him, but one day a scholar in the Ming Dynasty visited the cave.

"Whereupon the dragon devoured all the enemies of the superior man."

Meifu copied the letters with close attention to detail. The position and balance of each stroke absorbed her until she became the letter, as the basket-weaver in the gate-keeper's lodge became the basket. As the words followed one another down the ruled paper, she became in turn the dragon, the enemy and the superior man. The curl on the head of the dragon, the three brief rough strokes in the character for 'superior' were painted with extraordinary affection. She held the brush in her upright hand, her tongue glided over her teeth and at the conclusion of each character protruded from her mouth. It was hot in her grandfather's study. The windows were closed, dust rose from the paper-bound books, the painting of T'ien Kuan, the god of happiness, looked dull and lustreless in the heavy afternoon light. When she completed the sentence, Meifu clasped her hands together with satisfaction and waited for the verdict.

"Too many trinkets, too many ribbons," grandfather objected. "You are not sewing silk. Characters should be firm. Look at the dragon! How weak he is! And the superior man—his head is falling from his body."

Meifu nearly fainted because her heart was choking her.

"I was doing my best, Grandfather."

"Yes, but look! Hold the brush firmly. Imagine you are a great hero! I don't want to humiliate you, but dragons are not butterflies. Now begin again."

Meifu obeyed. She held the brush firmly, not too tightly, in her right hand. Her grandfather had already dipped the brush in the ink-stone. Because she was exhausted with the afternoon heat, she wrote swiftly, in a panic of despair which increased whenever she paused for breath.

"Much better! Much better! I can see the scales on the dragon—and what a superior man! Write it again, once

more. Oh poor Meifu! You've put the dragon into trousers."

Like all lessons, this one came to an end in an atmosphere of apprehension and inexpressible happiness. Meifu knew that Ti could write better: his strokes were sturdier, his wrists more supple: but grandfather was content. He placed her writing in the cupboard where he kept all the precious things of his long life. He bowed and she bowed in return. Then she was free to return to the silk curtains in her bedroom.

"When shall we make the Buddha curtain?" Meifu asked, as they sat cross-legged, facing each other in the centre of the large bedroom.

Ng Ah said nothing for a long while. She was preoccupied with her needle which sailed among the waves of silk like a thin silver boat.

"I saw a book in the market—we could copy the figures from the book," Ng Ah exclaimed suddenly, dropping the needle.

"Have we enough silks?"

"Of course," Ng Ah pointed to the wicker-baskets. "We could make a hundred curtains."

They decided to buy the book the same evening. Meanwhile grandfather came in and examined the immense curtains with the inscribed characters. He did not approve of the shape of the characters, but he approved of the colours. He held the silk to the sunlight, folded it tenderly, laid it against his cheeks and smiled down at the two children with an expression of extraordinary tenderness.

"Always remember to treat the Chinese characters as though they were sacred," he said. "Or treat them carefully, because they *are* sacred."

He left them to their sewing after warning them against copying the perverse kind of characters which were employed on modern porcelain. Meifu gazed at her round childish characters with satisfaction. It was growing dark when they laid the silks aside, and Meifu suddenly remembered her promise to buy the book at the market.

"It's too late to go," Ng Ah exclaimed, carefully folding the silks.

"Why is it too late? We can take the sedans. Who will know we have gone?"

They peered through the window. An old man with dark blue glasses was talking earnestly to the driver of a carriage led by two magnificent bays. He was surrounded by three or four tall men who were absent-mindedly kicking the dust with their shoes. There was no sign of activity in the woodshed. The house was quiet, so quiet that when Meifu held her breath she thought nothing would ever happen to make her breathe again. Then, suddenly, there was a swish of silk and the patter of sandalled feet on the stairs: grandfather pattered down the stairs and taking the strange gentleman by the arm led him into the deep shadows under the eaves. Meifu and Ng Ah slipped downstairs holding each other's hands. The sedan carrier was waiting for them. He told them to wait a few moments for the three boys who each held one arm of the sedan chair. Then the two children huddled in the warm sedan and waited for the beginning of the journey.

In the dark lanes, rustling with shadowy gowns and murmured conversations, there passed a stream of people whose shadows fell on the silk curtain of the chair. There were Tamil boys in embroidered mandarin coats, Malays in sarongs, small boys in blue cotton shorts, flute-players, merchants, lovers and fortune-tellers. In the side-streets, where only a lantern here and there shone on the dim brick cornices and carved lattices, Singapore became China, but in the broad market-roads, under kerosene flares, and the yellow jets of naphtha, China disappeared and in her place they discovered strange silhouettes like the wings of birds. The round melon-shaped hats of the Chinese were exchanged for turbans and *kopiabs*; the Chinese loose drawers disappeared and everyone wore sarongs, even the police and the Sikh money-changers. Sedans passed hurriedly, but they were always carried on the shoulders of small sweating Chinese. Through the silk curtains Meifu heard the throbbing of voices in the crowded streets, and high above the voices of the merchants came the insistent cries of the sedan-carriers: "Lend a lantern! Please lend a lantern!" Ng Ah fanned herself vigorously, Meifu sighed and squeezed her own hands in pleasure. In a small locket hanging at her waist she carried the precious money for the books.

In the sedan chair the pattern of the curtains was reflected

on Ng Ah's pale expressionless face. She sat upright, her body as straight as the caulked lines on a boat. The curtains were the colour of grape-must and the shadows swirled in the purple darkness. At times, when the sedan carriers hobbled in the direction of the meat-vendors, whose bright kerosene flames illuminated the whole street, it was almost as bright as in daylight. Small boys ran beside them, hoping that the curtains would part and reveal a generous merchant half-tipsy from a wine-party; and when the curtains parted, they had already bared their bellies and were pointing mischievously at the brown patch which was supposed to show that no food had been eaten for three days. Oil-lamps flickered in earthenware bowls, the harsh light of the acetylene flares poured through the thin silk and illuminated them fitfully; then once more they lay concealed in layers of darkness.

"This is how it must be between you and I," Ng Ah sighed, thinking of their rare quarrels. "Sometimes we are in the dark and sometimes there is so much light that we can barely see."

Meifu was overcome by the amah's confessions. She grew pale and anxious. Suddenly, losing all reserve, she leaned forward and began stroking Ng Ah's face.

"You mustn't worry, amah. Nothing will ever separate us," she said.

Meifu peered through the curtains. She saw old men smoking opium pipes in the doorways of houses, young men with smooth black moustaches, their shirts rolled up to their armpits because of the heat, children huddled on the pavement with blue faces, for everything was bathed in a blue light under the naphtha flares. Some of the children were naked, others wore cotton trousers. The girls' hair was not oiled or ringleted, but hung in dull-coloured plaits. They carried small children on their backs or on their hips, they laughed and played finger-games. An old man with a bare chest, whose ribs protruded like umbrella frames, unwrapped the white powder in a betel leaf and chewed white lime; his teeth were red stumps and his skin was parched and glistening like an opium smoker's skin. Meifu was choking with excitement. She caught Ng Ah's arm and pointed to the children playing in the gutters. Clouds of flies drifted over the narrow street, which was ankle-deep in

filth. In the Hall of the Cloud at Rest no dust was allowed to settle, the kitchens were spotless and a speck of dust on the wall inevitably occasioned a family conference. Fortune-tellers squatted over smoking lamps, their brown-leaved books decaying with age and constant usage. In the restaurants, behind bead curtains, young girls were singing in high-pitched, throaty voices. Meifu listened attentively but could not understand the words of their songs.

"Look at the street, amah," Meifu plucked Ng Ah's sleeve. "It is not at all the same at midday. Are you sure it is the same street?" She shouted to the sedan carriers, but they were too occupied in forcing a way through the crowd to pay attention to her. "How sad! The children here never wash their faces," Meifu sighed.

"Perhaps they have no time," Ng Ah suggested.

Meifu pondered for a while. She was beginning to be afraid of the street. She remembered that she had not asked her mother's permission to be allowed to take the sedan to the market. She still peered through the curtains at the old men squatting over braziers, the /ivfo-sellers, the young girls with heavily painted eyes in the restaurants, the boys with bamboo poles over their shoulders and earthenware jugs hanging from each end of the pole. The sedan carriers were plunging through the crowd like a knife. They had lost patience and cared nothing for the old men who muttered in their beards when the chair-handles knocked them over. Meifu noticed that people, even young girls and children, were shaking their fists at her. Suddenly the sedan-chair came to a pause. The voices of the sedan boys became rough and strident. They shouted abuse, and abuse flowed over them from the side-streets and the five-foot way. The chair remained on their shoulders. The sedan boys made no effort to conceal their hatred for the people in the street. "We are carrying the honourable daughter of the high-born merchant Cheong!" Meifu heard these words clearly and blushed with shame. In a side-street shaped like a long box, with bare discoloured walls from which the advertisements had been torn, leaving only scraps of pale ochre and brilliant crimson, a story-teller was reading over a soap-box the story of the Three Kingdoms. Meifu heard the words above

the roar of the crowd now surging round them with upraised threatening fists. "Then the hero left the Kingdom of Wei on a white horse, with a silver bridle, caparisoned in silk, his hair——" She could not hear what happened to his hair. The sedan was slowly sinking. "Amah, help me!" she shouted, but the curtains of the sedan were being torn apart and the bright porcelain bowl of an acetylene flare made her eyes dazzle. They were no longer sinking. One of the chair-boys had blood on his chest. In the confused uproar, the sedan was overturned and Meifu was suddenly thrown among the dust and refuse pits on the ground. All round her small squat houses, with balconies and leering windows full of washing and tireless children, who laughed and showed their teeth when they saw Meifu sprawling in the road.

"Amah, where are you?" she shouted, her upper lip trembling uncontrollably.

Ng Ah had disappeared. Someone was picking her up. She saw a ricksha boy standing over her. He wore a frayed straw hat and blue trousers rolled to the knee. Dogs barked. A sedan chair passed; an old Chinese lady with gold teeth and gold pins in her hair stared out of the curtains, but no one attempted to molest her.

"Where am I?" Meifu shouted again.

Drawn up against the kerb were hundreds of rickshas. The rickshas penetrated the houses, and she saw them propped against tables and beds, filled with cooking vessels and shrouded in tea-cloths. The ricksha boy laughed and pressed his face against hers. All the while the children in the upstairs balconies were shrieking at him unintelligibly. Meifu struggled in his arms and beat him with her small fists until his yellow skin grew dark.

"Let me down!" she exclaimed. "Do you come from Hunan province? "Are you a beggar?"

"What if I am?"

"My father will give you money if you take me home."

"How much money?"

"Ten thousand cash."

He laughed and rubbed his forehead against her, until she was overcome with the overpowering smell of sweat.

"No, little missy, let's go and buy turtle-eggs."

Meifu was pale with anger. His rough hands crumpled her silk coat. There was no sign of Ng Ah. The children were still shrieking. Their noses were running, they were covered with sores and every one of them was powdered with a greasy yellow ointment against the prickly heat. She could not recognise where she was. The sedan still lay on the ground, the hangings torn, one handle on the ground, the others in mid-air. She beat on his bare chest with her clenched hands, but he made no sound. Still holding her so close to his chest that she could hardly breathe he led her through interminable strange streets where the kerosene lamps spluttered in her face, where men walked in the middle of the road, paying no attention to the sedans and where everyone was dirty and freckled with the blue light which hovers in the heart of the naphtha flares. There were Indians with white circles on their foreheads, Indian women in saris with red circles on their foreheads and gold rings in the wings of their nostrils. In this strange world of sharp contours and aching darknesses there were dragons and glistening cymbals. From upstairs windows, from alleyways, from horse-carts and horse-trams, everyone was staring at the green dragons which blew black smoke from their heavily-painted jaws. The dragon was winding along the centre of the street. Cymbals crashed, small boys ran out and touched the scaly green body and then leapt back again. Children squealed with fear and excitement. "How terrible," Meifu exclaimed. A horse-cart got in the way. "Quick, quick!" she beat on the ricksha boy's head. "Show me the dragon, please." He lifted her above his shoulders. She saw that the dragon was larger than the dragons she had seen at the Dragon Boat Festival in Ai-lin. This immense curving green dragon with smoking eyes and gaping funereal jaws, entranced her. The people were shouting and deafening her. She removed the ricksha boy's straw hat and bent down until her mouth was on a level with his ear.

"Why don't you wear a coat?" she asked.

"It's too hot," he laughed.

The dragon was moving away.

"Please, please go on!" she insisted. "How big is he? Ten *lit* Twenty *lit*"

There was no end to the dragon. It poured down the street like a never-ending green river. She knew men were walking underneath the dragon, but she saw only the river and the tall houses on either side. In one hand she held the ricksha boy's straw hat, with the other she was mechanically twining her fingers in his long hair. The dragon was so long that she could see neither the end nor the beginning, for the great red eyes and smoke-erupting mouth had long since disappeared. The dragon wandered from side to side of the road; and there were places where the shrivelled scales danced to their own tune independently of the rest of the dragon. There were places, too, where the body had almost fallen apart, but although Meifu saw these places, she paid no attention to them—they were whirlpools in the river or wounds on the dragon's back—they were not important. Her face was shining, her lips were set firm. She was ashamed to be seen, but she was consoled by the appearance of young Chinese girls dressed only in red trousers who wandered in and out under the thousand legs of the dragon.

"Where do you live?" the ricksha boy asked her.

Meifu could not remember where she lived. She seemed to have been born five minutes ago, at the precise moment when the dragon appeared. She could remember nothing before the moment when the red glaring eyes of the dragon turned the street corner.

"Look, look—the dragon," she stammered.

Suddenly she realised that the dragon was stopping still. It was as though a mountain were toppling over, or a river were turned to stone. The clash of cymbals died down. The flutes, the guitars, the violins with three strings—all were silent. Even the old man with the forked beard selling Swatow oranges stopped selling them. The dragon was disappearing in a house at the other end of the street. Gradually the dragon was shrivelling up like a concertina. They raced along the street until they came to the gates of a merchant's house. Inside candles were flickering, incense was being burnt, small boys were playing on the floor and the dragon was becoming bamboo and strips of green paper. The ricksha boy lifted her from his shoulders and dropped her on the pavement. He took

a knife from his pocket and whittled a green stick. Meanwhile she looked up at his sunburnt shoulders which rippled with the movements of his immense veined hands. His bare brown legs were scratched all over. There were berry stains round his mouth and his breath smelt of rice-congee.

"Do you drive a ricksha?" she asked suddenly.

In answer he showed her his sunburnt legs, all muscle and lean flesh, and he pressed her hands above his knees. The flesh was quite soft until he flexed the muscle. Without removing his eyes from the green stick, he said: "It's hard work. The towkays curse so! They give you enough money to sleep on a table. If you're not quick the horses ride over you." He showed her the blue weal on his side. "This is where the shaft caught me once," he said.

Meifu had never thought of ricksha boys before. Her father possessed a ricksha with long silver shafts and red leather cushions. The apron was embroidered with sun-birds and pheasants, and there were peacocks on the curved roof.

"Did it hurt you?" she asked, touching the blue weal.

"No," he answered, and held up the wooden dragon. Although it was only six inches long, it exactly resembled the dragon she had seen in the street.

"You don't know where you live?" he asked again.

"No," she shook her head dumbly.

"Well, we'll buy you some turtle-eggs. We'll go along to the market."

"Yes, yes, we'll go along to the market," she repeated mechanically.

At the gates of the market a girl with a silk coat smiled at the ricksha boy, who paid no attention to her. Her face was lathered with white paint, and she wore heavy gold ear-rings. She followed them, continually calling to the ricksha boy, but they hid behind a vendor of lanterns, and she went off, muttering to herself.

"Do you know her?" Meifu asked innocently. There was no reply, and Meifu said: "I think she must have been ill. You couldn't see the colour of her face—she wore so much paint."

"Yes, she is ill," the ricksha boy laughed boisterously, and pointed to the aquarium where hundreds of Siamese fighting fish were engaged in battle.

A Chinese millionaire had bought all the fighting fish in the market and poured them into the aquarium. They were fighting each other, digging their teeth in the thin red fins of their opponents, churning up the water until it resembled a cherry-blossom spray. Meifu was excited at first, and then disgusted. So many torn fins rilled the aquarium that it was impossible to see the fighting. The fins fell to the bottom slowly like petals, a stream of golden-red petals falling among the green rocks and lichen at the bottom. Some of the fish were already dead. They floated on the surface and the colour was drained from them, but below them the remaining fishes made sudden jabs and swerves, racing in circles, descending into the seaweed and striking up again until they leapt out of the water and fell back, dazed, the red delicately-veined fins torn away. The ricksha boy hurried her into the market, for her despair and excitement were too much for her and she was on the verge of hysterical tears.

There was hardly room to move in the market. There were vendors of opium-pipes, spectacles, oil-cloths, buttons, sandalwood incense sticks, spiced lemons, mangosteens, golden pomeloes, fish in noodles, crab's feet, yellow jellies of passion-fruit and red jellies of quinces. The buttons were of jade and green malachite and every known metal. The opium pipes had silver stems, and the sandalwood incense sticks were marked with little circles to show the hours. There were flower lanterns and perfumed baskets and teapots of mother-of-pearl; and there were tobacconists selling opium tubes from secret drawers in small ivory-wood tables, and book-shops where Chinese boys were eagerly poring over books with extraordinary covers showing men and women embracing, and there were pepper-nut casters and bales of silk and—Meifu turned to the hot walnut vendors and breathed the familiar rich smell of burning walnuts. Her attention was distracted by a bald old woman, who came from behind the coloured glasses filled with sugar-cane juices—a bald old woman with a small bun at the back of her head though there was no hair

on the crown. She opened her mouth and showed the yellow stumps of her teeth.

"Turtle-eggs! Turtle-eggs!" she screamed mirthlessly. "Buy one—they're fresh. They came from you-know-where in Java this morning."

"Where's that?" the ricksha boy asked, leering at her. "You say they are fresh, grandmother, but a turtle lives to a great age. How much?"

"Three cents."

"Three cents! Would you rob a poor ricksha boy, grandmother? Two cents. I can't spare more. Look at my empty purse. Look at my poor motherless daughter." He laughed and pushed Meifu gently forward. "Look at her——"

The old woman came hobbling towards Meifu with an enormous white turtle-egg in her outstretched hand.

"It won't harm you, little treasure. This is a present from old mother Hsuen. Take it. The yoke is good for the complexion and the skin is good for the waters."

Meifu saw that her breath was sweet, although her face was haggard. She took the egg and thanked the old woman with a bow. The egg was warm, and moss from the basket still clung to the leathery shell. She bit a hole in the shell, sucked the yoke and continued to look at the old woman.

"How do the eggs keep warm?" she asked.

"She's got a charcoal burner underneath the moss," the ricksha boy explained.

"No, I haven't," the old woman cackled as she hobbled away. "I sit on them myself. Why, I've produced turtles before now just by sitting on the eggs."

Meifu loved this world of naphtha flares, kerosene lamps and charcoal braziers. She loved the trays of sausages, the pyramids of sweetmeats, the glistening enamel spoons and the sound of the sugar-cane crusher and the cold air which hung over the blocks of ice. Above all she loved the *tic-toe* of the wooden shoes in the market. *Tic-tic* went the red shoes. *Toc-toc* went the black shoes. You could tell the height of a person, and whether it was a man or a woman, simply by listening to the shoes—she thought she could tell their characters and even whether they were Buffering from disease.

Under the bright blue naphtha flares, the black silk worn by the peasant women assumed a deep purple colour, and the children who crowded round her, touching her embroidered coat or simply watching her, all had blue faces and black lips.

"It's extraordinary," she exclaimed, and then she noticed the book-shop and the long strips of silk covered with small paintings of the life of Buddha. Even from a distance she saw that they were exactly what she wanted. On one side of the book-stall there were books on Buddha: on the other side there were those extraordinary books with coloured covers showing men and women embracing. She asked the price of the scrolls on brown silk. They were eight cents each. She bought two books of woodcuts for four cents, and some striped paper used for learning to write and called 'nine palace fashion paper' for two cents a packet. This left her with no money at all. She turned to the ricksha boy and said: "It's late. My father will be angry with me—I must go home now."

And suddenly she saw the stage, where, behind rows of benches, a princess was kneeling at the feet of an Emperor. Although she had never seen a Chinese play before, she knew instinctively that the Emperor was evil, because there was white paint smeared on his face. The princess knelt and implored his mercy in a loud screaming voice, while the Emperor listened to her carefully, stroking his beard with an effect of venerable calmness. Then he raised his right foot, which meant that he was mounting in his chariot, and the princess threw herself on the ground—and suddenly Meifu saw her draw a sword from her long sleeves. She stood quite still, critically surveying the stage which began to fill with courtiers in nodding peacock plumes and dancing-girls in trailing silk gowns. They danced round the Emperor, while the princess swayed interminably over her sword, singing her swan-song of remorse and despair.

"Hurry," the ricksha boy half swept her off the ground as he struggled through the crowd.

"Is she going to kill herself?" Meifu asked, as they found a place, wedged between a girl sucking an orange and the Chinese millionaire who bought all the Siamese fighting-fish in the market.

Meifu watched the princess closely. She had an oval face and small red cheeks and eyelids stained with mascara. She held the sword in her hand and swayed from side to side with her eyes fixed on the blade. The silver-green peacock head-dresses of the courtiers shivered in the brilliant light from the foot-lamps. Behind the musicians, who wore no uniform, there were boys smoking cigarettes, and sometimes they walked across the stage and presented the Emperor with a silk banner or whisked a chair away. The princess was still swooning.

"Do you think she will really kill herself?" Meifu asked.

The ricksha boy said nothing. He was staring as though mesmerised at the small blue flame creeping along the curtain behind the musicians. Someone had carelessly thrown a cigarette on the floor. The flames rose higher, changing from blue to bright yellow. The flames began to crackle. The princess was still swooning, and the sword was still being held upright in her hands when the paper curtains burst into flames.

"So she is not going to kill herself," Meifu said. "She is going to be burnt. What a terrible punishment!"

She leaned forward eagerly, her cheeks in her hands. The musicians were scattering hurriedly, overturning the music-stands and jumping off the stage into the auditorium. She laughed approvingly. "So she is going to die by burning," she said, when the flames roared over the painted back-cloth and great columns of black smoke began pouring from the back of the stage.

The girl sucking the orange had disappeared, taking with her the turtle-egg which lay on her lap. Meifu was in an agony of indecision. She did not know whether to run after the girl or watch the princess dying. The flames were silver leaves from a tree. The fire hissed and roared, and the wind came through the tarpaulin covering to stir up the flames. The princess's head-dress caught fire. She rolled on the stage, screaming and beating her hands on the bare boards. The flames were on a level with the rafters supporting the tarpaulin roof. Panic fell on the audience, the quiet undemonstrative panic of people who have nowhere to go and have not yet realised they are trapped. Meifu was not afraid of death, for she had never

thought of dying. The princess was rolling over and over, screaming and attempting to remove the burning head-dress from her head.

"Did the Emperor really ask her to be burnt?" Meifu asked at last.

The ricksha boy stood up. He had been stunned by the thought of fire in the theatre.

"This way!" he shouted, wide awake at last. "Walk quietly over the benches—don't be frightened. Stand up, and walk quietly over the benches." He bent down and whispered to Meifu: "We'll have to run."

Rain was falling on the tarpaulin covering. It fell in a steady downpour, but the flames inside the theatre still mounted. A hot furnace blast, accompanied by a swarm of pieces of charred paper, came from the direction of the stage. The princess was screaming—a long continuous scream in a single sustained note. The flames rose higher, spluttering, chewing through wood and paper, changing from yellow to red. There was no longer any shouting in front, only a silent desperate struggle. All the shouting came from behind—from the black-bearded uniformed Sikhs who were tearing down the barriers with their axes. The princess's voice grew silent at last. As if entranced, Meifu watched the fire, thinking that this too was a part of the play, even when an immense bell-like yellow flame descended and enveloped her. Her ears sang, and an unbearable blast of dry heat smothered her. She did not feel the ricksha boy gathering her in his arms. He smothered out the flames, raised her above his head and threw her with all his strength at the Sikh policeman twenty feet away.

The rain fell continuously, pattering drip-drip on the tarpaulins. The flames were leaving the stage, and throwing tendrils and creepers of bright yellow over the benches. Men were rushing in all directions, treading over each other and cursing. The flames crept closer, and the ricksha boy felt the blast on his cheeks, but still he did not move. The tarpaulin was bellying and creaking under the weight of the rain. All the colours were sharp—the black tarpaulin and the brilliant yellow flames. Suddenly he stood on a bench and began to climb one of the pillars which supported the tarpaulins. He

climbed as a Malay boy climbs, with hands and knees round the trunk, making short sudden spurts, resting, making spurts again, as agile as a cat. When he reached the top of the pillar, he leaned over and slashed at the dark belly of the immense breathing animal above, and the rain fell through the gap in a seething downpour, yellow where flames could be seen through it and milk-white near the roof. No one paid attention to the ricksha boy, no one looked up and saw the great rent in the tarpaulin or the great shapeless piece hanging down. There was a crackling sound when the rain met the flames. The force of the rain was so great that it overturned the benches underneath. The rain hissed and the flames roared; but the roar grew fainter and the hiss grew louder. Meifu looked up and saw on one side of her a transparent curtain of rain through which yellow lights played, and on the other side the dark mahogany face of the bearded Sikh policeman. And suddenly she realised that she was no longer in the theatre watching the princess rolling comically on the floor—she was outside in the cool street and the rain was falling on her upturned face.

The ricksha boy found her squatting on the five-foot way, dreamily gazing at the golden wheels of rickshas. The wheels appeared to be going backward. The ricksha boy was drenched to the skin and his face was smeared with pieces of charred paper. She laughed at his black face and white nigger's teeth. He looked uncomfortable and began shaking her.

"Where do you live?" he said roughly. She laughed because his face was black, and now he laughed because her embroidered coat was singed and discoloured. "Where do you live, Meifu?" he shouted, shaking her again.

"How do you know my name?" she asked quickly.

He said nothing. An old ricksha, with the paint peeling off, lay against the kerb. He lifted her up, thrust her in the ricksha and pulled down the hood and began to run in the direction of the river, pulling the ricksha behind him.

"Do you know where to go?" she shouted.

"You're Cheong the wood-merchant's daughter—yes, I know where to go," he shouted over his shoulder.

Meifu quivered with cold and excitement. She huddled back

in the warmth of the ricksha, her brow furrowed and her lips trembling with unspoken questions. It was dark in the ricksha, but sometimes her white muffled face peered over the apron and she saw lights through the rain—and round the blue gas-lamps there were immense haloes which dazzled her, and wherever there were lights there were smaller haloes. They came to a bridge and raced down-hill. The motion which had seemed like a boat riding lightly among waves was now like a box falling downstairs. The springs creaked, and the guards over the golden wheels rattled on their bearings. Her bones were bruised with the shaking. Lightning forked over Fort Canning—the lighthouse on the hill was silver inlaid with blue. The rain streamed over the ricksha boy's shoulders, and through the rain she saw the lightning turn the red letters on the shop-signs black and the pavements green, and all the while there were silver haloes which blinded her.

"Where are we?" she shouted.

She could not recognise the landscape through the rain, which came down in coiling ropes which lashed at the lamp-posts and the iron cornices.

"Turn left—turn down the alley-way!" she said. "There's a short cut to Alexandra Road."

She felt humiliated because he knew where the Hall of the Cloud at Rest was—he even knew the short-cuts. But although he knew she was Cheong Meifu and lived in the great house at the source of Singapore river, he was being guided by an instinct, the same instinct which forbids homing pigeons from flying in a straight line, but sends them along the curved roads in the clouds.

"Turn left, turn left!" she said, but he had already turned left and was coming out into Alexandra Road. The lightning flared up again and she saw the weal on the boy's side like a silver crust. Deep down in her unconsciousness she remembered she had seen him before. *He was the ricksha boy who prevented her mother from bearing any more children, because he had nearly killed her on the day when they arrived in Singapore.* This thought did not occur to her at once, but arose in her mind like that slow flowering of bubbles from the bottom of a deep well.

"So this is the ricksha boy," she said aloud, leaning forward to study him more closely.

The rain poured along the hollow of his back and matted his hair, and she smiled innocently as she told herself she would tell no one that she had recognised him. This knowledge seemed to her to have been acquired with great difficulty, but in fact it was acquired instinctively—it was the first time she had ever spoken to a man who had not entered the vermilion gate.

The Malay door-keeper stood in the rain with an oil-lamp in his outstretched hand. The curved sides of the glass shield barely protected the wick, which guttered and sprang to life again—a faint yellow taper-light which illuminated only a small circle of rain.

"Go in—don't pay any attention to him," Meifu said in a sober voice, as the ricksha passed through the ornamented gates and came to a full stop in the -centre of the court-yard.

And now the court-yard was unrecognisable. The tubs of oleander trees and sweet-smelling mangosteens, the miniature mountains of clay and papier-mache, the waterfalls, the duck-ponds—all these were strange. The silver rain streaked over everything, and at first it obscured even her father who was standing in the porch with a greased-paper umbrella over his head. All the lights in the Hall of the Cloud at Rest were shining. Suddenly she jumped and ran to her father's arms.

"Father, father——" she choked, burying her head underneath his armpits.

For the first time it occurred to her that she was late and they were waiting for her in an agony of tenderness and worry.

"Where have you been?" her father exclaimed, in an agonised voice, looking down at her scorched coat—even the pigtail ribbon was scorched and her red trousers were sodden. "Look at you!" her father continued. "An important visitor comes to the house, and this is what happens." He could not continue. He pushed her away, gave the umbrella to a servant-girl and impatiently opened a fan. The ricksha boy was bowing and breathing heavily, like a drunkard. He had never run faster and he felt sick with anxiety for the sake of the girl who was standing alone on the porch, sobbing, her eyes red

with tears, surrounded by maid-servants. Someone, who was evidently her grandfather, came and placed a protecting hand on her shoulder, but she shook him away. The extraordinary thing was that he was dressed in a blue-silk mandarin gown, with embroidered slippers and a small melon-shaped cap with a jade button on his head. "Get out! Get out!" Meifu's father shouted at the trembling ricksha boy. "Haven't I trouble enough. You stole my daughter——"

"I didn't steal her, your worship," the ricksha boy said, still holding up the shafts of the ricksha. He was so perturbed by Meifu's crying that he let the shafts fall.

"Look what he has done to you!" her father pointed with an expression of disbelief at her torn black belt, the scars on her embroidered coat and the stains on her red trousers.

"He bought me turtle-eggs, Father," she sobbed through her tears.

"Get out! Get out before I order you to be whipped," her father continued relentlessly, and she heard the click of his fan.

"I did my best, your worship——" the ricksha boy began, but he was cut short.

"Keep quiet!" her father shouted, and suddenly his voice softened cunningly and he said: "What's your name, boy? Don't answer me—you're a criminal. Don't answer me!"

Grandfather raised a hand in protest. Father brushed it aside.

"I can see by his face he is a criminal," he said. "Look at those big ears. He's a criminal—a cheap jack-snake. Where's Ng Ah? Will someone tell her to stop crying? What's your name—you criminal?"

"My unworthy name is Leong Chye," the boy answered, smiling.

"Please, Father——" Meifu interrupted. "The sedan was knocked over. The boy came and rescued me."

"Yes, I understand—the sedan was knocked over."

"You don't understand, Father. He came and rescued me. Then we went to a theatre and something went wrong, because the princess did not kill herself—she was burnt to death."

"What's this nonsense about being burned to death?"

"There was a fire. She was singing to the Emperor. Then it began to rain and he brought me away."

"You are really mad! Look at the ricksha! How dare you ride in a ricksha with no springs? The paint's peeling away. How did you come to have such a ricksha? I shall never allow my daughter to ride in a ricksha without springs."

"We stole the ricksha, Father," Meifu said quietly.

Instead of exploding, her father was strangely silent. He gazed down at his thirteen-year-old daughter and then at the ricksha boy. He said quietly: "There's a very dark weal on your side, boy. It must have been a bad accident." He understood everything now. He remembered the boy who had fled through the palm-trees. He knew exactly what had happened, because Ng Ah had told him the sedan chair was overthrown; but he had never expected to see his daughter again. He said quietly: "Come and see me to-morrow morning in the woodshed, boy. Your benevolence will be rewarded." He bowed slightly. The boy bowed quickly, seized the shafts and turned into the road with his head bent low against the driving rain.

Meifu looked at her grandfather. There was a faint scent of chrysanthemum on his gown. His beard was freshly combed. He looked closely at her. "You've been eating turtle-egg," he said.

"How did you know?"

"Your mouth is green and you're a green-child."

She laughed as he led her to the kitchen. White steam rose from the newly-boiled rice. Ng Ah was drying her eyes. She still looked pale and terrified. The rice-bowl contained a mountain of soft, white snow. Meifu sat down before it, but as soon as she touched it with her spoon, she fell asleep. She heard neither grandfather carrying her to bed nor her mother giving orders in an extraordinarily gentle voice of forgiveness and understanding. Ng Ah whispered close to her ear, but the words immediately became transformed into the sounds made by the rain on tarpaulins. "How light she is," grandfather said. "Really she is becoming lighter every day." Ng Ah carefully undressed her and wrapped her in a hot towel. And lying in bed, her hair unbraided, her cheek on the cool wooden pillow, Meifu smiled

and called softly to the moon: "Don't shine on the rain——"
Lamps were being lit in the bedroom, but she was already fast asleep.

VII

ON A late September morning grandfather gazed from his window at the sampans in the river. A warm summer light shone on their palm-leaf roofs and on the flashing oars. Children were bathing in the river, and he watched their black heads bobbing in the water. "I stay too long in the house," he told himself. "If I go in a ricksha, I think the boy is trying to break my bones. If I go in a motor-bus, I am asphyxiated. If I go in a taxi, I can never ask the taxi-driver to help me, for they all speak Cantonese. I must buy a sailing-boat—it's the only way to see the world without too much exertion." He went to his bookcase and found some poems on the delights of sailing. He read them slowly and carefully, then he returned to the window with his opium pipe and once more he gazed at the river.

All morning he had been playing on his flute, but the cries of the boys in the water were more melodious than his own pipings. They were shouting as they swam. He saw their black heads bobbing as they raced in circles until, exhausted by the green oily water, they came ashore, and each boy was a small silver fountain. Perhaps one of them is Ti, he thought. And suddenly he realised that Ti had grown up, he was tall and strong, with a chest like a bamboo cage, and sturdy legs and smooth muscular arms. He was nearly sixteen. He was no longer the boy who came shamefacedly into the library, asking if he could use a paint-brush or talking solemnly with Dr. Sun Yat Sen. All this had passed like a dream. He realised suddenly that Cheong was a workman, who could even help him to build a sailing-ship—and he was no longer called Ti, but Cheong, as though he alone bore the name of his ancestors, as though there was only one Cheong in the family. His father had long ago lost interest in the woodshed. It was Cheong

who ordered the wood and took charge of the timber-yard on the Rochore Canal. It was Cheong who attended to the accounts and banked the money received each week. He bought more wood than he needed, because he could rarely refuse offers for timber when some strange new wood came on the market. There were hundreds and thousands of different timbers, and no one had troubled to explore their possibilities. Cheong examined them with care, stored them in the river or in dry-kilns, surveyed them at intervals and bought up all the small timber-yards in Singapore. There came a time when the management of the timber-yards worked so smoothly that he could stay away for whole days. He discovered that he had no desire to work all his life among sawmills. In the late afternoons, when the sun painted the squat roofs of Singapore, he remained with grandfather in the library, trying to reproduce the decaying light on paper. Meifu embroidered curtains and painted with short sharp strokes of black ink on browned paper. Her paintings were masculine, while Cheong's were almost feminine. He learnt the Four Classics by heart and repeated after grandfather the favourite poets of the T'ang and Sung dynasties, while An-mei listened from the bedroom downstairs and Cheong Ehr Sung complained of the heat and the flies.

"But I should like a sailing-boat," grandfather exclaimed with determination. "My grandson must build me one. Immediately he returns I shall ask him to build me a sailing-boat."

The naked boys had departed, leaving trails of water on the bank. The sun glinted on the rippling water and the white stone embankments shone dully and reflected a diffused heat. He had given up trying to play the flute; he was merely looking at the river, the flower-gardens on the roofs, the steam rising from the fish-market, staring in thought at the processions of ants in the streets below.

When Cheong arrived, he wore a blue gown and a red skull-cap. He had discarded the flowered gown he wore when playing music. Cheong's face was covered with a soft powder of sawdust. He bathed and dressed quickly, turned on the wireless and sank into a chair. Ng Ah knelt and removed his sandals. Wearing high heels and a white satin gown laced at

the neck, Meifu returned from market, singing, with her mouth full of sweets. She whispered something to Ng Ah, burst out laughing, pulled a grape from the bunch on the silver bowl on the table-cloth, ran to the window, called out to grandfather and suddenly threw herself on the arm of Cheong's chair.

"Why should you make all this fuss?" Cheong asked irritably.

Meifu stared at him uneasily.

"You should have more pleasure," she said. "You work all day, consequently you arrive home in a bad temper. Why should I not enjoy myself?"

"Only because it is so strange—you are usually quiet," Cheong answered, hiding behind the newspaper.

Their father came in. He nodded to them, but said nothing. For days he had been talking excitedly of a financial speculation. From the expression on his face they knew the speculation had come to nothing.

"How is grandfather?" he asked after a long pause.

In answer there came the long sigh of a flute from the upstairs library. Ng Ah was preparing the rice in the kitchen. Sliced cold meat and chilies were set out on the table, together with a glass of goat's milk, which someone had said would be good for Meifu's complexion. The maid-servants could be heard whispering. Grandfather possessed three flutes. A single note was tried out on each one repeatedly, until Meifu clapped her hands to her ears and exclaimed:

"Has he no sense of tone? A thousand miracles will happen before he plays another note."

The miracles all occurred the next moment, for grandfather suddenly played a higher note. Cheong burst out laughing. The weariness departed, leaving him fresh and strong, so that when grandfather unexpectedly came downstairs he looked as though he had spent a leisurely morning in the court-yard.

"I want you to build a boat," grandfather said. His eyes blinked in the bright rays coming through the window.

"A boat?"

"Yes, a boat."

There was no more conversation on this subject. Meifu giggled and An-mei could be heard rustling the bedclothes—a

sign that she was listening. Their father whisked the flies with a paper-knife. Meanwhile grandfather looked round the room, into which he rarely entered, with the expression of a bird discovering a nest already prepared. His bright eyes flickered, and he gazed at the paintings on the wall, the porcelain cups on the shelves, the mountain of Java grapes and the kittens coiled up on the cushions. Everything in the room downstairs suggested Meifu. She was eighteen and round-faced, with pouting lips and a gentle incompetence, which made her behave in everything as though she was afraid of creating attention. Then his gaze fell on his son, who sprawled in an easy chair, with newspapers between the cushions and the arm-rests, a strained look in his eyes and a sullen expression on his mouth. So the rubber estate he bought was worthless? Grandfather hummed to himself. Meifu had an illusion that she was waiting for some momentous happiness. The tension of the silence and the waiting exhausted her. She felt her heart leap with relief when grandfather turned to her, pushed his skull-cap further back over his forehead and spoke.

"I have thought we might buy another house."

"Yes?"

"We have enough money. Why should we always live here?" He pounced on one of the white kittens which was crawling along the seam of his gown. "Two houses is the sign of wealth. Why should we keep our money in the bank? Another house, and we shall be able to disappear for the week-end——"

Before he could say any more, Ng Ah arrived with the rice. Grandfather attacked it with zest. He looked younger than for many months, and there was an acquisitive look in his eyes. It occurred to Cheong that this desire for a new house and a boat were the signs of returning strength. A young nation is always acquisitive, an old man never; but grandfather gazed round the quiet room with an air of possession.

"What kind of house?" Cheong asked, looking up to see grandfather's face hovering above the smoking rice-stew. "A house in the country, or another house in the town?"

"A house in the country with a lake and a round pond for the ducks—and we'll grow vegetables in the garden—and everything quiet——" He nodded in the direction of

Alexandra Road, where the dray-carts were rumbling over the asphalt as long before they rumbled over the cobblestones, and long before that over the stamped red earth. "There is another thing I have to say," grandfather concluded. "Your father is unwell. He should learn to enjoy nature."

Cheong Ehr Sung looked up gratefully. Too often he discovered, that he was being forgotten in the family conversations. His forehead was wrinkled and bony; his hands hung lifeless in his lap; he seemed to be perpetually frightened of something.

"A duck pond," he repeated slowly. "Yes, I would enjoy feeding the ducks and geese. As you say, I should learn to enjoy nature."

For several weeks Cheong thought of the boat. In November he decided to build a sixteen-foot cutter in the woodshed on the Rochore Canal. He steamed the keel, morticed the floorboards and planed down the clinker-built side strakes himself, refusing to allow anyone to touch it. The keel was deep red *chengal* with a straight grain and a fine even finish; the mast was camphor-wood and the fittings were all in teak. When he began to build the cutter, he knew nothing of ship-building, but he bought a second-hand book in Bras Bussah Road and drew out the plan of the ship carefully on the floor. He said nothing to grandfather until the sails arrived from Australia, then he invited the whole family to the Rochore Canal one Saturday afternoon, when the clouds rose high in the sky and the air was clean after recent rains. Only An-mei refused to join them. A morbid fear of drowning kept her to her bed, but she prayed earnestly for the success of the journey and obtained from the Buddhist priest a special blessing for the enterprise.

Grandfather was continually shaking the sawdust from his gown as he walked through the woodsheds. The dust rose in columns like whirlwinds. On both sides of the canal Chinese boys were fishing. There were stall-holders selling iced drinks coloured green and gold; there were fish-hawkers, fruit-sellers with slices of pine-apple in ice, and strings of mangosteens; a blind man whispering a Buddhist prayer sat in the red dust of the kerb with hands outstretched; and wandering among

the crowds in their holiday clothes were small Malay boys in silk sarongs and small Malay girls with silk kerchiefs round their heads. They seemed to have descended from the clouds, for Cheong had never seen so many Malays beside the Rochore Canal before. The woodsheds looked on to the street. Hundreds of planks leaned against the wall, and through the tent of planks grandfather saw the street brilliantly illuminated in the afternoon sun, and there was so much colour that he sighed for his paint-brush. Then suddenly, turning the corner, he came upon the boat. It lay on the stocks, all ready for launching into the canal, the mast stepped into position, the sails bleached, and there were cushions on the seats and even a small table with a luncheon basket underneath. The workmen were laughing at the two girls, for Meifu had insisted on bringing Ng Ah. Grandfather rubbed his hands together and bathed in the sunlight.

"I have asked for a ship," he murmured, "and now perhaps the ship will discover a house for us away from the noise of Singapore."

The clean flowing lines of the sailing-boat pleased him in exactly the same way that a T'ang poem pleased him. Nervous and concise, with nothing superfluous, austere and cunning, hammered into the shape designed for it, it stood on the stocks like an image of speed raised on an altar. The strakes were painted white and blue. A tiger's eye was painted on each side of the bow. There was even a small shrine for Tien-how, the goddess of seafarers. Everything about the ship was pleasing, from the jib to the copper nails along the clinker strakes. Grandfather discovered that he was humming the poem of Lu Lung, which begins: "Dark night, the wild geese fly high." Although the poem was about the wars of the T'ang Emperors, it possessed a curious brooding quality like distant music, and he recited it to himself whenever he was particularly pleased.

The workmen finished greasing the sliding runways and stood back to admire the sunlight slanting down the sails. There was to be a ceremony. Grandfather was told to break a bottle of Teochew wine on the bows. He would name the ship and watch her skimming down the runway of greased palm-trunks into the canal; then he would wait until

the ship was moored along the wall before sailing among the islands.

"I shall call her 'The Wild Geese' if I am allowed to give her a name," he told himself.

For nearly ten minutes, while the workmen completed their last overhaul, he was distracted with the thought that Cheong had already settled upon a name.

"Is this a propitious day for launching?" he asked suddenly, looking up so that the sun danced madly on his steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Yes, I have seen to everything," Cheong smiled.

Ng Ah stepped forward and touched the smooth planks. She was proud of the ship and continually asked Meifu questions, which she could not answer. The smooth planks were as firm as the flesh of a mangosteen. A joss-stick was burning before the shrine of Tien-how, and this pleased her, because it was fitting to the occasion and perfectly appropriate in its setting. Her starched coat squeaked as she moved about the small shipyard, and she was conscious of the eyes of the workmen appraising her. The sun rained down upon her, and Cheong caught a glimpse of a pale face with dark eyes slowly turning into a darker colour. "How beautiful she would be if she wasn't so pale," Cheong thought; then he ordered the workmen to leave the boat and, pushing grandfather forward, showed him the bottle of wine.

For some moments grandfather had been conscious of his responsibility. As soon as he named the boat, she would slide into the canal and they would go on board. The air was full of whirling dust. The scent of wood and burning joss-sticks filled his nostrils. In the burning sunlight these scents quickened his senses and somehow they made the burden in front of him intolerable. What if the ship refused to move? What if he was unable to break the bottle on the bows? What if he was suddenly overcome by the hot sunlight? Suddenly, from among the planks and logs in the woodshed, musicians appeared with violins and trombones, four or five men wearing blue silk shirts, black trousers and sashes round their waists. They played a few bars, smiling, staring at grandfather, and suddenly silenced by a gesture from grandfather, they began

to laugh nervously like young children taken for the first time to a Buddhist temple.

"I name this ship 'The Wild Geese' and may Tien-how guard her wherever she sails."

Suddenly the great ship shuddered on the runways and seemed to be in danger of falling over. The greased keel began to scream over the thin palm-trunks, the bow dipped and moved away, growing smaller with surprising speed, until the stern ploughed into the canal, throwing up a fountain of clear water. Grandfather was pleasantly surprised that it was all over. But when the yacht was moored alongside the wall, there was no wind and he watched Cheong rowing with the expression of someone defeated of all hopes and even of his fears, for this was worse than anything he had imagined. The white sails hung down in the breathless air, as limp as string. But when they reached the sea, the air shimmered, the sails grew taut and the islands danced in the heat and glare.

They coasted along the shore, waiting for a favourable breeze which would take them round the island. The wooded hills, the peaks behind, the squat red houses under the palms were spotless in the white sky. All the cliffs were of red sandstone, but there were long intervals of green plain. An aeroplane flew overhead at a great height; the sound of the engines was no more than a faint hum. Spray rose over the bows, while the white houses and palaces of Singapore grew smaller and smaller in the haze.

Grandfather lay in the bottom of the boat, staring up at the sky. He followed a shear-water as it sailed down-wind, the white wings spread out, only the wing-tips flapping. The water lapped the sides of the yacht. Memories of a willow's leaves falling like a frozen green fountain over the Liu valley came back to him with curious persistence. He was sailing among the islands. The colour of the water was reflected on the sails in cuts and splashes of green, and he blinked his eyes as birds flitted like shadows over the mast. Ng Ah was whispering. The bows broke against a green wave, and a fine spray dashed over the gunwales. The air tasted of salt and fish, and they seemed to be moving on a lake of green silk.

"How quiet it is," grandfather murmured. "Such peace I have never known except in opium dreams."

"What were you saying, Grandfather?"

"I was thinking of one of my paintings. There are high mountains and gorges, and thunderclouds are coming up, but the small man hidden in the valley pursues his way in peace."

Meifu giggled. She did not in the least understand what he was saying, but it was pleasant to lie back in the boat eating sweets, listening to grandfather, watching the shear-water diving among the red cliffs as they sailed between the islands and the palms. Grandfather fell asleep. When he woke up, there was a commotion in the water and he saw Mcifu in a green bathing-dress about to take a header into the sea. She was plump, but graceful. She dived in, and Ng Ah was waiting for her. How extraordinary it is! grandfather thought. The younger generation are afraid of nothing, not even of sharks. They wear dresses which would be considered immodest at a young bachelor's stag-party before the Revolution, and they have no shame in bathing before men's eyes. Meifu was swimming round the boat like a dolphin. She was squealing and splashing. The green buttocks shone on the water like perfect spheres, and he expected to see goldfish swimming inside them. Ng Ah wore a white bathing costume with a white skull-cap. She rarely swam, but floated on her back and hummed the mysterious songs of her childhood in the Liu Valley. Grandfather could not say whether he was pleased or disturbed. Meifu in her wet bathing-dress was certainly a curious spectacle. A string of seaweed clung to her cheek, and suddenly he remembered the day when she cried herself to sleep in his arms, the day when Leong Chye brought her home in a stolen ricksha, the day when they discovered the ricksha boy who was responsible for An-mei's illness. "I shall never need to smoke opium any more," he told himself. Ng Ah was clambering over the gunwale. He was astounded. He had never thought of her before as a woman, but how beautiful she was! If she was not a slave, he would have liked Cheong to marry her, for she would have children as beautiful as herself. Drowsily, while the green light shone through the sails like leaves, he thought how fortunate he was in his family.

The yacht coasted along the red sandstone cliffs of Changi, where palm-leaf huts and palm-trees glistened in the sun. There, too, everything was at peace. Fires rose among the palm-trees, he heard pigs grunting and the clacking of geese.

More islands appeared—really they were past counting—and as the yacht dipped in the wave-troughs and beached herself on the wave-crests, he hummed continually and feasted on the jade-green sea.

"We'll go all round the island," Cheong said. "They'll open the gates of the causeway for us."

He stood by the mast, wearing only white shorts, and his legs were still covered with a thin film of sawdust. Standing there, he resembled a heroic figure of one of the past ages of China's glory, the swaying jib-sail behind him, the islands on either side, the two girls in bathing costumes sun-bathing at his feet. Already they were near the Straits of Johore. They seemed to be surrounded by islands, some green, some yellow, others a faint bluish-grey. There were fishing stakes with little bamboo houses, and fishing-boats were anchored at intervals. The yellow hats of the Malay and Chinese fishermen were mirrors reflecting the sun. For a long while they coasted with the island to leeward. The water was shallow, and whenever they looked over the gunwale they saw the white coral and the shelving sand.

Soon they came to the place where the Straits grew narrower. On the banks of Johore cliffs and quarries towered over them, and there were marshes of black mangroves and casuarina trees, which hung as still as olive-trees on the Mediterranean. On Singapore island they saw small tussocky mounds and no mountains except Bukit Timah in the south like a grey tower of white granite. Chinese junks, with enormous high prows and flapping palm-leaf sails coloured like moths' wings a deep burnished brown, sailed past and appeared to pay no attention to the small yacht below.

"Here it is even quieter," grandfather said. "We are evidently sheltered from the winds, and I notice that there are no more islands. According to the Chinese philosophers, islands produce great winds."

He could not understand how the yacht could tack into the

wind, and he asked Cheong innumerable questions. The answers rarely satisfied him. Meifu explained that somewhere on the sea-coast of Johore there was once a great city now buried under the jungle, but grandfather lost interest in archaeology and his mind was filled with the thought that they could sail against the wind.

"When the Chinese junks sail down from China during the monsoon, they have a following wind, isn't that so? Then why shouldn't they sail against the wind?"

He relapsed into a long silence until he was awakened by the sounds of wild boar on shore. The long grasses rustled and the boar came down to the water's edge, and suddenly he realised that the island was full of noises, and there were strange animals everywhere, on land, in the air and in the sea. Here the gulls were larger than over Singapore river, deer came down the limestone cliffs and stared over the estuaries, he saw pilchards moving in black shoals as they swam in terror before the great *ikan merah** Then suddenly, at an invisible sign from their leader, they turned sharply at right-angles, like a black swarm of angry bees and as quick as the motion of a thrush's wing.

"We could fish here," he said at last. "We could cultivate the land and fish and learn to contemplate nature."

He pointed to a small red house built on piles. Rubber trees grew on distant knoles, where the wild pig were barking and small grey lizards called flying-dragons swooped down from the rubber trees. Stoats and civet cats galloped in the undergrowth. The white-hot sky beat down on them and the small yacht cast a shadow shaped like a shark. But over there, under the mangroves and casuarina trees, there was deep shade. Grandfather thought deeply and seriously. The land could be reclaimed, the mangroves cut away, the earth filled in. In this silent backwater, between the forest and the sea, they could construct a small summerhouse away from the noise and smells of Singapore river.

"Look out for the crocodiles," Cheong shouted as Meifu dipped her feet in the water.

There were no crocodiles about, but Cheong thought he heard them splashing along the bank. They lived in rivers,

not in the sea, but there were innumerable small rivers flowing from the north of Singapore island into the Straits of Johore. At the river mouths crocodiles would be dangerous; here there were only sharks.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake be careful, Meifu!" Cheong said nervously, but it was already too late. When they were near the shore, she sprang out and walked to land, leaving the yacht rocking on the sun-locked water with the impetus of her springing leap. To her surprise there was no sand—only mangroves and thick clumps of grass, with here and there a pathway leading through the rubber trees and casuarina trees. The pathway puzzled her. She could not think why people should trouble to make a pathway here; for they were far from any habitation except the small red house half a mile away. The wind dropped suddenly. Cheong rowed the yacht inshore and threw the anchor over; then they walked ashore, sinking to the ankles in mossy grass, where mosquitoes flourished and the pug-marks of deer and wild-pig were clearly visible. From somewhere behind the casuarina trees they heard the babbling river.

"Yes, we could stay here," grandfather said, milking his chin. "Stay here, and grow our own food—far from anywhere. Stay here whenever we are weary of the city. For a hundred years no one will find us. Cultivate a relationship with the soil—says the old scholar of the T'ang Dynasty. Let us stay here and build a temple at least."

They spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the forest of mangroves and casuarina trees, while green pigeons wheeled overhead and the wild boar rooted through the woods. They reached a river, where small green crocodiles were basking until the sound of their footsteps drove them into the shelter of the muddy river. On the opposite bank lay a Malay fishing village, and plumes of white smoke rose above the palm-trees. When it was growing dark, they watched squirrels and flying dragons among the trees, while bats flitted among the leaves and forest owls stared at them with eyes like phosphorescent saucers. Grandfather measured out a square for a temple, another larger square for a house, an oblong vegetable garden, a round duck-pond, and all round the house there were

to be fruit-trees. "Drain the earth, cultivate the land, sow seeds, gather harvest." He repeated the words like an incantation. Already he saw the house going up, already he had given it a name, already he had decided to spend a whole month there with his flute, his paintings and his books of poetry.

"Singapore river smells like dead cod-fish," he said accusingly. "Here the air is clean and there are no sampans to disturb the view."

At last, just before they were returning to Singapore, small half-naked boys appeared along the winding path between the mangroves. They carried baskets and acetylene lamps. Without paying any attention to the four strangers they waded into the sea under the shade of the casuarina trees and dredged for shrimps and prawns. The red lamps would be used later when the sun had gone down.

A cool wind rose. More bats came to wheel round the trees, until the air seemed to be full of their high-pitched whistling note. The light had almost gone out and the sky overhead was a very dark blue, without stars or moon, like an uncut jewel. It was as though the summer haze remained long after the light disappeared. It was growing cold. The forests were awake. From every side they heard the rumbling of animals as they wound their way to the salt-lick. The fishing boys lit their lamps and a red glow settled on the water, a mysterious red glow which seemed to come from beneath the surface. A heavy cloud had blotted out the sun, and when the yacht was once more in the straits, the sun shone again, luminous and crystal-clear, shedding a bronze light on the summer islands and the milky sea.

"We shall build a house there," grandfather said, and thinking of the heavy cloud which blotted out the sun and how it mysteriously vanished, he added: "We shall call it Cloud Temple Hall."

During the next three weeks Cheong discovered the owners of the rubber and gambier plantations in the Straits of Johore and leased two acres of mangroves and casuarina trees. Gradually the mangroves were cleared and a rammed earth floor was prepared for the foundations of the house. A small

temple of red brick was built and the Senoko river was diverted to flow through the vegetable garden. Two years later Cloud Temple Hall rose above the casuarina trees, where wild deer once played and flying dragons still flew from the branches of the fruit-trees.

"In Cloud Temple Hall we shall find peace," grandfather said solemnly as he lit candle-tapers before the goddess in the temple. He sighed and looked beyond the vegetable garden to the blue sea. "How much it has changed. A year ago there were wild weeds, and to-day we have tamed the jungle." The yacht rocked among the mangroves, the first shoots of papayas were turning yellow. Grandfather stood there until the first stars appeared. Voices called to him, but he paid no attention. A bull-frog croaked; then another, then another; and again the silence was deeper.

Ng Ah changed into her starched coat and black trousers after swimming in the river. On a bamboo sling over her shoulder she carried the two petrol tins full of water. As she carried the two heavy tins she saw the shadow of grandfather and the stars reflected on their steep silver sides.

She had not realised that there could be so much peace in the whole world.

VIII

DURING the evening they had been singing in the court-yard among the wood-piles. Grandfather with his flute, father with his string-thrumming board, Goh Seng with a three-stringed violin and Cheong with a wooden hammer of hollow *nanmu* wood which he beat in time with the rhythm under the flame of the forest tree. The air was windless and their voices carried far over the river. All the songs they sang were sad; they were the songs of the Liu valley, tea-planters' songs and the high-pitched tunes of the buffalo boys, or else they sang of the princess who was drowned in a thunderstorm in Liu river after waiting for her lover. The celebrations of the eighth moon were over and there had been a spell of warm, tranquil weather,

but the heat was beginning to pile up in the cloudless air and they knew there was a thunderstorm approaching over the Dutch islands. The four singers were naked to the waist. In the red glow of the lanterns sweat trickled down their chins and settled on their shoulder-blades and over their chests. Yet they continued to sing, although they could hardly breathe the damp, feverish air, and Ng Ah listened from the kitchen like someone enraptured and conscious of the miracle of four voices singing in tune.

"They will be hungry," she told herself as she lifted the heavy copper rice-bowl from the hearth, "Hungry and thirsty—ah, how hungry and thirsty they will be."

As the night grew darker, more voices came to mingle with the voices of the singers in the court-yard. On Singapore river the junkmen tuned their instruments or beat time with mallets, they plucked the strings of their broken violins and bayed at the moon. The great heat was sending everyone to music, and it was as though the Chinese thought they could hold off the threatened storm by tuning their violins. Their voices came over the river among other voices—a rat clawing the banks, an old woman tittering, the police-boat scurrying under the bridges at half-hourly intervals. Meanwhile Ng Ah battered the rice and mixed some coconut milk with spices on a tray.

All evening, since eight o'clock, they had been singing in the court-yard. It was now nearly eleven o'clock, and there was no sign that they had finished or were thinking of finishing. Meifu left her embroidery and crept out on to the porch with a white squirrel-kitten on her lap; An-mei ordered her bed to be removed near the window, so that she could hear better. The kitchen maids were silent. They listened to the melancholy songs of the Liu valley and held each other's hands. The coming of the thunderstorm produced a curious physical weakness. Birds began singing, bats wheeled under the trees more swiftly and a flying fox jumped from the flame-of-the-forest tree to the oleander and back again twenty times before it lay limp and whimpering in the high branches.

"It will come soon," Ng Ah told herself, and she looked down to see her crisp, starched coat stained with sweat. It no

longer creaked when she walked. "I've never known such heat," she exclaimed. The kitchen-maids smiled nervously and clung to one another for protection against the approaching thunder.

But the thunderstorm, which had been expected for three weeks, did not break. When the singing party broke up, Cheong lay in a hammock in the court-yard, fanning himself. There were no clouds, and the stars shone solitary in the broad sky, their twinkling like an eternal stutter. "If the heat lasts much longer," he thought, "we shall melt like butter and generations coming after us will see only the faint stain in the pavement where we have been." He laughed and began singing again; the shutters were being closed; one by one the kitchen-maids went to bed; a fan clicked, and in the library grandfather lay down on a trestle-bed and watched the house-lizards on the wall leaping at the moths.

An hour later Cheong rose and walked slowly to his bedroom. He undressed and bathed. From his window he looked out on the windless sky through the scarlet petals of the flame-of-the-forest tree. He could scarcely breathe. The hot air filled his lungs. The stars twinkled madly, and he had never seen so many stars in the Milky Way before. In the shadow of the five-foot way the coal-coolies coughed and choked in the heat. Ng Ah was padding restlessly round the house. Often, when he was half asleep, he heard her wandering downstairs to the kitchen, where late at night she prepared the food for the next day. Her whole life centred round the kitchen, where she was most at home in her starched coat. The thick braid of her hair was so stiff that it, too, seemed to have been starched, and everything about her—her gait, her delicate hands and high forehead and pale cheeks—all these seemed to have been starched, so that her body rustled inside her clothes. Behind the thin partition wall he heard Meifu tossing on her bed. Upstairs grandfather paced up and down the library, and from time to time came the splutter of his opium-pipe or the faint whisper of the spirit-lamp with its blue flame. His father was talking, but probably he was asleep. Both his mother and his father talked in their sleep; this frightened him when he was younger, but no longer disturbed him. He lay at full length on

the wooden bed, and he thought: "Soon I shall be too tall for this bed. I shall build a longer bed." After a pause he added: "And a wider one, for this is certainly made for only one person."

His father was walking along the corridor—he knew it was his father by the violently waving square of light under the door. Afterwards he thought he heard the quick, nervous steps of his mother; but five minutes later he realised the sounds came from the loft, where the river-rats were known to build their nests. From the bed he looked out over the river, where the Milky Way lay reflected like a bar of intensely white light. "I can't sleep," he moaned feverishly. Sweat collected on his chest, under his armpits, between his legs and in the soft hollows of his arm. It left a prickly rash and a sensation of burning, and when he started scratching the irritation increased unbearably. He got up and splashed lukewarm water over his body, and when he returned to bed drops of oily water still clung to his chest. The spirit presses were thudding in Alexandra Road, and their relentless thudding was like an accompaniment to the throbbing heat. In all the twelve years he had spent in Singapore he had never known such heat. Before midnight he was restless and impatient for the morning. The birds were asleep at last; the flying-squirrel was still whimpering and the whirring of the bats still resounded from the court-yard. At the moment when he was about to fall into a doze, he heard footsteps along the corridor and halt by the door.

"Come in," he said quietly.

There was a scraping of feet on the wooden boards. The door opened. He thought for one moment that it was Meifu, and then recognised Ng Ah. She wore her starched coat, but for the first time he saw it unbuttoned, and below the coat the yellow breast-bands dark with sweat.

"I can't sleep, Cheong," she whispered. "Soon the Monsoon will break—it can't last for ever."

Her face was swimming in sweat. Standing in the doorway, her mouth moving uncontrollably, her hands clasped over her breast, she resembled a silver toy; for her face shone silver, her white coat was silver and even her black trousers and buckled

shoes caught the silver moonlight. She smiled nervously. "Such heat must be a punishment for us," she sighed.

"That's nonsense. What have we done to deserve this heat. The black flies are everywhere. No, it's not a punishment, Ng Ah. Soon the storm will break."

"How soon?"

"To-morrow perhaps."

"Or perhaps in a week's time, who knows?"

They stood looking at each other, half-stupid, half-uneasy, conscious now more than ever of the physical weakness and which comes with the enervating heat.

"I must go now," Ng Ah said.

"Why?"

She shook her head, and the sweat streamed off like a white fountain. She folded her hands on her breast and suddenly noticing that the loops of cord had escaped from the buttons, she ran back quickly to the door.

"Come here," Cheong said urgently.

They were silent now, listening to the pluck of the tide and the last boats on Singapore River. Cheong threw himself off the bed and followed her to the door. He felt as though he was going to choke. He trembled, and wondered when the sweat would stop pouring down his body. He put one arm on her shoulder and looked in her eyes. In the moonlight they were a strange colour, almost green, and her face was still silver. In silence he busied himself untying the last remaining threads of cord round the bone buttons. Then, when her coat hung open, he carried her unprotesting to the bed.

Even when they lay on the bed, his eyes rested alternately upon her and the familiar objects of the room. He could not believe that she was in his arms, or that her warm heart was beating against his. He unwound the breast-bands slowly, like someone unwinding the silk-threads from the cocoon. When his eyes were no longer fixed on her, she in turn watched him, marvelling at his strength and his long eyelashes and the backward sweep of his hair, feeling cool at last in his embrace. She noticed something fresh about him each time. When the last ribbon of the breast-bands was whipped away, his hands closed over her beating heart; and she noticed that they were

trembling violently; and his lips were trembling. She did not offer any resistance when he untied the ribbon of her trousers because the heat had melted her body and she had become a slow-moving stream like the river.

"I have always loved you," he sighed.

She stiffened suddenly.

"No, no, Cheong. Don't, please! Your mother will beat me to death."

He sighed and held her more gently.

"Don't worry, Ngo. No one will beat you to death. Are you feverish? No one will beat you to death."

Suddenly his voice shook. He trembled violently and involuntarily, sick with heat and love for her. In this atmosphere of moist, burning heat, he thought she alone was cool. He touched her face, her arms, her breasts, her throat and the arch of her eyebrows. He uncovered her ears and played with the smooth nape of her neck. A river flowed through him, darker and more mysterious than Singapore River, for it possessed no source. He watched the shadows of the flame-of-the-forest tree waving over her body. She offered no resistance, because the heat had melted her and she too had become a slow-moving river.

"Have pity, have pity," she murmured, sighing through her tears.

Cheong said nothing. His mouth was dry and parched. The sweat flowed into the hollow of his back. The waving shadows of the flame-tree covered their faces and concealed them from one another. The moon rose higher; the flying squirrel was still jumping between the trees; down on the river the boatmen would soon be preparing for the morrow's journeys. At last the house was quiet—the solitary silence which descends upon the houses at the upper reaches of the river. An hour later Ng Ah cried out in alarm and escaped from the wooden bed and her sleeping lover. "It's late," she told herself. "I must sleep, or who will cook the rice in the morning?" Cheong was sleeping quietly. She lifted his head and laid it against her breast, then she hurried downstairs.

The next morning Ng Ah awoke early. It was still dark, but

the sky was clear and there was no sign of rain. "Perhaps it rained during the night," she told herself; but the dust in the court-yard was dry and the leaves of the oleander tree were white with dust.

Suddenly she remembered Cheong. She was combing her hair and looking over the court-yard wall, thinking of nothing except the bright morning and the promise of the day's work in the kitchen, when the thought of Cheong came to her like a savage impact on taut nerves. The comb was held in mid-air. She thought of all the things she would have to do in the early morning—the tapers she would light, cleaning and scouring the rice-bowls, killing the chickens and chopping up the meat in fine pieces for the soup—and she decided there was still time to see him again.

After placing incense sticks in the copper holders, she boiled enough water for a single glass of flower tea. While she waited for the water to boil, she hummed the song of the tea-planters in Huanan:

In Spring we gather the green leaves from the tree;
In Spring the tea-planters embroider handkerchiefs.
Boys are plentiful in Spring, the girls are few.
In the early morning our robes are stained with dew.

When she opened the door, Cheong was lying exactly as he had been when she left him, face downward on the wooden bed, his head buried in his right arm, naked in the sunlight flooding through the window. How brown he was! Beside him her own body seemed as white as ice. She smiled and laid the steaming glass near his bed and softly tip-toed from the room, but before she reached the door he was awake.

His eyes were heavy with sleep and his face lay in shadow.

"I have no need of my rice-bowl this morning," he said dreamily. He looked at the sky. "Has the storm passed yet? I was heavy last night. I couldn't sleep."

Afterwards he was silent, he bit his lip and the blood riounted to his cheek. They looked at one another, not knowing what to say or whether they should say anything, excited by their guilt and their love for one another. The small

familiar room grew bright. The flame-of-the-forest flowers sparkled in the dry heat, and suddenly they realised that although the storm had not broken, the air was no longer moisture-laden, but sweet and cool with the scent of peonies. Cheong rubbed his eyes. When he looked up again Ng Ah had disappeared. He searched for her in the room, imagining that she was hiding from him. Later he thought he heard the bees droning in the flame-of-the-forest tree, and later still he knew the sound came from Ng Ah's soft footfalls on the stairs.

With a shrug he rose and poured ice-cold water over his head. With the knotted end of a handkerchief he began whipping his firm body until the blood sang, and he rejoined in the quicksilver coursing through his veins. He dried himself slowly and rhythmically, in time with a song he was humming; then he slipped into his blue open-neck shirt and blue trousers and wriggled his toes into his wooden clogs. "But timber fades," he thought for no reason at all. "The sun gets at it, and it turns dark." He smiled to himself. "We shall soon be married. Grandfather approves of the new customs and she will still be able to prepare his food." Then he ran downstairs and gulped down his rice.

During the next three months Ng Ah often came into his room. Her manner never changed, and she wore her starched white coat in exactly the same way as before, but when she came to his room she wore a silk coat, for fear the creaking of the starch would be heard. But whenever Cheong asked her to marry him, she refused. On every other subject she agreed with him. At night and during the day their thoughts were identical. While Cheong was working, she would suddenly discover that a strange thought had entered her head, and when Cheong returned she learned that this thought had entered his head at exactly the same time. Then they would laugh, and he would take her in his arms, and without speaking they knew the thoughts whirling in each other's minds.

One evening, immediately after the festivals of the eighth moon, Cheong was summoned to his grandfather's library. He passed Ng Ah on the stairs and watched her as she walked slowly with head bent an'd arms pressed to her sides; and

suddenly he knew grandfather had been talking with her—but what they had been talking about he had no idea.

"Have you eaten rice?" grandfather said in greeting.

Cheong bowed from the waist. Grandfather made a slight inclination, carefully dipped his brush in the ink-stone and continued writing. Cheong had time to look round the room where everything was spotlessly clean, and the gold and red of Tien Kuan's gown shone like a mirror in the wall. Grandfather swung round on his chair. The sun shone on his drawn cheeks and deep-set eyes. There was a peculiar greyness at his temples which showed that he still smoked three pipes of opium daily. In the strong sunlight he looked ill at ease. Cheong watched him closely, afraid of the silence between them. From under the tall forehead his grandfather's eyes regarded him coldly, seeing everything, knowing everything, conscious of the least movement and stirring of emotion in Cheong's brain.

"I have asked you to come here," he began, "because it is time you were married. You are eighteen. At eighteen I already possessed a family. You were born when your father was eighteen, and I have promised the ancestors that you should follow in their footsteps. It is my wish that you should marry Tien Hsueh, the daughter of merchant Hsiung——"

Cheong's heart began to beat so loudly that he was afraid his grandfather would hear. Through the window he saw the brown maze of sampans on the river. Tien Hsueh was the sister of Crystal Jade, who had fallen overboard more than ten years before when they were returning from Tortoise Island. He remembered her embroidered dress, but he could not remember her face. Somewhere at the back of his mind there hovered the vision of a pale girl who was always at ease and whose expression at the moment of her brother's death showed no trace of anxiety.

"I have heard your words, honourable Grandfather," Cheong said respectfully.

Grandfather motioned him to remain.

"This is not all I have to say," he said in a voice devoid of emotion. "I have noticed many things that displeased me. You study too little. Your calligraphy resembles the scribbling of a peasant. There was a time when you took an interest in

painting. Now you take an interest only in your woodshed and your slave-girls." He paused abruptly, looking up to see what effect his words produced. Cheong showed no sign of the whip-lash. His brown face, lips slightly parted, remained untouched by his grandfather's words or the menacing light in his grandfather's eyes.

"Soon I shall have a child by Ng Ah," he said quietly. "I have read somewhere that glory and splendour, wealth and honour and beautiful women are flowers before the eyes, but to have children is to become immortal."

The wind rose in the flame-of-the-forest tree with a sound like the scamper of mice. The day was warm and misty, but the wind brushed the mist away and the warmth disappeared in the cool breeze from the islands. Cheong smiled mysteriously. Nothing would ever shake his affection for Ng Ah. Without her—without the sound of her starched coat, without the ritual of untying her breast-bands, without the *szvisb-swish* of her cotton shoes on the stairs at night, so faint that only a lover could hear her coming—life would become intolerable and he would prefer to hang himself.

"I have known for many months of this affair," grandfather continued. "In the Cheong family no one has lowered himself so much as to marry a slave. This girl has many qualities, but she is not a suitable wife for a member of the Cheong clan. You are rich enough to support a concubine. It seems that you would prefer to remain a bachelor. But the Hall of the Cloud at Rest must have children, otherwise our steps will sound like ghosts in the tomb. The children of slave-girls may pray to the ancestors, but the value of their prayers is less than the value of prayers uttered by children born after marriage."

For a moment Cheong could not understand why there should be any difference in children born out of matrimony and children born after marriage. Surely the ancestors were indifferent! Surely they paid no attention to the circumstances of things! Then it occurred to him that their lives below the earth depended upon the circumstances of ritual, and there was no escape from their demands and desires.

"I shall do as you wish," he said after a long pause.

Grandfather leaned forward.

"You will do as the ancestors wish," he said peremptorily. "Your sister will also be married shortly. This evening the announcement of your two marriages will be laid before the ancestors. It is my desire that you should be married on the same day."

Cheong was thunderstruck. For weeks he had noticed that Meifu disappeared quietly after meals. He thought she was unwell, for she looked pale, but it occurred to him now that she was afraid to speak of her marriage and that she spent her days embroidering her marriage clothes. Sometimes, turning sharply down a corridor, he saw Ng Ah and Meifu whispering together. Was it possible that they kept secrets from one another? For a single moment he began to doubt whether he could trust Ng Ah. Then he smiled grimly and tried to picture the extraordinary girl who accompanied them to Tortoise Island.

In the garden the bees were humming even louder than the circular saw in the woodshed. The sun flooded the courtyard and set fire to the flame-of-the-forest tree. Meifu was singing in her bedroom. He heard the click of her long needles. He was certain now that she was preparing her marriage clothes. Birds were chattering in the high branches. Logs were being hauled ashore on sliding-ways which creaked and filled the air with a continual scream. All sounds were discordant. *ThcJlap-Jlap* of wooden clogs on the stairs suddenly became unbearable. One of the kitchen-maids brushed against him as he passed downstairs, and he recoiled from the touch of her silk coat. His nerves were on edge. Suddenly he stood silent. There came to his ears the loveliest sound he had ever heard—the welcome sound of Ng Ah scouring the copper pans.

"Tien Hsueh will never recognise me," he told himself, "but even if we were ghosts in Heaven Ng Ah would always recognise me. Now that grandfather has said I may take her as a concubine, she belongs to me as nothing else belongs to me. Tien Hsueh will always belong to herself, but Ng Ah will always belong to me."

Early in December the two weddings took place. Cheong was married to Tien Hsueh in Singapore, and Meifu was

married to Goh Seng in Malacca. For more than a week before her departure Meifu spent all her time crying. She could not bear to leave the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. She could not bear the thought of being separated from her brother. On the journey to Singapore her mother had promised her to Goh Seng, but she never believed that the promise would be carried out, and when Goh Seng was sent to manage a rubber estate in Negri Sembilan, she knew that her childhood had come to an end, she could no longer behave irresponsibly and Ng Ah would no longer comfort her. Long before grandfather, she realised that Ng Ah was madly in love with Cheong. At first she behaved as though her heart was broken with jealousy; later she repented and did everything she could to prevent grandfather or her father from hearing of their love affair. One evening, when Cheong returned from work, he discovered carpets laid in the corridor and in his bedrooms. He immediately accused Ng Ah of spending her small savings on the carpets, but Ng Ah was as surprised as he was. He suspected everyone except his sister. Once, he spoke of the carpets to Meifu, she raised her eyebrows in a very childish astounded manner and sucked in her cheeks. His suspicions increased when he discovered An-mei arguing with Meifu about her marriage with Goh Seng. "He does not believe in love," she said, and suddenly her voice became vibrant with emotion. "In the Hall of the Cloud at Rest only Cheong loves. Does grandfather love? Does father love? Only my brother is capable of loving for its own sake."

Cheong was astounded. He had never thought of love before. To possess a great affection for Ng Ah seemed to him the most natural thing in the world, for they had grown up together and they were inseparable even when they were children. When grandfather spoke of love, he was thinking of the drinking bouts in the days of the T'ang and Sung Emperors when the great poets wrote poems to the eyes of dancing-girls, but he had never spoken to a dancing-girl and he would not understand why men should waste time writing in hot blood when there were other things to do. Ng Ah had become as necessary to him as rice and air. He was never allowed into her bedroom, and she came to him only when he desired her. Except at

night, they never spoke of their love but communicated by a complicated series of signs. Even at night they rarely spoke. During the day he would forget her until a finely carved piece of wood or a well-seasoned log reminded him of her. They loved in silence, and to Cheong this seemed to be the most natural thing in the world.

In Meifu's bedroom the silk coverlets and damask curtains became more numerous each day. The presents she would take from the Cheong family to the Seng family in Malacca were piled round the small bedroom; there were rosewood wardrobes, camphor-wood chests intricately carved with designs of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, there were smaller chests for spices and handkerchiefs, fruit-caskets, hammered silver and pewter dishes, a grandfather clock, three small glass-covered tables and eight chairs which Cheong had designed after a European pattern. Nearly all these presents were made in the woodshed. Ng Ah embroidered the curtains for the bridal bed. An-mei opened the cedar-wood box containing the family heirlooms and set aside three gold bracelets and a small platinum ornament for her hair. As soon as Meifu was married, her pigtail would be cut off and instead of the single thread of red ribbon in her hair, she would be allowed to wear jewellery. Yet Meifu was disconsolate. The rubber-estate was far from anywhere, and she would be allowed to return to Singapore only three or four times a year.

"I shall be alone, and no one will remember me," she sighed. "I shall be forgotten——"

The night before she took the train for Malacca, Ng Ah came into her bedroom and they slept together as they often slept when they were children. Meifu cried even in her sleep. Ng Ah slept fitfully, awakened by Meifu's sighs and the child stirring in her. She thought she was sleeping with Cheong and embraced Meifu madly, but afterwards she remained silent, wondering how soon her mistress would forget the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. In Ng Ah's mind a clear philosophy had arisen. She believed in only one thing—the love she bore for the house in which she had lived ever since she could remember. She was heart-broken at Meifu's departure; at the same time she knew that she would not be heart-broken for ever. Soon there would

be children to take their minds from their cares. Tien Hsueh would produce children, Meifu would produce children, she herself would produce children. In future there would be no time to be heart-broken.

Already all the presents had been sent to Malacca. The bedroom was empty, and Ng Ah had disappeared. In the cool morning light Meifu shivered and buried her face on the pillow. "If only I could be married in Singapore," she thought, tossing feverishly on the bed. Outside she heard Ng Ah lighting the spills before the spirit altar. Afterwards there was a long silence and she knew the maid-servant was bowing to the four corners of the earth with lighted tapers in her hands. "If I could take Ng Ah with me," Meifu sighed, "I would be happy, but even this is impossible, for it would break Ti's heart." She dressed slowly, not in her bridal costume, but in her everyday gown. When she looked in the mirror, she saw her face as pale as a wax taper, and she hurriedly called Ng Ah to paint her cheeks.

"Don't worry," Ng Ah admonished her. "You will not be alone. Grandfather is going with you, and your mother and father, and you will often come to stay in Singapore."

Meifu refused to be comforted. In two days she would be separated from her parents. On her bridal night they would pack their luggage, and the next morning they would be gone. While they were waiting for the carriage, messages came from the Seng family. There were scrolls on red silk, and inside the scrolls were pearl-necklaces, handkerchiefs and bracelets. Each scroll contained a present, but Meifu could barely summon enough strength to look at them. Suddenly she realised that the parting with Cheong would come at any moment. Grandfather came downstairs in a ceremonial gown. He led her before the family altar, where Cheong was waiting for her. Grandfather addressed the ancestors in an unnaturally loud voice, while from inside her bedroom An-mei could be heard sighing and groaning.

"This is terrible," Meifu whispered to herself. "In a jnoment I shall be hysterical. I must keep quiet. Perhaps Goh Seng will love me after all. One is always calm in despair. One may even be more brave."

Until she reached the station, she refused to cry. An-mei was lifted carefully into the train by her father, but grandfather refused any assistance. Ng Ah and Cheong remained behind. At the last moment a few more marriage presents were discovered by the Malay gate-keeper of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, who arrived at the station in a taxi a few minutes before the train steamed away. Grandfather could not determine whether it was bad omen that the presents were forgotten or a good omen that they were found in time. Such a thing had never occurred in the family before. He laughed nervously at Cheong and Ng Ah, he made jokes about the marriage and promised Meifu that he would stay in Malacca until a week after the marriage, but Meifu was gradually losing control of herself. She laughed hysterically when she saw him fumbling for the tickets. Afterwards, ashamed of herself, she huddled into a corner seat and gazed at Cheong, as though her whole life depended upon retaining in her memory a portrait of her brother. Suddenly it occurred to her that when Cheong was married a fortnight later, she might be able to obtain permission from her husband to return to Singapore. She decided to behave towards her husband so sweetly and so devotedly that he would be unable to refuse her request.

"It's all settled," she said suddenly. "I shall come down. Goh Seng will be unable to refuse such a small thing."

And suddenly the weight of months of anxiety seemed to leave her, and she laughed gaily, and waved her handkerchief as the train steamed out of the station. "It's all settled," she told herself, smiling at Cheong. "Why should I worry? I shall always be welcome in the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. My husband will treat me well, and perhaps I shall soon have a child and forget my worries."

Grandfather swayed from side to side in the carriage. He thought of marriages in the Liu valley. When his daughter was married, she travelled by bullock-cart for eight weeks before she reached 'the home of her affections.' In those days marriages were solemn affairs. Many days were spent in celebrations, gifts were scattered far and wide, no one thought of hurrying. But now the train was hurrying northward across Singapore Island in the direction of Malacca, trees flashed past,

the telegraph wires made him dizzy and he could no longer think clearly. Meifu was sobbing. He thought she was sobbing because she was afraid of Goh Seng. He did not know she was sobbing with joy because she would soon be back in Singapore.

On his own wedding day Cheong awoke early. It was still dark outside, but already the birds were singing. A faint light shone under his door, and he heard his father walking about downstairs. For the first time he realised how empty the Hall of the Cloud at Rest could be at night, and suddenly he remembered that Ng Ah had left three days before for Cloud Temple Hall. The thought of her absence chilled him. Echoes followed one another around the house with startling rapidity. Grandfather was awake. His mother was praying. This had never happened before so early in the morning. It was three o'clock in the morning. At twelve o'clock Tien Hsueh would arrive in a sedan-chair. He tried to think of Tien Hsueh, but he could only remember the small girl, older than her years, who accompanied them to Tortoise Island. He shivered, jumped out of bed and poured cold water over his head; then he rubbed his body down vigorously and stood by the window, breathing deeply the cool air over the river.

On the chair beside the bed hung a grey scholar's gown which once belonged to grandfather. He touched it. It was cool and soft—the softest silk he had ever touched. Accustomed to cotton trousers and a singlet, he was afraid of this silk gown, which he would wear all day and which he would remove only at night. He thought of Tien Hsueh, but even when he remembered the photographs sent by the Hsiung family, he could not remember details of her face. She was cool like the silk, and there was no expression in her white limpid face. "Shall I recognise her when I see her?" he asked himself. The flame-of-the-forest tree was waving in the cool breeze. Along the corridor candles were moving. The house was slowly awakening.

When he was washed and dressed, his hair neatly combed, his feet in silk slippers, he walked downstairs to pray before the family altar. The corridors were deserted, but the whole

family and all the servants were waiting for him beside the spirit screen. He bowed to his parents and to the spirits. To his grandfather he made the deepest and most ceremonial bow of all. Tapers were lit. A few presents were shown to the spirits—a bicycle, a new saw, a photograph of the assembled family with Meifu frowning and grandfather looking absurdly like a picture of the old philosopher Lao Tzu. Until this day Cheong had no great faith in the ancestors. He worshipped them perfunctorily, in the belief that the customs of the household had acquired a curious validity because they were so old. But this morning, before the sun rose and while the tapers were flickering, they seemed to be present in the air and their familiar features were almost visible on the small wooden tablet where their names were engraved in gold. The air was cold, and everyone was impassive. He knew they were praying for the continuation of the Cheong family and not for him. He knew that the weddings in the Cheong family were only incidents in the long history of the clan, which one day would return to China. The candles dazzled him. The silk gown made him uncomfortable. Through his excited mind there passed the small pageant of his life, in which Ng Ah and Tien Hsueh became confused until he almost believed that in a few hours the golden sedan-chair, with the rich red velvet curtains, would arrive in the court-yard with Ng Ah. One by one his family left him. The servants had disappeared. He was left alone, sitting in a high-backed chair facing the spirit tablet, waiting for the sunrise.

In the quietness of the large room, where porcelain plates gleamed dully from the walls and no light shone through the coloured windows, he seemed to be at peace. The musicians and carriages would come, but they would fail to disturb his peace. A sense of tremendous responsibility settled upon him. A carpenter will examine the wood from all angles before deciding where it should be sawn. Before a Chinese marriage both the bride and the bridegroom wait for the sunrise. There were no sounds in the house. The gold letters on the spirit tablets glittered in the candle-light, and now for the first time he thought he saw the ancestors passing before his eyes. The gold letters became alive. They moved in a ghostly procession

among the candles. Some were old and admonishing, others were young and reproachful. Some had died young, others were bent double with the weight of years. All possessed the round foreheads of the Cheongs and all were handsome. They trailed their gowns, and in their hurry to allow others to come up with them they danced among the candle-flames and their pigtails flapped in the breeze. Gongs were struck, and in the smithy the armour was being hammered into shape. For the first time in twenty years Cheong remembered Three Bird Tower and the coffin with its thick coating of dust—the coffin and the sea-shells and the suits of armour—and grandfather was hurrying to the powder-tower to speak with the bandits. Grandfather was saying: "As soon as we have earned seven thousand taels of silver, we shall return," but he knew they would never return as owners of the village. Everything was passing so swiftly—the faces among the candle flames disappeared in the leaping shadows on the wall—and he knew that China would never be the same again. A wooden drum was beating in his brain. The air grew cooler and fresher. He sat before the spirit tablets, his arms folded over his chest, his back straight, dressed in silk, waiting for his bride, waiting for the sunrise, waiting for something—he could not tell what it was.

One of the maid-servants entered quietly with a glass of chrysanthemum tea. One of the three clocks in the house began to chime the half-hour. The steam from the white tea filled the room with a scent like orange-blossom. But now the hours before sunrise no longer dragged, and every moment was more soothing than the last. He never once thought of Tien Hsueh, though she was constantly present in the background of his mind. He thought of sawn timbers, the prow of his motor-boat, the flame-of-the-forest tree shedding its petals in a high wind, and gradually the thoughts concentrated on the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. The thin light of dawn came under the door and through the coloured windows, but the light resembled mist: it did not disturb his silent thoughts. At nine o'clock, when the room was flooded in sunlight, he was still there, contemplating the red and gold letters with the names of his ancestors.

At nine o'clock he was awakened from his dream by the

sound of crackers in the yard. The workmen were coming to pay their respects. They laughed and called out to him, but for some reason he had no desire to see them to-day and instead he walked np into grandfather's library.

"Since you are to be married to-day," grandfather said, "I shall open a bottle of wine." He pointed to a wooden box like a small container for paintings. "This wine is two hundred years old. May the spirit of the old China enter your veins when you taste this wine."

For years Cheong had seen this box on the shelf. The box was decorated with grandfather's seal and small paintings of the country around Ai-lin. Cheong always thought it contained a painting. Now, as the slender bottle was brought from its bed of rice-straw, he saw that the glass was black with age and covered with a hard crust of tartar. The seal of an early Ching Emperor was imprinted on the bottle. Grandfather waved the head of the bottle over a candle flame. He was exactly like a soothsayer chanting over a sacrificial fire.

"This is to warn the spirits," grandfather said with a slow smile of approval.

Cheong fetched the glasses from the sideboard and waited for grandfather to pour out the wine. The dust from the bottle was first wiped away with a silk cloth. Slowly the wine was poured into the thin porcelain cups, a dark red wine, almost black and as thick as treacle. Grandfather lifted it to his lips, smiled at Cheong and began drinking, but he had hardly drunk more than a sip when he started choking.

"It's strong, it's strong," he kept repeating, "a perfect wine for a marriage night."

Already there were sounds in the court-yard. The procession was arriving. Tien Hsueh was invisible behind the curtains of the sedan, but all round her were her relatives and serving-maids. The boys carrying the sedan were especially beautiful, and looking through the coloured windows of grandfather's library they seemed to be unreal, and he thought they were the ghosts of his future children. The wine had made him a little light-headed. He smiled stupidly, watched one of the boys lighting fireworks and turned to grandfather, who was pouring out more and more wine. "She will come into the house, and

for the first time in many years I shall see her. Afterwards I shall see her every day and every night. Why have they separated me from her for so long?" He did not once think of Ng Ah, though he looked surprised when one of the maid-servants entered with a tray.

In China the husband goes to the bride's house with an empty sedan-chair to carry the bride home. This custom had been dispensed with because there were not enough sedans in Singapore. In the court-yard the boys were playing round the sedan as though they were running races round a tree. No one seemed to think of the bride suffocating inside.

"Why are they waiting?" Cheong asked impatiently.

"Evidently your father and mother are not ready to receive the bride," grandfather began, but already the bride was coming through the thick heavy-quilted curtains, and he saw that she wore a phoenix crown, a vest of morning cloud, a green skirt and small red shoes which hovered in and out of her skirt like the tip of an impudent tongue. And suddenly the court-yard seemed to be full of all the Chinese in Singapore—there were no longer only the beautiful boys and the bride's relatives—and there was a brass band, and men in startling costumes were carrying gifts under hangings of scarlet satin. The bride entered the house, supported on each side by her serving-maids. Her face was concealed in a red veil, and she seemed to be fainting under the immense weight of her crown. Downstairs Cheong Ehr Sung in a mandarin coat which he last wore in Ai-lin was waiting for the bride, who tottered into the hall to the screams of the brass band. While he was waiting for the bride to enter, Cheong Ehr Sung was so nervous that he began tipping everybody. Mye Chieh, the youngest maid-servant, was given two dollars and Leong Chye was given three dollars, because he looked so miserable. Five minutes later they were both given five dollars, because he had already seen them before.

All over the court-yard sulphur crackers were bursting. The band was playing, and the smell from the kitchen, where meals for all the relatives were being prepared, rose through the house like a pleasant south-easterly breeze in lagging sails. "The wind is beginning to rise: I must begin to live," Cheong

murmured, drinking his last cup of treacly black-red wine before descending the stairs. "How is she? Is she beautiful?" he whispered to Nye Chieh, but she was so overcome with nervousness that she said nothing and only gaped with her mouth open.

Grandfather already wore his scholar's robes with engraved silk phoenixes and dragons, but Cheong had not yet slipped into his decorated over-gown. He felt nervous and sullen. The memory of Ng Ah was slowly reviving in his brain, and he was already exhausted by the preparations which had lasted over three weeks, and even now, when people were clapping and watching the presents from the bride's family as they were unloaded in the house, he could not believe he was being married. The long vigil during the morning left him feverish, and everything that happened during the ceremony he saw through feverish eyes and with a feverish desire to escape—anywhere, anywhere at all, as long as it was out of the world. He stood beside Tien Hsueh before the family altar, and during the feast which followed he tasted the Peking ducks supplied by her family. His mother hobbled in, grandfather poured the black-red wine down his throat and laughed at the relatives' coarse jokes, and he laughed still louder at the blushing maid-servants. In the evening, still wearing her phoenix crown, Tien Hsueh attended the performance given by actors on a stage erected in the court-yard. This was the first time he was able to see her clearly, although he had heard her voice often during the day. She was white and fragile, no longer the self-possessed child he met on the journey to Tortoise Island; yet her features were hard and under the heavy white paint and crimson lips, he thought he saw someone he might one day learn to love. She talked in a twittering sing-song voice; she turned her head from side to side like a doll, answering all his questions with downcast eyes and performing all the duties expected of a bride, waiting upon mother-in-law, kneeling before grandfather, saying little and eating like a small bird. Her red shoes hovered in and out of the green ivory skirt, and the red veil pushed back over the crown gave her the appearance of some strange white animal too fragile to live long in the world.

The long afternoon and evening wore away. One by one the relatives left, weeping according to the custom, and meanwhile swarms of coolies entered the court-yard selling chickens, pears, grapes, lotus wine, eggs and pomegranates. Cheong Ehr Sung paid no respect to money. He bought everything he saw in the hope that it would give some pleasure to his daughter-in-law, and when he was drunk with the black-red wine he laughed with grandfather and together they performed a solemn dance of thanksgiving. Seeing them as they danced round the room in their flowing red gowns, Tien Hsueh laughed for the first time that day. Cheong was surprised at the clearness of her laughter. He began, to watch her closely. Ng Ah was strong and brown; this woman was weak and white, and so delicate that he imagined her made of white glass. Her forehead was perfectly round and smooth, her hands were limp and cool, and when they touched him accidentally they sent an extraordinary shiver down his spine. He felt no desire for her, and no love. She was so slim that he could almost fold his hands round her waist, and she was so small that if he carried her he would hardly be aware of her weight. "She is as light*as a feather and she will dance away at the first opportunity," he told himself.

At night, when she lay white against his dark skin, she seemed to dance in his arms. Her white face peered up at him in the faint light coming through the decorated curtains without fear or anxiety. How small she was! She was smaller than Ng Ah. Her bones were even more slender, and her curved eyelashes were almost as long as his mother's.

"You are not frightened?" he asked. "You have never seen me, and yet you are not frightened?"

Suddenly he remembered Crystal Jade gathering sand-beetles in the hot sand of the island. Tien Hsueh shivered in his arms. She was crying and shivering, and for the first time he felt pity for this creature made of dancing glass. Her large eyes opened wide in resentment, but immediately they filled with tears. Soon they had forgotten Crystal Jade, and for a long time they remained awake. In the morning grandfather poured another bottle of black-red wine in the porcelain cups. "The curtains rattled all night,"

he laughed. "You were like two untamed tigers in a cage."

Three weeks later Ng Ah returned hurriedly from Cloud Temple Hall. She was heavy with child and very pale, with blue rings under her eyes. She walked unsteadily and seemed to have lost her youthfulness. Grandfather noticed that she was continually wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. One evening in August, when the whole house was away, she gave birth to a boy silently, without crying out and with the assistance of the Malay wife of the gate-keeper. When the family returned the child was sleeping in her arms, a child whose puckered face and enormous eyes suggested that it would live in spite of its weak body. Grandfather held a small green jade Buddha near the baby, whose hands suddenly darted from under the thick shawls and grasped it. From that moment the baby was called Green Jade. Cheong presented Ng Ah with a gold wrist-watch. She seemed to be even more delighted with the wrist-watch than the baby, and held it to her ears, and then she would burst out laughing, holding Green Jade and the green jade Buddha and the wrist-watch in a single embrace of happiness and proud joy. An-mei came to inspect the baby. On her forehead as she hobbled into the room lay the deep etching of a frown; but she noticed that Green Jade possessed her own long eyelashes and instead of frowning she smiled. "He will live long," she said. "He will grow up like his father and become a carpenter." Then swinging on her heels she said: "This is a disgrace for the family. Take care of him. There have been many disgraces in the family and they have all turned out well." Neither Cheong nor Ng Ah noticed that she was nerve-racked with pain and that she had expended nearly all her energy in coming to see the new grandchild.

Ng Ah did not cry during the birth of Green Jade, but Tien Hsueh wept bitterly during the birth of her children. She screamed the house down and shouted for help at the slightest pain. Her small dancer's body was so thin that it seemed impossible that she would produce a child. But Crystal Stream was born in December, and Crystal Talk the following November. Two years later Crystal Virtue was born and Tien

Hsueh decided to have no more children. All her children were alike. They were small and fragile at first, and seemed to resemble their mother only when they were babies. Afterwards they grew in their own way and according to their own laws, and Cheong was puzzled to see in Crystal Stream's dark beauty or Crystal Talk's monkey-face any resemblance to Tien Hsueh or himself.

"This will come later," said An-mei one day when Cheong went to ask her advice.

"And what do you think of Green Jade?" Cheong smiled.

"He is the most beautiful of my grandchildren," An-mei replied. "But take care of him—he has already passed successfully through three fevers."

"When he is older, I shall take him to live with Ng Ah in Cloud Temple Hall. Then there will be no bitterness between Tien Hsueh and Ng Ah, and Green Jade will grow strong."

He smiled with pleasure at the thought of spending weekends with Ng Ah in the north of the island. Meanwhile he lived with Tien Hsueh, rarely seeing the concubine unless he strayed into the kitchen. Catching her sometimes on feast-days he would sit and watch her basting the meat or making moon-cakes of pink sessamine seeds. When she had baked the cakes, and the meat lay snug in the ovens, she would stand back in the smoke and steam of the kitchen, her sleeves rolled up, her arms red and her starched coat still creaking a little, smiling curiously, like someone who had won a victory but dared not admit it. He stood watching her, overcome by an inconsolable passion to know what was going through her mind, while Green Jade rolled on the floor at their feet. On these days he would forget Tien Hsueh entirely, and when darkness came down, a strange wordless silence brought them together, while old words and images flared up in his mind like distant fires. At those moments he would remember the taste of *durian*, and think gratefully of her love. All night they would remain talking, half conscious of the presence of Green Jade in a cot near the bed; but in the morning he would forget her and return to Tien Hsueh's bedroom with the scents of spices and expensive perfumes, of silk pillows and small white jars of face-cream. Tien Hsueh would look

at him sleepily, and looking at her small white body and her large eyes full of a restless, magnetic life, he realised that he would never be able to choose between them.

IX

THE day had been hot and still, and the water-buffaloes were soaking themselves in the ponds, their noses and curved horns lying upon the black surface of the water. The red tiled roofs of Cloud Temple Hall nestled deep in the tulip trees. The mangoes were in flower, and the rubber trees were shedding their leaves. In the nursery garden there was a blaze of red and white flowers. Cheong had been working in the garden all afternoon. He worked bare-foot, splashing through the thick mud, pulling out the rotten mangroves and erecting stakes to prevent the earth from subsiding. Now the flowers were shooting up—hibiscus, azaleas and peonies—and the earth which had been thick and wild, too heavy for the spade, was being tamed. Around him the flowers grew waist-high, hiding the mangrove-swamps. He threw down his spade and stretched his back. The sweat glistened on his chest and on his face and arms. He listened to the sounds coming from Cloud Temple Hall—Ng Ah was singing and Green Jade was clapping his hands. Cheong laughed with happiness, wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and took up his spade. He told himself he would plant three more rows of flowers before the evening.

Ng Ah sat on a wooden bench on the south side of the house, nursing her son. She wore a red scarf over her hair, a silk coat embroidered with peonies, black trousers and her feet were bare. She swung Green Jade high in the air and let him fall. Close by the seat Cheong had made for her the bees were humming in a clump of tulip trees. In the hot sunshine the fragrance of the tulips was rich and sweet, and the colour of the petals was deep yellow against the blue sky. A light breeze rustled the leaves of the rubber trees and the small green crocodiles were stirring in the mangroves. Ng Ah felt drowsy

with the heat and the pain of all this beauty. Green Jade's long eyelashes were black and silky like his father's, but his face was pale, the colour of ivory, and she thought she detected in his large dark eyes a gleam of fever.

"Where's grandfather?" Green Jade asked suddenly.

"He's fishing—look over there," Ng Ah pointed through the mangroves to where a small red boat was rocking on the tide. "You'll have fish for dinner," she smiled and once more she threw him in the air.

Grandfather heard them and drew in his line. He was glad to sit still, with the rod dangling over the clear blue water, the forest in front of him and behind him the red tiles of Cloud Temple Hall. He heard Green Jade laughing, Cheong stamping through the black mud and Ng Ah's voice as she sang to his great-grandson. The heat of the day had drained his strength, but their voices came resonantly over the water and awakened him. Green Jade was a puny, sallow-faced child, whose face puckered with nightmares in sleep and who was continually whimpering when his mother was away. There seemed to be a curious understanding between mother and child, as though neither could exist without the other. Of all his great-grandchildren Green Jade possessed the brightest eyes and the whitest skin. As he rocked in the boat under the pitiless heat of the sky, grandfather thought seriously of this child whose strange ways frightened him a little. He sighed, removed the small wriggling fish from the end of the line and threw it back in the sea.

The land round Cloud Temple Hall was scorched and dry. Where previously there were mangrove swamps and green crocodiles, there was now a fenced garden with fruit trees. There were almonds, melons, golden-green papayas and the sweet-smelling plant Malays call 'virgin's breath.' The motor-boat brought red earth and sand from Singapore. Lorries came over the Johore Causeway with baskets of earth from Malacca—grandfather had seen a vegetable garden near the sea-shore at Malacca where everything blossomed splendidly, and these baskets of earth were birthday presents for Cheong. Throughout all the preliminary work, Ng Ah had been there. Dressed like a peasant woman with her trousers rolled up to

her knees and a square red hat on her head to protect her from the sun, she worked with hoe and mattock within a few weeks of Green Jade's birth. Now she gazed at the reclaimed land with pride, thinking how it would produce the food which would make Green Jade well. She was the mistress of Cloud Temple Hall. Tien Hsueh remained in Singapore with her three children, but she was not the mistress of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, for An-mei still ruled from the bed-chamber, a harsh, critical An-mei whose illness made her ruthless within the narrow walls of her house. Here, however, no orders were given in sharp voices and grandfather's authority was shown in look and gestures, the gestures of an old man too pleased to be away from the town to rebuke anyone or find anything wrong.

"Don't go near the crocodiles," Ng Ah shouted after Green Jade as he ran in the direction of the fence.

She was afraid he would break through the fence, for his legs were sturdy and his body was well-formed; it was only the pale face and heavy black eyelashes which gave him the appearance of being feverish.

It was nearly midday. The sun was riding overhead. Over in Johore the Malays were lighting their cooking-fires, and great plumes of smoke rose over the jungle. Ng Ah often thought she would like to go to Johore, but she never had time. It was not often that she sat still. The days were full. At six o'clock in the morning she rose and milked the goats, leaving the boy to sleep on until she came back again. She strained the warm milk and sweetened it, then boiled the rice. If there were any vegetables in the garden, she would pluck them and stir them into the rice-bowl, for the doctor told her fresh vegetables were good for consumptives, and although she did not believe that Green Jade was consumptive, she saw no harm in feeding him well. After breakfast she worked in the fields, driving piles into the earth, cutting off the dead branches of mangroves, breaking up the soil where it was hard and leading water-channels through the soft mossy earth where the mangroves on the bank had been cut away. But when it rained, she stayed indoors with Green Jade, teaching him to speak and telling him stories she had learnt in her childhood in

Hanan. Meanwhile, she had grown older, but she had not changed. Her hair was still polished with wax, her hands were still well-kept and she still wore a handkerchief on the button of her coat. She smiled tenderly when she saw Green Jade returning with his father.

"The earth is good and ripe," Cheong said, laughing and screwing up his eyes as he caught a glimpse of grandfather in the rowing-boat. "We'll make something of it yet, *pao-pao*."

Ng Ah's face which had been sad a few moments before brightened as Green Jade ran into her arms. She folded him against her breast, tenderly and fiercely.

"Oh leave him, leave him, don't always fondle him," Cheong exclaimed, wiping the black mud from his arms.

But he did not speak brusquely, and Ng Ah pressed the boy still closer to her breast, smiling over his head at the strange black husband who was covered in mud from head to foot.

"Go and get some water, boy," Cheong said, and immediately Green Jade climbed down from his mother's arms and ran for the two empty petrol tins. The tins were attached to a bamboo pole, which he balanced carefully on his shoulder. Then he ran down to the duck-pond, his legs flashing, the tins shining like silver coins. He half-filled them with water—they were too heavy if he filled them to the brim—and came staggering back with a triumphant expression on his small pale face. His father stood a little way away pouring the water over his back and chest, an unrecognisable father whose body glistened with streaks of wet mud and who roared with laughter at Green Jade's pale face and serious expression.

"Can I do that too?" he asked.

"Yes, you can do it—but not now," his father said, lifting him up in his wet arms and shaking him until the blood rushed to his face. "You'll soon be digging vegetables in the fields."

"How soon, Father?"

There was no answer, but Green Jade saw Ng Ah and Cheong smiling at each other and he knew that it would only be a few more days before he was working beside his father in the fields.

Grandfather came up the landing-stage with a basket of

struggling wet fish. He showed them proudly to Cheong and squatted on the seat beside Ng Ah.

"I want them well cooked," he laughed, "with sessamine sauce and perhaps chicken noodles. Could you kill one of your chickens, do you think?"

"They're not big enough yet, Grandfather."

"Well, cook them, girl. I'm hungry. It's hot on the water. I've been fishing for two hours and this is all I have caught."

He held up the basket and twirled it in his fingers. Green Jade saw the fish leaping round and slithering over one another, still alive, the gills breathing; and he clapped his hands.

"Yes, cook them, Mother," he shouted happily.

They cooked the fish over a stone fire. The warm smell of fried fish in noodles was pleasant after the stale smell of man-groves. The sun was straight overhead. It blazed hot on the silent yard where they squatted round the fire, making no sound as they ate except to click their chop-sticks together when they were particularly pleased with the crisp taste of the fish. At noon there is always a sudden hush over Malaya. The water was too gentle and slow to make a sound, the summer sky an intensely bright blue without clouds or wind. Cheong got up and soaked his feet in a round tin bath of steaming water from the kitchen. He came back with a picture book for Green Jade and tried to make him read, but they were both too drowsy and contented to worry about the Chinese characters. Ng Ah fanned herself vigorously and grandfather went to sleep with his fishing-line in one hand and the wattle basket in the other.

It was Sunday, and Ng Ah knew that Cheong would return in the evening. Perhaps he would take grandfather with him, but certainly she would be left with Green Jade. The old problem of Tien Hsueh came up in her mind, but she had defeated jealousy in hard manual labour, and she was too wrapped up in her child to remember that Cheong spent every evening during the week with Tien Hsueh, who looked like a Shanghai fashion-plate in a white brocade gown slit to the thigh. Ng Ah's brow furrowed. Green Jade drowsed on her lap, sometimes puckering up his forehead as the dreadful

dreams returned, sometimes shouting out, but more often he was still. The fire died down until the red embers alone showed of the immense roaring fire they laboriously constructed together; and there was no wind to set the embers alight. The afternoon passed away in memories of China. The motionless earth lay silent under the weight of blue sky and even the butterflies and dragonflies seemed drowsy with the slow heat of a Malayan afternoon.

At four o'clock grandfather awoke and demanded chrysanthemum tea. While this was being prepared, Cheong went down to the landing-stage and inspected the engine of the motor-boat. After the small thimble-cups of chrysanthemum tea were passed round, grandfather went to sleep again, but Cheong was wide awake. He decided not to wake grandfather, who was snoring peacefully and whose broad-brimmed straw hat had fallen over his face: instead he decided to walk round the fence of Cloud Temple Hall with Green Jade on his back.

As they walked along the cart-track in silence, looking at the vegetable gardens and the nursery, the afternoon sunlight, a warm lemon-colour, made the rubber trees shine a deeper red and the flowers of the tulip trees a deeper yellow. The sun was falling over Johore, but it was still high in the sky. Green Jade was half awake, but he was always heavy after sleep and Ng Ah watched him carefully for fear he would stray from the path. Now and then he lagged behind to watch a horned snail or to pick up a leaf, which he carefully put in his pocket. In all his movements he was quiet and methodical; but when a kingfisher flashed through the branches of a casuarina tree his quietness left him and he went crashing through the undergrowth in an effort to seize the bird in his hands. The whirring of the blue wings entranced him even more than the lovely yellow bird with grey wing-tips which flew with a kind of hopping motion in the high branches. The slender body of the bird was honey-yellow and the long narrow wings were an even deeper yellow except at the tips. But whenever he ran after birds, he heard his father behind him, and he dared not get lost for fear of the crocodiles on the bank.

When they came to the end of the fence near the sea, Green Jade stood back cowering. The sea was wide and deep, with a

few Malay fishing-vessels off-shore. In a green pool the crocodiles lay sunning themselves, broad and fat, as nimble as minnows when his father threw stones at them. And when the crocodiles struck off with swift movements of their tails, his father flung his head back, swelling his lungs and his breast with the string sound of his healthy laughter until the boy was laughing also.

"Don't go near them, Green Jade," father said, shaking a warning finger.

"No—n-no!" Green Jade cried, running into his mother's arms, laughing and crying.

"Ah, keep away from them, son, then they won't hurt you."

As they walked back along the fence, admiring the vegetables and daffodils, Cheong wondered whether it was wise to leave Ng Ah alone with grandfather on the northern shores of Malaya. There was no village on the island nearer than four miles away. Between the Cloud Temple Hall and the first village on the main road from Singapore there were rubber trees which had grown foul with age, a stretch of impenetrable forest where wild pig and deer crawled through the undergrowth, and hamadryads sunned themselves on the branches of the trees; there were small snakes and pale-green land-crabs and crocodiles; mangrove swamps and the stumps of Malay villages long forgotten. It hurt him to think of them there defenceless against robbers and wild animals except for the split-bamboo fence, and suddenly he gathered Green Jade in his arms and said:

"Would you like to go back to the Hall of the Cloud at Rest?"

Green Jade thought for a moment, his brow puckered and at that moment he saw a blue kingfisher skimming over the sea towards him with a whirring beat of its wings.

"No—no, Father," he said, his eyes narrowing as he watched the brilliant blue bird.

"His eyes are like yours," Ng Ah said proudly as they walked back to Cloud Temple Hall.

They were silent then, taking in the scenery, walking so slowly that Green Jade who usually lagged behind was far in front. He stopped to admire the green sticky buds of the

casuarina trees and the black roots and air-tubes of mangroves. He dug a sodden leaf from the mud with enormous concentration, carefully scraping round it for fear that it would break and crumble in his hands, and stroking it until it shone again, its dead life reviving under his hot eager breath. He heard his parents talking in low voices—always this meant they were talking about him. He smiled as he put the leaf carefully in his pocket and waited for them to come up. He walked slowly beside his father, breathing quick gulps of breath, happy now because he seemed so close to his father.

Near the red-brick shrine Ng Ah halted. She gathered flowers from the nursery garden and placed them on the altar. It was cool inside the shrine and distant voices came clearly, but she was shaking with emotion, already conscious of separation. It was growing late. Inside the shrine flowers and altar-cloths gleamed, and the red taper threw a smoky light on the small jade figure of Kuan-Yin. Ng Ah bowed, touching the altar with her forehead, then she walked slowly in the direction of Cloud Temple Hall.

"Are you going now?" grandfather looked up from his book. "I'll come with you to the motor-boat."

"There's no need."

"I can still walk. If you want to live to a ripe age, be a scholar, and smoke opium." He smiled wickedly, laid the book aside and accompanied them down to the launch.

As they left the house, the sky over Johore was liquid with changing golden light, the evening full of gentle airs, the Straits unrippled except for the little rings made by swallows as their wings stroked the water. A slate-blue heron waded in the clear shallow water near the bank, silent like the white palaces and temples on the opposite shore. "There are no wild geese here," grandfather remarked. "It's a pity—I should like to see the wild geese again." A swallow-tail ran with little frightened cries along the stubble pathway, one wing broken, the other hanging limp and covered with blood. Green Jade ran ahead, caught it and pressed it eagerly against his chest.

"Don't put it in your pocket, Green Jade," his father laughed.

And while Green Jade was stroking the swallow-tail, making

curious sucking noises of pleasure, grandfather waded out and inspected his home-made fishing-net, all bamboo sticks and string. Numbers of small fishes were trapped as the tide carried them involuntarily towards the Causeway. A moment later he returned with a string of fishes, still alive, threaded through the gills like ropes of cash. In the soft light of evening they shone mysteriously, silver and gold, the tails jet black and the small curling bodies rustling together like distant bells.

"I want you to give them to An-mei," grandfather said, when they came to the motor-launch hidden under the mangroves. "She needs food. What a woman she is! She expects to live without food."

He stroked his beard and lifted Green Jade on his shoulder. Ng Ah was frightened of his strength. His face was yellow, the skin drawn tight over the cheek-bones; and his small eyes, no longer black but dark brown, glinted wickedly like elephant's eyes. At night he would sit in one corner of Cloud Temple Hall, reading and humming to himself, sucking at his opium pipe and sometimes gazing for hours at Green Jade. At night he became a stranger to her, silent and motionless, as weak as a child; but during the day he could not exhaust his energy and even wanted to plough and harrow the earth. As Cheong jumped into the motor-boat, she felt a strange sense of loneliness—as though the revolving globe of the earth was running away from her. •

"You'll be back soon?" she asked, thinking of Tien Hsueh.

"Soon—soon——" he answered as gusts of smoke rose from the exhaust in a purple plume.

"I'm so thankful you have come. We can live on the vegetable garden. Grandfather finds our fish, the goats give us milk and the vegetable garden is in full bloom. What more do we want?"

She sighed and wrung her hands when the nose of the launch turned westward. She stood by grandfather's side, catching the strong smell of opium and fish, and she looked out at the dark sea, where a solitary heron was flying with low sweeps of its grey wings towards the jungle.

"Soon—soon——" she repeated, but the motor-boat was already making away from the shore, the engine chug-chugging

and short plumes of purple smoke rising like gasps from the exhaust.

She stood there until the boat was out of sight, until the sky changed from golden to red and a mist rose over the rubber trees. The Malay cooking-fires in Johore gleamed through the trees, and the smoke rose over the mountains; and she saw how the mangroves were already swallowing up the faint colours of the water, and how the red tiles of Cloud Temple Hall were losing their colour one by one.

They returned hurriedly, making light of Cheong's absence, laughing shrilly when the geese came waddling forward through the lane of mangosteens. Ng Ah hurried into the house and moistened the bran. Green Jade ran into the court-yard with the rice-bowl, afraid of the geese but determined to feed them, standing quite still while they craned their long black necks and their hideous heads pecked and gobbled among a flutter of wings.

"Where's the swallow-tail?" grandfather asked sharply. "Have you lost it?"

"It's in the kitchen," Green Jade said. "Near the fire."

"You'll kill it—you shouldn't leave it unattended——"

Green Jade left the geese and hurried inside. The swallow-tail was slowly reviving. He fondled it and crouched below grandfather's bed with the bird in the crutch of his elbows, singing to himself in exactly the same voice which grandfather used when humming poetry.

Suddenly Ng Ah called to him. She was feeding the ducks and hens in the patch of red earth below the tulip-tree. The tulips were fading. A mist like coils of white rope was threading through the rubber trees.

"What is it?" Green Jade called.

"Some Englishmen are coming—go and hide."

But Green Jade stood by the door, looking at the strange Englishmen with red faces and sunhats, coming through the rubber trees as the sun was sinking. They carried heavy bags and looked tired. They came up to the fence and looked searchingly at the chickens fluttering in the yard, the tulip tree, grandfather's nets and the huge dog chained to the gate.

"May we come in?" they asked in gentle voices.

Ng Ah knew no English except: "Yes, please," and "No, thank you." She thought it was better to say "Yes, please." They came in, talking quickly in voices like the chattering of a defective saw in the wood-yard at the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, not loud but insistent. They looked at the house and the Vegetable garden with enquiring glances; then they shook their heads and bent over the instruments they carried in their heavy travelling bags. Ng Ah bowed continually. She did not dare to call for grandfather. When she saw Green Jade peeping from the house, she made a shooo-ing sound, exactly the same sound which she made when the hens began to fly on her shoulders.

The Englishmen departed five minutes later, saying "Thank you" repeatedly, while Ng Ah smiled, thinking they were pleased with the reclaimed earth and the buildings they put up with so much labour. Afterwards she became frightened. It was almost dark now. A flock of rice-sparrows flew low over the tulip tree. "It will rain during the night," she said, hurrying away to open the flood-gates of the bamboo conduits which led through the vegetable garden. "It hasn't rained for three weeks, but it will rain to-night," she said in a determined voice. When she returned, the sea was quite dark, opaque under the heavy storm-clouds. Johore was invisible behind the thudding clouds. The forests were like great rough scarves, green and white. There was no sign of the Englishmen now. "Have they come to take Cloud Temple Hall away from us?" she cried as she lit the oil-tapers in the house and watched grandfather settle comfortably over the blue flame of his opium lamp. Green Jade was stroking the limp feathers of the golden swallow-tail feverishly, with a kind of burning compassion she had never seen in his eyes before. Darkness fell, and the long lines of flowers and vegetables turned back like the night. The earth was a veritable wonder of shadows, the air leaping from the trees and swirling through the undergrowth of mangroves. A crocodile splashed into the water, a deer barked and she heard the wild pig grunting among the rubber trees. Along the coast the lights of the Malay fishing-boats shone like tapers of milk. "They can never take this away from me," she said urgently.

Inside the house the warm red glow of the oil-lamps was silent and unchanging. These lamps did not flicker like gas-lamps, and they were not so blinding as the electric lamps of glass, with strange coloured filaments inside. Here there was warmth and comfort against the night, the deep comfort which follows exertion as day follows darkness. She sat in a corner with her darning-needle, staring through the greased paper windows at the shadows coming closer. Soon the crocodiles would sleep, the deer would burrow into their caves of grass and even the serpents would close their hooded eyes on the high branches. She went to the door. A great silence seemed to rise from the earth, a silence as deep and pitiless as the earth, sending them to sleep.

Green Jade was awake. He was stroking the bird feverishly and humming grandfather's favourite poem: "Dark night, the wild geese fly high. The Huns are fleeing, fleeing—"

"Go to sleep now, Green Jade."

"Ah, wait until the bird is healed," he said.

She felt his feverish forehead and sighed.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Two years."

"You're too young to heal the bird. Give it to me——"

But instead of giving it to her, he held it fast to his breast, impatient for its beauty, afraid that Ng Ah would touch it, afraid above all that all his love for it would come to harm if another came near it.

"Let him sleep with the swallow-tail," grandfather said.

"To-morrow they will both be well."

Ng Ah said nothing. There was something extraordinarily comforting about the sympathy which existed between the old man and the small boy. As she felt the darkness pushing into the house, so she felt too the sympathy between them like a protecting chain. A storm came up. Through the cracks in the paper window she saw lights moving hurriedly at sea and suddenly the rain came down, lashing at the trees until they bent over under the weight of rain and wind, the sea flecked with white and the tulip tree shaking its branches with a great flourish of leaves. The rain came nearer until it seemed to concentrate on the red roof-tiles, pattering

incessantly, but in the red glow of the oil-lamps she felt safe and at peace.

"It's like the Liu valley," said grandfather. "You never know when it comes."

"Put the swallow-tail away, Green Jade."

"Another minute, Mother."

An alarm clock was ticking. The silence grew deeper and deeper until she thought it would never end. At last the bird was picked up and placed in a cardboard box near the stove, grandfather carefully wiped the end of his opium pipe and Ng Ah for the last time that night spoke aloud, but in a voice so low that no one heard her. She was facing the place where the motor-launch had been hidden under the mangroves.

"Soon—soon——" she said, watching Green Jade as he climbed into the wooden bed.

In the Hall of the Cloud at Rest Cheong Ehr-Sung, the merchant from the Liu valley, no longer possessed authority. While his father was alive and his son managed the business, he was content to surrender the little authority over the family he once possessed and spend every evening with his friends in the cafe's. When grandfather was away in Cloud Temple Hall, he invited his friends to the house, where they played mahjong until three o'clock in the morning, while the children sat round the tables, wild-eyed, tired, but excited by the continual clicking sound of the tiles. An-mei raised no objection, for their laughter pleased her; and when Cheong returned early in the evening to see his wife sitting at their tables, dressed in a white silk Shanghai gown slit to the thigh, he told himself that it was impossible to love two wives and thought more and more of Ng Ah.

"In the old days," he told himself, "a woman was strong, she cooked and served for the family and fulfilled her duties to the ancestors. What is happening in my generation is that all the women desire to look like fishes and all the men desire to be taken for Americans."

He could not understand her pleasure in dancing. Early in the morning she was dressed and powdered for the evening. She seemed spiritless unless she was dancing. He took her

to the Great World Cabaret, danced in an overpowering atmosphere of scent and shaded lamps, where he seemed to be gliding in the deep blue waters of an aquarium, where the small breastless Chinese girls were suddenly transformed into fishes. The heat, the smell of powder and sweat, scent and waxed hair sent him stumbling outside. He could not understand why people danced. "They must be very rich," he thought, "to have so much time to spare." He was twenty-five, but his youth had passed almost before he was aware of its passing.

One evening, three weeks after he had returned from the Cloud Temple Hall, an oblong letter arrived addressed to the elder of the Cheong family. The envelope was thick and greasy, like all official envelopes; and the address was written with a typewriter and there were no stamps on the corner. He placed the letter carefully in his pocket and went to his room, where the drawing-boards were crowded with drawings of ships. For a long time he had been discussing with his father whether they should open a shipyard. Trade was reviving after the great rubber slump. The China coast was full of junks which had hardly changed since the reign of the Emperor Huang Ti five thousand years ago. It was the eighth month, the month of cinnamon, propitious for merchants in wood. For the hundredth time Cheong gazed at the plans on the drawing-board—these junks he had designed like warships, with slender bows and straight stems and great masts of *chcngal* or *belian* wood—and while he gazed at the drawings he listened to the voices coming from the dining-room. His father was growing old, in some ways he was even older than grandfather; always dreaming of the Liu valley and worrying because there were revolutions in Canton which made the journey impossible. He had gradually lost interest in the business he had founded. Without enough money to buy his native village, but with enough to live at ease in Singapore, he seemed to have lost interest in everything but mahjong and sweet Chinese wine.

Crystal Stream knocked on the door. She was six months younger than Green Jade, but she was fatter and quicker and possessed her mother's grace. Green Jade was awkward and

capricious, always wanting the unattainable; Crystal Stream never wanted anything and amused herself for hours watching the play of light on a painted wall.

"Have you come to see me?" he asked, afraid that Tien Hsueh had sent him in to demand money to pay her mahjong debts.

"Yes, Father."

She climbed into his arms. There was a long silence while they both looked at the drawings on the drawing-boards.

"Are you going to build ships, Father?"

"Yes, big ships. They'll take you to China one day."

"To China?"

"One day we're all going back to China," he laughed, amazed that she could recognise the drawings and still more amazed by her quiet seriousness.

He compared her with Green Jade, whose dark eyes and long silky lashes were the first things strangers noticed; but Crystal Stream's eyelashes were short and widely spaced, like a doll's. She possessed her mother's high forehead and slender hands, and her mother's profile—the 'destroy kingdom' profile, which had intoxicated him ever since he saw his wife on the journey to Tortoise Island.

"So we're going back to China, Father?"

"Yes, we'll build great ships and sail them ourselves along the Liu river."

"Where's that?"

"Where I was born. It rains every day and a mist rolls up the mountains and everyone is Chinese."

Crystal Stream gazed at him contentedly as he recounted the history of the Liu valley. At last she fell asleep over the drawing-board: with her hands folded under her forehead, oblivious to the rattle of the tiles in the next room.

Cheong watched her as she slept, hardly breathing, the small bones delicately carved, the round cheeks shaded with sleep. Then he rose quickly and walked into the dining-room, where below clouds of tobacco smoke and incense, his father was smoking a cigar and poring over the heaped stakes of mahjong. Tien Hsueh caught at his sleeve as he passed.

"Have you come to play mahjong, dear?"

She spoke in English, which he hardly knew.

"Not now. I must talk to father."

"I must talk to father," she mimicked his bad English. "But you can't disturb the game, Cheong. How would you like it if we came and disturbed you when you were making up the accounts?"

"It's not the same thing. Accounts are important—mah-jong is not. That's the only difference as far as I am concerned."

He caught a glimpse of the Chinese merchants and their wives, in their white silk gowns, with ropes of pearls and gold ear-rings. He saw them staring at him over the bright glitter of the table-cloth, the old men, their old wives, and sometimes their young concubines who had steeled themselves to resemble Chinese film-stars. The coloured tiles on the spotless table-cloth were arranged like toy soldiers in battle order. They alone were well-made. They alone shone with an interior light, as everything shines which is well-made and not fabricated. Suddenly a great horror for these people, their jewels, their well-manicured hands, their simple sing-song voices and their expressionless startled faces came over him, and he leaned over the table and drove his hand through the carefully arranged tiles. Then he caught Tien Hsueh by the shoulders and lifted her from her chair, pushing her against the wall, breathing heavily, conscious at the same time of his own guilt and an overpowering obsession, the same obsession which drove him ceaselessly into the woodsheds to touch and finger the cool spars of wood, rejoicing in their cleanliness and smoothness. These people were rough and ill-mannered. They wasted time, they simpered, they hated the idea of work and lived on their accumulated capital like the mandarins in ancient China, without the excuse of being able to write poetry. They were empty and futile, and he hated them with an overpowering hatred which he made no attempt to disguise.

"You are wastrels," he shouted hoarsely. "Have you nothing better to do? When the first Chinese came to Singapore, they worked until their thumb-nails were bleeding. They set up their shops and laboured from early morning until late at night. You are too rich—all of you. What good are you

to the other Chinese? >You play mahjong for the sake of yourselves, not for the sake of the war which is threatening China every day more terribly. What have you to say for yourselves, who have no work and no conscience? Get out! Get out! Get out before I throw you out. You are not worthy to be touched by a Chinese coolie. You are no longer Chinese. You belong to the pleasure-seekers who infest the world and make all carpenters sick."

No one said anything. The white faces at the table remained numb, as if they were caught in a searchlight or as if an electric shock had riveted them to their seats. Suddenly the silence was broken by Cheong's father, who rose slowly from his chair.

"My son, my son, there is much truth in your words, but a Chinese should not show force on his wife. I say this with a heavy heart. You must respect the enjoyments and pleasures of others, as they respect yours. Now we shall continue to play and you must leave us quietly."

Cheong's father slowly subsided into his chair. It was the first time for years that he had shown any strength of character. Cheong respected him for it, but he could not forgive Tien Hsueh, whose carefully lacquered hair fell in disorder over her forehead. She was panting and staring at him through half-closed eyelids. Her bead necklace was broken and one shoulder was higher than the other.

"Forgive me," Cheong murmured.

He made ineffectual efforts to set the mahjong pieces in their proper order, then he left the room. He was calm now. Guilt rose in the place of hatred. He knew he was wrong. It was the first time he had ever set hands on his wife. He would never be able to forget that look of contempt on her face. He could not remember how many times he had begged her to leave her mahjong playing friends, but he was conscious that Tien Hsueh saw in his rebukes the expression of his love for Ng Ah. Now he prepared to make peace with her, for there was nothing else to be done.

He returned to his own room without putting on the light. He walked on tiptoe so as not to disturb Crystal Stream, who was still sleeping peacefully. In the darkness his thoughts wandered to Ng Ah and they refused to settle anywhere but in

Cloud Temple Hall, where grandfather was sleeping and Green Jade was dreaming of the motor-boat as it chugged through the mangroves into the Straits. He heard the rattle of the tiles and Tien Hsueh's voice coming loader as her confidence returned, and then his father's low voice followed by interminable silences. They were playing without talking. A servant brought tea in little thimble-cups. Another servant brought hot towels. Food was passed round; but no words were spoken. It was as though they were ghosts who had been so noisy in their acclamations a few minutes before.

Crystal Stream whimpered in her sleep. Cheong ran up to her and placed his hand on her forehead. She was feverish. The blood was throbbing at her temples. She was sitting at his desk with her head resting on her arm, and the faint shadows through the curtains fell on her face which seemed to be motionless in a world of revolving shadows. "How lovely you are," he thought, as he carried her silently upstairs to her own bedroom; and laying her on the cool wooden bed, he remained by her side until the fever passed.

Downstairs the mahjong party had broken up. There was no longer the click of tiles and their weighty silence had given place to an extraordinary emptiness. The house seemed deserted except for the children who were sleeping.

"It was only a short fever," he whispered to himself as he descended the stairs. "How lucky I am! If I had left her in the draught, she might have died."

He was calm now. He heard his father breathing heavily—he was glad his mother was not present when he spoke to the mahjong players. Whenever his grandfather was away, the house seemed deserted, but without Ng Ah and Green Jade there was only Crystal Stream to comfort him, for Crystal Talk was still too young to talk to him on equal terms. He lit the lamp and returned to his accounts. It was quiet now except for the pluck of the tide on the woodshed walls, the midsummer quietness of Malaya which can become vibrant if a single moth dashes itself against the lamp-shade.

"I shall offer my apologies to father in the morning," he told himself. "And to-night I must make my peace with

Tien Hsueh. I shall tell her I was wrong. I will go on my hands and knees before her, for I dare not lose her."

He sank back in the chair, gazing at the light, with one hand in his coat pocket. Suddenly he realised that the envelope had become unstuck. He took it out of his pocket and laid it carefully on the table. He was afraid of the typewritten English characters, which always looked formal—they showed no signs of character like Chinese handwriting, and they seemed indeed to come from a world where good handwriting was accounted unnecessary. For some reason he knew that the letter boded misfortune, yet he dared not open it. Time passed. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. The last taxi-girls had left the dance-halls. The streets were quiet, and he had almost decided to walk down Alexandra Road, when the letter slipped from the envelope and fell on the floor. He had not lifted it purposely. He had been dreaming, thinking of the future and his reconciliation with Tien Hsueh; and as he dreamed he lifted the envelope and the letter fluttered to the floor in graceful sweeps like the motions of a swallow's wings. He could not read all the words, but he read enough to know that the letter was written by the Land Office authorities who proposed to take over Cloud Temple Hall, because the new naval base was to be constructed there. The shock silenced his anger. He could no longer think or dream. Ng Ah was sleeping peacefully: she did not yet know that all their labour would be in vain.

He walked unsteadily upstairs after locking the letter in the cupboard. Everything that had happened during the evening—Crystal Stream's fever, Tien Hsueh's anger—passed from him as he slowly climbed the stairs. His father was still breathing heavily. He paused on the landing to watch a house-lizard scuttle away by the light of his oil-lamp, then he entered the bedroom and slowly undressed. No sounds came from the bed. Usually, when he came late in the bedroom, he would hear Tien Hsueh calling to him, or at least he would hear the movements of her body as, half-awakened from her sleep, she heard him brushing his hair or cleaning his teeth. But to-night there was no sound, and he imagined she was fast asleep and unaware of his presence. He spent a long time

undressing. Gradually, 'and as though by infinitesimal jerks, his brain sought to piece together the events of the day, the morning's work, the contracts duly signed, the feel of the timber in his strong hands, the silence of his study in the evening when Crystal Stream came to see him for no reason at all, and then the row with Tien Hsueh and the frightened faces of the mahjong players. All these events precipitated themselves upon him in sudden half-illuminated visions which passed as swiftly as they arose.

"I must be kind to Tien Hsueh," he kept repeating under his breath.

Washed and dressed, his face smooth and burning with the astringent he rubbed into his cheeks, he lifted the curtains of the bed. There was no sign of Tien Hsueh. Instead there was a short note, written in black ink, pinned to the leather pillow:

I love you, but I cannot bear your insolence. Dr. Sun said that men should respect their wives 'in the new way.' I shall return when you love me again.

There was no signature. The Chinese characters were written with a fountain pen; in grandfather's eyes this was almost the greatest sin that anyone could commit, for the letters became as shapeless as English typewritten letters. Tien Hsueh had written hastily and almost, it seemed, without knowing what she was writing; for the characters were the characters of a four-year-old child. "Even Crystal Stream could have written better," he said aloud. Still louder he said: "You are in my blood, and I shall always love you. How do you think you can escape from me, for I too am in your blood?" Then his head sank on the cold leather pillow, and he dreamed that they were all living in the Cloud Temple Hall, and Ng Ah's face changed into Tien Hsueh's, and his mother was well and his father worked in the wood sheds from morning to night. No sounds came to him. After the first excited dreams of peace, he slept dreamlessly until the morning.

"Forgive me, Tien Hsueh," he said as he awoke, But Tien Hsueh had disappeared, and the note was still pinned to the leather pillow.

He rose, and wrapping himself in a dressing-gown, walked down to his study; then he placed Tien Hsueh's note carefully beside the letter from the Land Office authorities.

Cheong spent many days searching for her, but she seemed to have vanished as quickly as she had entered his life. She had taken her jewellery, and he knew she had enough money to live, but as he wandered through the streets of Singapore, straightening his back and shaking the white sweat from his forehead, he was appalled by the thought that she would come back whenever she wanted to—perhaps in a week, perhaps in three weeks, perhaps in a year—and he would be unable to punish her. A spell of hot weather filled the streets with dust. He felt sick and tired. He was no longer interested in the woodshed, and a curious desire came over him to be a servant and not a master. "I am tired of giving orders," he told grandfather, who nodded and carefully unscrewed the mouth-piece of his opium-pipe. "The greatest happiness is in obedience," he said, though it was doubtful whether he had obeyed anybody in his life. Cheong refused to ask him for aid in discovering Tien Hsueh, for her parents said they knew nothing about her and smiled mysteriously when he asked them to help him. He was alone with Ng Ah and his children. It was better like that. He could look forward to a time when there would be no restlessness in his blood and when Tien Hsueh would be completely forgotten.

Three months later Cloud Temple Hall was sold for eighteen hundred dollars. The altar-cloths from the small temple were removed to the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, and the seedlings and some of the fruit-trees were replanted in a small estate he bought beneath Bukit Timah, the tin mountain which looks over the Straits of Johore. For three years he went nearly every week-end to the new estate with his children, but the restlessness in his blood was only increasing. And suddenly, one morning when the wind was lashing the coloured panes of glass and rain was falling in torrents, he decided to leave the woodsheds in the hands of his father and work in the Naval Base, which was slowly being cut out of the mangroves and forests on the northern side of the island. He worked for

a while as a contractor, then returned to the woodsheds when the work on the Naval Base was held up by the Socialist Government in England. There was still no news of Tien Hsueh and he worked half-heartedly, loving Ng Ah but unable to talk with her as he talked with Tien Hsueh. Then one day when Green Jade was twelve and the Naval Base was once more being built and the memory of Tien Hsueh was fading from his mind, he returned to the north of the island, deciding to work as he had never worked before, losing himself completely in a task which would enable him to forget everything.

"We'll go and work there and watch the place grow up," he said one morning. "Heaven knows what it will be like when we have finished, but it will be bigger than anything in Singapore."

Green Jade nodded gravely. For a long time he had been puzzled by his father's inactivity.

"Yes, we'll go and work there as we have never worked before," he said, while the wind tossed the flame of the forest flowers and his father, stripped to the waist, finished varnishing a piece of wood in the court-yard. The scent of varnish, the bees humming in the oleander tree, the white stump of a mast leaning against the court-yard wall, the whirring of the mechanical saws and the thought of working with his father in the north of the island—all these intoxicated him, and he smiled proudly at Crystal Stream as she peered through the door.

"We're going to build a Naval Base, you understand," he said gravely. "We've built a few yachts and things, Crystal Stream, but this time we're going to build something bigger."

X

WHEN Cheong reached the gates of the Naval Base, there was a streak of blue lightning, and the thunder rolled up the Straits like the rumble of chariot wheels. A mist rose over the island—a dense opaque mist which shrouded everything more than five yards away. When the mist falls in Malaya,

time stands still and everything turns grey. No sounds come from the mist, no shadows fall, the hands grow clammy and useless, and the rice-birds are silent. Cheong stared through the mist, which hung so still that it seemed to be rooted to the ground. At the gates of the Naval Base there was a small attap hut guarded over by a morose Sikh jaga in a khaki uniform and a red turban. He showed his pass and a long black finger pointed to an invisible road. Cheong could not speak Malay, the Sikh could not speak Chinese. Cheong asked questions about the road, but he could get no reply. He hated driving a car, but more than anything he hated driving through a thick mist. He drove very slowly, with his head pressed against the windscreen in order to see the road better, but so many heavy carts and lorries came rushing towards him that he drew up on the side of the road. Suddenly he heard the soft hiss of rain in the distance.

"The mist is lifting," Green Jade said, tugging at his arm.

Cheong rubbed the windscreen with a piece of chamois leather and looked out. The mist was lifting bodily. First the stubble grass and then the roots of the trees showed beneath the mist. He watched the mist rising through a few rubber-trees near the dockyard gates, but when it reached the level of the lowest branches it remained still, a white sheet completely hiding the branches while the trunks stood out, glinting with dew, pillars supporting the immense white sheet above. And there it hung, motionless, until the rain came nearer and the wind gradually dispersed the mist in shreds of grey cloud.

As the motor-car climbed the hill, the sun shone through the mist and the rain fell down. Green Jade thought he recognised the brow of a hill. The mist was being tossed higher and higher by the wind, leaving a thick dew on the ground. His heart pounded under his thin white cotton vest, he stared through the windscreen eagerly and expectantly, and suddenly he turned to his father and said:

"You see, all the trees have been cut down. There were rubber trees and gambier trees. Now there's nothing left——"

The earth was red mud, which stuck to the tyres and splashed on the mudguards. It had been raining during the night. It was raining now in Johore—grey drifts of rain

concealed the forests, and there was a cloudburst over the Causeway, but no rain fell where they were, although they heard the hiss of distant rain clearly, as if it was quite close to them. When they reached the brow of the hill, Cheong pulled the brake up sharply. Where previously there were thousands of trees, rubber-trees, gambier, mangoes and mangroves, there were none. Below them lay a wide bay of blue sea flecked with mist, exactly as it had always been, but the earth was scarred with railway lines, steam navvies, derricks, pile-drivers and lorries. There were no signs of Cloud Temple Hall. There were no signs of the black mangroves. There were no signs of the creek where the crocodiles splashed and lay in wait for the deer. In all this forest of derricks and decayed land Green Jade recognised only a small red house which had unaccountably been left untouched. On the crown of the hill there was nothing left except a single rubber-tree; but the bark had grown grey with disease, the leaves hung lifeless in the wind.

"But where's Cloud Temple Hall?" Green Jade exclaimed with astonishment. "The red house is there, but whereas the hall?"

He rubbed his eyes and crouched back in the car, afraid of the tall derricks and the railway lines which wound along the coast and passed through the place where Cloud Temple Hall had been. There was no sign of the small red-brick temple his mother had built. The sun shone on the railway track and the steam navvies at the base of the hill; it glittered on the roofs of the red house and on the felled trees waiting to be taken away in lighters; but on the red earth where Cloud Temple Hall had been there were four derricks, an excavator, a stationary steam engine and a crowd of yelling coolies.

"It must be the wrong place," Green Jade said, choking with laughter. "How funny. They're digging a hole just where Cloud Temple Hall was. You see the loop of the railway—well, that's where the vegetable garden was."

"How do you remember all this?" Cheong asked, looking puzzled.

"You see the red house. That tells you everything. They're digging a hole just where Cloud Temple Hall was."

"That's going to be the new dock."

"You mean they're going to dig deeper and deeper, so that ships can come along where I fed the goats?" Green Jade threw his head back and laughed until the tears came into his eyes, but it was mostly nervous laughter. It was as though someone had removed the Hall of the Cloud at Rest and put it on top of the highest mountain in Singapore Island. He could not understand why the trees had been cleared. Four-yard line excavators were digging through the sea-shells and red-earth, and tumbling them into small trolley-trucks. The noise like bones rattling came from the crushing plant. At one end two ton granite boulders were being let into the machine. At the other end they came out as small stones. Green Jade rubbed his eyes again.

"They're going to dig a hole for the ships to come in," he said, "but what happens when it rains? The sides will fall in. They always do."

"They'll try to prevent that, Green Jade. I don't know how they'll do it—fill it with stones and concrete—stone walls and a concrete foundation, like the woodyard."

"They're taking the earth away—they're taking it all away——" Green Jade repeated.

He pointed in the sky.

"So Cloud¹ Temple Hall is up there—where the smoke is," he said, getting out of the car, and at once he realised that where the trees had been cut down there was ceaseless activity.

From the car it was not possible to see everything that was happening below. The idea that the mangroves and forests could be swept away had often occurred to him; but he could not understand why so many men should be employed when everything protruding from the earth was lopped away. The fallow land lay at his feet waiting to be ploughed; and these hundreds of coolies, Tamils, Malays and Chinese, were drawing their immense hoes over the land. And just as wood grows sweeter and stronger after long immersion in the water, so the land had become sweeter and stronger after its long immersion in the forest. It was blood-red except where the pile-drivers rose screaming in the air, and there it was white with granite. The pile dam rose up steep from the dredged sea bottom like a

hundred water-towers filled with clay. The sea lapped the piles, the huge excavators dug iron teeth in the earth and the coolies were removing earth in small baskets. All the ingenuity of man was concentrated on removing earth from one place and putting it in another, yet the coolies still gathered the lumps of warm damp reddish clay in baskets and ran with them to the waiting trolleys. But the abiding impression was of farmers preparing the land for the spring sowing.

It was warm near the car. Gusts of hot wind came from Johore, where the rain had ceased falling. There were no clouds left in the sky. Down below, the trucks were being shunted in the direction of the shore, where the earth was tilted into barges to be removed later; but in the noonday heat they resembled toy trains, too slow to move of their own will except downhill, and even the giant excavators and pile-dams belonged to a toy world when seen from the top of the hill. As they walked down the hill towards the palm-leaf hut where Cheong expected to discuss his contract, Green Jade clutched at his arm.

"When they've dug the holes, what will they do then? Ships will come in, but why do they want to hide?"

Cheong shook his head. He could not understand what was happening all round him. At any moment he expected the trees would grow again, and there would be no dead mangroves piled on lorries for firewood; the green crocodiles would splash in the creeks and the narrow pathways through the forest and the heavy shade of the decaying rubber trees would return to make him once more familiar with a landscape which passed his comprehension.

"I don't know," he said. "Grandfather must be right. Things are changing too fast—how can we tell what is happening?" Then he said: "Perhaps they will build repair shops? Perhaps there will be sawmills and rolling mills, but not yet. More holes in the ground, more workshops! Grandfather is right. One should not change the shape of the earth. If they take too many trees away, how will the earth hold together?" He sighed again, but in the strong sunlight he seemed to be laughing.

Suddenly the steam-winch came to a pause, and the only

sound was that of baskets of earth creaking under their great weight as the women carried them to the trolleys. The women wore stiff red caps, the starched cloth drawn to a point over their foreheads, and blue-mud-stained coats and trousers. A tranquil, almost sleepy hush prevailed in the fields as in the early morning when they lived in Cloud Temple Hall and Green Jade was sent to gather the fish from the stakes; an imperturbable calm; a stillness made more resonant by the faint lapping of the tide. The shadows were deep and heavy, almost the colour of purple grapes, and they walked in silence down the hillside to the great pit opening at their feet.

Cheong entered the palm-leaf hut, and Green Jade was left to stare down at the immense pit. At the bottom of the pit the red water was criss-crossed with bubbles of yellow foam left by the immense excavators. The pit possessed no shape; it was not square or circular, and the edges were eaten away with the tooth-marks of rats, the strange depressions made by the women coolies with their small baskets of mud. There seemed to be no plan in the excavation. There was no chalk-line, as when wood is carved into shape. The coolies were hungry beasts, taking earth wherever they saw it, foraging for red mud as though their lives depended on their toil. Green Jade was shocked by the disorder. But along the quay wall there were water-towers—or something which resembled water-towers—and he feasted his eyes on the white tubular scaffolding of the pile-dams. The concrete glowed in the sunlight, impassive and motionless where everything else was changing—changing so rapidly that he did not dare to think what it would be like a week hence. Yet, while the buildings were in construction and the pit was being hollowed out, something dead, decaying and old-fashioned lurked in the fields, like the rotting mangroves on the shore and the dead rubber trees piled in mountains with their leaves still hanging on them. He noticed that the coolie women were singing, but he could not recognise the words—they were not Cantonese, which was the only dialect, beside Huanese, which he recognised. He wondered vaguely whether the women were brought specially from the Great Canal in China, then once more his thoughts turned to another landscape. Superimposed on all

these excavations, like a dream too lovely to be understood entirely by the innocent eyes of the imagination, he saw the red tiles of Cloud Temple Hall and the candle-lit interior of Ng Ah's small temple. His heart ached with the oppressive weight of this continual vision and he was pleased when his father came out of the palm-leaf shed, waving a piece of paper on which the ink had not yet dried.

"Look at them," Cheong said. "They're like our farmers in our province Hunan. You would think they are sowing grain."

Within a year the seeds flowered, but instead of ears of corn there were granite blocks, huge towers, walls eighty feet thick. Instead of two thousand labourers there were four thousand, but still the great pit was not deep enough to receive the great ships which would one day enter the harbour. The earth had been levelled, whole mountains were sliced and showed the scars of the knife which drove through them like butter, and still there was an air of decay and improvisation about the Naval Base.

"When the great dock is finished, it will be all -ight," Green Jade told himself. "It all depends on the great dock——"

He was already sixteen. He had worked for four years in the quarry-like base beside his father until his muscles grew hard and his smooth flesh grew warm with exertion. Every morning he arrived in a lorry outside the dock-gates and walked over the hill to his father's office. The contract for building palm-leaf sheds was coming to an end, and slowly the Naval Base was taking shape. Years of planning and concentrated devotion by man who employed all the resources of Malaya and the islands, the best machinery of England and the finest skilled labour of China had made out of a waste of mangroves and decaying rubber trees a white wall and a great dock so strong that no one would dare to attack it with impunity. Wireless masts shot out of the ground, hospitals were erected, machine-shops rose on concrete piles and resembled palaces. Malay princes worked in the ship-fitting shops, Tamils pulled at ropes and bent their backs in the floating dock, which arrived one day under the guidance of four

sweating Dutch steam-tugs, and above all there were Chinese. There were Chinese everywhere. They were improvers and skilled mechanics, yard boys and boat-builders, youngsters and old men, tall Manchurians and squat islanders from Hainan. These men, descended from a race which cast the beautiful bronze and iron ware of the Chou dynasty, seemed to adapt themselves to precision instruments with an intensity of energy which made the Malays stare with astonishment. But Cheong kept to his Chinese saw, his glue-pot and his beloved wood. He had no desire to play with machines, which are always dangerous; and he preferred the free life of a contractor building sheds and spending the whole day in the Naval Base. Singapore was old. The city, with its crumbling stucco, had passed from the hands of the old merchants into the hands of a younger generation, more grasping and no longer eager to make, from the products of the islands, an enduring beauty. Their money made, they sank back and played mahjong or visited the dance-halls. There was no longer any incentive to create. But in the north of the island everything was fresh and new, and even the air tasted less of summer than of spring.

One day, two years before the great dock was opened, Cheong spent the morning in his carpenter's shed. All round him the grass grew waist-high, golden-green in the wind. A slight breeze was moving along the casuarina trees in Johore; it rippled the brown moth-wing sails of the Malay fishing craft, but the white smoke of a locomotive near the great graving-dock hung motionless in the air. "The wind hasn't reached the Naval Base," he said; but almost before he had spoken, the wind tore the smoke savagely apart and left only loose feathers. Further away the grass-cutters were swinging their sickles. Instinctively he watched their movements. They were Malay boys and Tamils in bright red sarongs and football jerseys. As the sickles swung down, the blades hummed and the grass crackled and the hafts of the blades made a sobbing sound. The swathes of grass were laid across in a straight line, and where the sickle had been the grass was not green but bright yellow. *Whoo-oo-oo*, the blade sang in unison. Afterwards there was a long silence, until once more the grass

crackled, the blades hummed and the smooth black arms swung up again in the sunlight.

Cheong rubbed the sweat from his eyes and watched Green Jade splitting wood.

"It's time for *makkan*, Son."

The boy looked up and brushed the hair from his eyes.

"Has the hooter sounded yet?"

"No, but it will soon!"

"Then we ought not to stop working."

Cheong laughed until the tears came to his eyes.

"But I'm my own master here," he said, and he pointed with his index finger at the great buildings on the wharf as if he owned them all.

The *makkan* carriers, boys carrying porcelain pans on *mcrbau* rods slung over their shoulders, were passing in an endless defile along the west wall. The porcelain pans were arranged in tiers and decorated with phoenixes, horses, pomegranates and chrysanthemums.

"Ah, look, my son," Cheong smiled and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Why should we work? Grandfather says the greatest satisfaction lies in watching people work. Why should we work?"

Green Jade dropped the chopper, which fell soundlessly among the wood shavings.

"What's happened, Father?" he asked, his eyes growing dark with annoyance. For a moment he thought his father had suddenly become ill. "What's happened?"

"I was thinking—Cloud Temple Hall is a hundred feet in the air above the bottom of the graving dock——"

He sighed and rubbed more sweat from his forehead. He could remember vividly the time when steel piles rose sharply from the dredged sea-bottom and giant excavators swung down and carved deep holes in the earth; but now he saw only the cormorants and herons in the white sky and the glue simmering in the earthenware stove. Suddenly the hooter sounded. And gradually, as though an immense hand had swept away all the sounds of the earth, the electric dynamoes, the tall cranes, the steam winches and locomotives, the lorries and the electric drills ceased working and spluttered to a dead silence.

"It's time to leave," said Cheong after a pause.

"What do you mean?" Green Jade asked anxiously.

"The graving dock is nearly finished. We've watched it all grow. There's no point in staying beyond our time."

"And then—then—you'll leave all this and never come back again?" Green Jade said, losing himself in his words. "But it's better than Singapore—it's better than the river——"

"I thought we would open a shipyard in Singapore."

Green Jade stared down at his bare feet. In the hot midday sun there were no shadows. His singlet was black with sweat, and with a swift movement he pulled it up under his armpits. The sun gleamed pleasantly on his burnt skin, and he sighed with the effort of concentration. He was already too old to break habits easily.

"Leave all this!" he exclaimed sharply. "But look—we've lived here all our lives."

"You forget grandfather——"

"All day we've lived here, Father. We see grandfather at night. Yes, he's good—and great-grandfather—they're all good——" He pointed to the gleaming red roofs of the coolie-lines, the great white wall stretching below the machine-shops, so long that it disappeared out of sight; and everything was clean, the lines chiselled into brilliant shape, the colours sharp and distinct against the burning white sky. "It's all new, Father——Don't you see—everything ought to be like this——?"

"Yes, everything ought to be like this," Cheong answered.

He drew his singlet up under his armpits, so that the wind played on his chest. For the first time Green Jade noticed that his father was getting old. The skin of his chest was drawn tight as a drum; not yellow, but tanned by the sun.

"Yes, everything ought to be clean like this," he repeated.

Outside the shed an Indian was sprinkling a red liquid in the pools left by the night's rain.

"What's it for?" Green Jade asked.

"They say it's to keep the malaria away," Cheong answered slowly, shaking his head. "Malaria comes from a fly. If you cover the pools with the liquid, the fly's eggs can't grow, but how can you cover the whole sea?"

He shook his head again and opened the porcelain pan with the day's food. All the workmen came to eat from the porcelain pans. They placed their bowls in the centre and squatted in a circle, stuffing their mouths with fish, chopped meat, rice and onions, talking all the time above the clicking of chopsticks. Green Jade noticed that his father was perturbed. He thought it was the heat and wolfed his food, but he knew his father was thinking of the time when the Naval Base consisted of mangrove swamps and poisonous black mud, with green crocodiles and land-crabs burrowing upwards in the sunshine. It had become an obsession with him. He did not think of Cloud Temple Hall, or even of Ng Ah. He was growing older, and middle age presented him with unsuspected responsibilities.

Green Jade looked at the other workmen. Ng Aik was a small gnarled peasant from one of the villages near Canton. His bones were big and his skin was the colour of brown paper. His eyes were bloodshot and yellow, and he smoked opium. Yet when he smiled, the tail of a fish hanging from the corner of his mouth, he looked happier than his father, happier than anyone in the Naval Base.

"I'm thinking of leaving," Cheong began slowly, in a despairing voice.

"Has something come over you?" Ng Aik asked, stuffing the end of the fish into his mouth with his chopsticks.

"No, nothing has come over me," Cheong answered. "But what good is it? I've seen the Naval Base grow up. Now I want to do something on my own."

"What sort of thing?"

"I can't make up my mind yet. I'd like to go to China. I'd like to build a shipyard in Singapore—I've always wanted to. Well then, there are hundreds of things I would like to do, but how can one make up one's mind."

It was beautiful in the midday sun, the fields stretching on either side of him, the red earth showing through the long grass. Here and there duckboards caught the light, or the shaft of a spade dazzled him with the burning silver rays; and overhead a flock of green pigeons flew serenely into the face of the sun. Ng Aik looked crest-fallen.

"Will you leave us to stew in our own juice?" he asked bitterly.

"Ai-ya! He thinks I have no milk," Cheong commented. "Even if I go to China, I shall want you to come with me."

Green Jade looked more serious than he had ever seen him.

"If you go to China——" he began, but he did not continue. Instead he gazed at the steel-blue wings of a dragonfly which hovered over the glue-pot.

An Englishman was coming down the road. He wore a battered sun-helmet and his white shorts were stained with rust or the red fungus which attacks all white clothes in the East. His face was red—the colour of deep red resinous wood, and he was accompanied by a shorter man whose shorts were carefully creased and who seemed to be continually smiling at his own jokes. The man with the extremely red face paused when he came to the carpenter's shed, stared for a few moments at a blue-print and suddenly burst out laughing.

"What's he saying?" Cheong whispered urgently.

"He says we are building everything with glue and not with wood," Green Jade translated.

"If he laughs at a thing like that," Cheong commented, "his belly must be full of rice."

The Englishman removed his sun-helmet and mopped his forehead with a blood-stained handkerchief. He was grey-haired and his forehead was round like a child's. Obviously he worked inside the ships, for the sun-helmet showed the scars which come only to men who walk underneath ships or inside their inner bottoms. Green Jade had almost forgotten the English he learnt at school, but he translated as quickly as possible, breathlessly, to keep pace with the Englishman who spilled his words so quickly.

"What is he saying?" Cheong interrupted at every moment.

"He says he wants good carpenters to work in his boatshed?" Green Jade said. "He wants men to build boats, but they must be good carpenters."

"Tell him I am the best carpenter in Singapore. Furthermore, I have my own woodsheds," Cheong said proudly.

He could not understand the Englishman with the round forehead and deep red face.

"The Englishman says he would like you to build boats in the woodshed over there," Green Jade continued, and he pointed to the immense building on shore with its square windows and granite roof. Cheong thought for a moment. He would be paid the wages of a skilled labourer, he would no longer be his own master, but he would be building ships. He stroked his chin and laughed. Ng Aik leaned forward; once more there was the tail of a fish hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Ask him where the wood comes from?" Cheong said quickly.

Green Jade translated and listened carefully to the Englishman's reply.

"He says the wood comes from all over the British Empire—hundreds of kinds of wood."

"Hundreds?"

"That's what he says. Perhaps he has eaten too much rice. He says he wants you to work in his woodshed."

"Tell him I will have a look at his woodshed this afternoon," Cheong said, and suddenly it occurred to him that all his problems were solved, he would no longer be his own master but the dream of building boats would be fulfilled. In the discipline of the Naval Base he would forget Tien Hsueh completely and every evening he would return to Singapore with Green Jade and his own workmen, for they too would be employed in the boatshed and he would still be their master.

During the next few weeks he subcontracted the work of building wooden houses with palm-leaf roofs and began to work in the large airy building overlooking the Straits. Nothing surprised him any more. He knew all the Malayan timbers; he knew Chinese *nanmu* and Burmese teak and all the other woods of the Archipelago; but here there was purple-heart from British Guiana, rock-elm from Quebec and Ontario, teak and green-heart from Jamaica, Australian walnut and New Zealand pine. There were so many woods that he lost count. He steamed sawn logs of *chengal* and bent them into keels. On a lathe he turned the high twenty-foot masts of the launches. He forgot Tien Hsueh and the gnawing hopes of returning to China. He watched the boats growing under his

hands, and meanwhile the graving-dock grew larger each day, and Green Jade grew taller. His interminable worries faded when he watched his son, in whom Ng Ah's quietness and his own furious energy were curiously mixed. At all hours of the day he discovered himself glancing surreptitiously at his son, and once at night he stole in Green Jade's bedroom. In the faint moonlight Green Jade was lying with one arm thrown round the wooden pillow, the other over his bare chest. How quietly he slept! In sleep he resembled Ng Ah so closely that Cheong was thunderstruck by the resemblance. He was so overcome at the thought of his happiness in his children that he nearly wept.

One day, when the great graving-dock was nearing completion, it began to rain while they were leaving in the afternoon. Hot gusts of rain fell from the dark sky, filling the deep conduits with torrents of yellow water. The conduits were often so deep that a man could stand upright in them and still be unable to see the level of the earth. The rain fell down the walls of the machine-shops in fountains and waterfalls. The wind drove across the Straits in a moaning frenzy and the rain lashed the decks of the ships moored along the north wall and hissed and roared like a stormy sea, flooding the roads and spinning along the roof-tops. The shriek of wind and rain, the murmur of the rushing water in the conduits, the echoes reverberating from inside the buildings, the growls of thunder and the audible hiss of lightning made a chorus of wild and mournful sound. Cheong fought against the wind all the way to the dockyard gates, and when he reached the waiting lorry, he discovered that Green Jade had disappeared. He waited for five minutes. The rain was steaming off the radiator of the lorry, which began to move off. He dived after it, but there was no sign of Green Jade and comforting himself with the thought that his son had taken another lorry, he stared out of the window at the flooded fields, where the furrows turned to dykes of muddy water and the rubber-trees bent under the weight of rain.

When he reached the Hall of the Cloud of Rest, there was no sign of Green Jade. It was not till eleven o'clock that Green Jade returned, looking pale and ill, shivering feverishly,

with a deep cut on his forehead and splashes of blood on his coat. He had taken a short cut to the dockyard gates, fallen into a conduit—the rain was so thick that it was impossible to see more than a few feet ahead—and after being dragged twenty or thirty yards by the torrent of water, he struggled out, half unconscious, panting like a wounded animal.

"But didn't anyone see you?" Cheong asked, wringing his hands together in despair.

"No, I took a short cut. No one saw me."

"And then what happened?"

Green Jade shook his head dumbly. He remembered nothing else, and his father suddenly realised that he had walked nearly twenty miles in the torrential rain, and all the time he had been nearly unconscious. The jagged cut in the forehead was still bleeding. Ng Ah came in. She made warm compresses and prepared a hot meal of stewed chicken and rice, but Green Jade refused to eat more than a few mouthfuls. He was shivering uncontrollably. His father sat at the table, watching the least movement of his son, whose face was sick and sullen with pain. Green Jade gulped down a glass of brandy and went to bed. Ng Ah showered aromatic herbs over him and caressed his forehead above the bandage. She sang to him as she sang when he was a child, but he no longer recognised her. The storm tore itself out, leaving the sky bright with stars, but Green Jade was delirious with fever and Ng Ah was drowsy with the pain over her heart. Heaven had given her only one child. If he be taken away, she would have nothing left to live for, and there would be no one to worship her when she died. Green Jade slobbered in his sleep, unrecognisable, a wounded animal still panting for breath and life. His chest was like a bamboo cage, but the air was whistling from his mouth and the cage seemed to be broken. All night they stayed by his bedside. Three doctors were called in. They stayed for half an hour, discussed the symptoms gravely, left medicines and ordered ice-cold compresses on the forehead of the patient, who seemed to be visibly dying before their eyes.

Green Jade was unconscious for a week. He became thinner and thinner, no longer beautiful, always panting for breath, which never came in sufficient quantities, hardly ever eating.

Sometimes the eyelids flickered open and they saw his burning eyes: they were grateful when the long eyelashes fell over the eyes again. Neither Cheong nor Ng Ah left the bedside. Grandfather made a special report to the ancestors, and Ng Ah sent yellow silk banners to the temple. When darkness fell, the house was full of the sobbing of the maidservants. Until this moment, no one paid much attention to Green Jade; but suddenly everyone realised that in the last few months he had become a grown man and he was almost at the age when a bride would be chosen for him. Tien Hsueh's children came to see him. Crystal Stream gazed fixedly at the boy on the bed, as though she could not tear her eyes away from the strange spectacle of someone struggling for breath. Crystal Talk, who was only three years younger than Green Jade, let out a sudden scream and was bundled out of the room before his nerve-storm could affect the others. Only Crystal Virtue, the youngest of Cheong's children, remained unmoved. She went up to Green Jade and stroked his face, and went away again, like someone who has performed her allotted task.

On the seventh day Green Jade recovered consciousness. He was seventeen, but there were deep lines on his forehead which showed how vigorously the battle had been fought. The wound had healed, but he was still pale and too weak to leave the bed. From time to time the shivering fits returned, and he tossed in bed like someone with a fever. Ng Ah lay back in the wicker-chair and thought all her good work had been destroyed. She had fed him when he was asleep, but it was even more difficult to feed him during a fit of shivering. Outside, she heard the laughter of Crystal Virtue and Crystal Stream. Her heart ached unbearably at their happiness. They were like dolls possessing Tien Hsueh's chaste beauty and her extraordinary *floppiness*. They seemed to have no bones. They laughed and turned somersaults and cried out in loud voices, forgetting Green Jade, forgetting everything except their own mirth. Then suddenly grandfather shouted to them in a voice of agony, and she knew then how much Green Jade's illness had meant to him.

One evening, Cheong received an invitation for the opening of the great dock. It was sent by mistake, because he was still

on the short-list of contractors. His wife was also invited, and he thought of taking Ng Ah, but she refused to leave the bedroom and he determined to take grandfather. During the morning he went in to see Green Jade. He was still feverish and he talked in a weak voice. His large eyes were full of a restless, magnetic life and the pallor was slowly giving place to his normal colour. Cheong could not make up his mind whether his son was getting well, or whether this change was only the first sign of a new decline. He held Green Jade's hand and listened to the throbbing of the pulse, and the undertones which lay beyond the sound of throbbing.

"You are ill—you haven't slept," Ng Ah pleaded. "Take grandfather to see the ships."

In a tired voice Cheong answered: "I haven't slept, but neither have you."

There were deep lines under her eyes, but otherwise she was unchanged. Her face had always been the colour of white wax, and her starched coat creaked as she bent forward and slipped a thermometer in Green Jade's mouth.

"Please go," she commanded.

Cheong obeyed. He waited till Ng Ah had withdrawn the thermometer and shaken it.

"What is his temperature?"

"It's all right—the fever has gone," she said with an effort, but when grandfather and Cheong had disappeared, she turned her back to the bed and sobbed until her heart would break, for the temperature had shot up and she knew she would lose her son.

All the way to the Naval Base grandfather was silent. For years he had kept away from the north of the island. He remembered Cloud Temple Hall vividly, so vividly that he thought they were once more on a journey to the old homestead, and he looked forward to seeing the motor-boat among the black mangroves, the temple with the red and gold altar-cloth, the vegetables and the ducks clucking in the round pond. Cheong thought the journey would make him forget Green Jade. Instead it only increased the depth of his pre-occupations. More vividly than grandfather he saw his son walking by the round pond, he saw Ng Ah feeding the geese,

the motor-boat turned seaward and the small grey dragons on the trees. But when they reached the gates of the Naval Base, there were so many people, so many uniforms, so many motor-cars with strips of pink paper on the windscreens that he became confused and forgot Green Jade in the excitement of once more seeing the boat-house and the machine-shops glittering in the sun. Grandfather was even more confused. He sucked in his cheeks and pointed to the houses beside the main road leading to the great dock.

"I see they are all on piles," he said. "Are they afraid the sea will swamp them?"

When they breasted the hill and looked down on the dock, grandfather stood still. He saw roped-in enclosures, flags, motor-cars with pennons flying from the bonnets—there was even a gold-plated motor-car belonging to one of the Sultans—and beyond them there were stands shielded from the sun's glare with sailcloth. On one side of the dock there were chairs for the high officials, the Sultans and their retinues, the naval officers with gold braid on their sleeves and on their caps; on the other side there were tiers of chairs for the contractors, the workmen and the less important officials. Grandfather could understand nothing of what was happening. In the outer harbour grey warships flying American and English flags from the mainmast were standing motionless. He stretched his legs and lay back on the wooden bench, enjoying the heat of the sun. More and more rajahs and sultans were arriving in the decorated dais opposite. A loud-speaker was blaring in some language he could not understand. The concrete walls of the dock glittered, and he shielded his eyes. In front of him, less than twenty feet away, lay the great dock which was so long that he could not see where it ended, and so broad that the figures on the opposite side were the size of pins.

"Can you see Cloud Temple Hall?" Cheong asked suddenly.

Grandfather contemplated for a moment.

"Why should I see it?" he said, shaking his head.

"It was here," Cheong replied. "Somewhere over there—" "but there are eighty feet of water below it now."

Slowly, like bubbles mounting from the bottom of a deep *well, memories of Cloud Temple Hall revived in grandfather's

brain. It was built here—yes, he remembered Cheong saying the ground had been bought and they were building a graving dock over it. But a dock—was this a dock?—this immense oblong pool of water. With enormous energy they constructed walls and dug deep into the earth, and for what purpose? To allow ships to enter? But surely they are not like birds who must have a special nest?

"Listen, Grandfather. There are gates over there. The dock is pumped dry and the ship is settled on wooden blocks, so that we can clean her and repair any damage."

"Ai-ya, the water—all green!" grandfather exclaimed. "I would drown if I walked in Cloud Temple Hall to-day. Where are the coconuts and the palms? Where is the temple? Where are the flowers? Where are the birds and the trees? All are gone! All are gone!" He leaned forward and laid his forehead on the curved handle of his malacca cane. The sun shone on his worn face and on the stains on his gown. He looked gaunt and old; the skull too large for the thin body, and the skin, which had once been so fresh and tight, had withered and wrinkled and changed colour. There were grey hollows under his eyes the colour of opium, and his hair showed like a dirty grey under the melon-shaped skull-cap. The life seemed to have gone out of him, seemed indeed to be trickling away as he gazed at the sunlit water with his chin resting on the malacca cane.

"Ai-ya!" he said. "They have taken everything away."

He could not understand what was happening. The silk turbans of the Malay sultans, the shouting and the great depth of the water in the dock—all these frightened him, and he was even more afraid of the great ships in the harbour with their guns pointed towards him.

"Will they shoot?" he giggled nervously. He thought: I should have remained with my poems and my paintings. What am I doing here among all these uniforms? A uniform means only that one is privileged by the government to kill. I prefer my scholar's gown and the scent of tulip trees.

Bands were playing Malay music, and a small yacht began to make its way into the great dock. It came fussily, steam rising from the funnels, and the throbbing of the engines could

be heard clearly over the water. The sea was smooth and calm. There was a faint haze in the sky. All the spectators were craning forward to see this extraordinary little yacht entering the great dock. Two hundred of these yachts might have come steaming in, and still there would be room for more. Guns were being fired from the warships. Grandfather shivered miserably, shaking his head, rattling on the ground with his stick. "A little yacht enters harbour," he said, "and they shoot off enough crackers to waken the dead."

But Cheong was neither frightened of the noise nor afraid of the crowds. Where there was now a great pool, Cloud Temple Hall once stood. Where people were cheering and a small yacht entered harbour, he had grown vegetables and walked with his son. Surely the gods would answer him! His son would become well again. The moment when the yacht broke the ribbon stretched between the concrete pillars of the dock gates, he knew Green Jade was well again. He sighed and stared at the wheeling sea-birds. How light the ships were! The American cruisers were so light that he could have stretched out his hand and lifted them out of the water. Grandfather was shaking his head.

"I have heard of many strange things," he said at last, "but nothing so strange as that men should dig a great hole in the ground and fill it with water, where once we grew vegetables. Are not vegetables more important than guns?"

Even when Cheong tried to explain for the twentieth time the importance of the dock—how it would safeguard China, how it would keep peace among the islands, how centuries later it would still be used, because it was unthinkable that men would build larger ships—even then grandfather sighed and wondered why men were so foolish as to destroy good earth.

When they returned Green Jade was sunning himself in the garden. He was no longer pale. Even the bandage over his head had been removed. Ng Ah sat beside him, saying nothing, smiling proudly. Cheong began talking excitedly.

"A ship was entering harbour—a small ship—and the sun was shining on the decks—and at that moment I knew Green Jade was safe. Grandfather could understand nothing. He

thinks Heaven disapproves of Naval Bases, but he is wrong. Grandfather has never cut wood with a saw. He thinks we can defend ourselves in the old manner, but the mandarins have gone for ever and he is wrong when he says vegetables are more important than guns."

Green Jade asked him to repeat all the details of the ceremony, what turbans the sultans wore, where the Chinese labourers were sitting, whether they played Chinese music, how many people were present and what were the names of the British and American ships in the Straits. Cheong told him all the answers to these questions, smiling tenderly and proudly because his son had been returned to him in double measure. From upstairs came the sound of grandfather singing the T'ang poets.

, XI

TIME iix China flows evenly like a great river, but among the Chinese in Singapore, where there are no seasons and the trees flower and fade according to no known laws, time moves steadily and slowly, as slowly as the river which flowed before the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. When Green Jade was well again, Ng Ah returned to her copper pans in the kitchen. As the days passed, she seemed to grow more quiet and undemonstrative. She could not forgive Green Jade for growing up so quickly. She knew she could do nothing, and therefore she remained in the kitchen, always busy, always apparently happy, smiling at the servants and comforting them whenever they were in difficulties, always at her ease, so calm and polished that An-mei took to calling her "the little mirror." Even this did not disturb Ng Ah, who accepted all the names showered on her from birth with quiet indifference.

Upstairs, grandfather continued to paint and read the Chinese poets, becoming more and more distracted by thoughts of the war in China, losing himself in painting and poetry only to discover with a shock that his country was being invaded by brigands, who bombed the cities he loved.

"The news from China is worse—worse——" he roared from the library. "There is so much blood that even the wolves are no longer hungry."

He threw the newspaper on the floor in a rage and trampled on it. He was now so blind that when he read, his lips almost touched the paper and he seemed to be caressing the page. As he grew older, he grew leaner. His voice broke, so that there seemed to be another child in the household. And gradually, as time passed and the news from China became more ominous each day, he reconstructed in his mind a new China in which he lived happily and gracefully—a China bounded by the high walls of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest and revolving around the flame-of-the-forest tree. But whenever he saw the newspapers he growled. In his careful scholarly handwriting he wrote an appeal to all the Chinese in Singapore to assist the Chinese National Government; this appeal was photographed and copies were pasted on the walls; but he was never content, and the thought of the Japanese invasion was like a continual thorn in his flesh.

An-mei remained downstairs in her bedroom. The red-gowned Buddhist nuns hovered continually around her bed. Joss-sticks smoked all day before the image of Kuan-Yin. From thuribles and censers scented oil was sprinkled on the polished floor, on the bedclothes and on the worn suffering face of the old woman in bed. The drumming and singing of the Buddhist nuns infuriated her husband, who found it more and more difficult to leave the mahjong players.

"Has Tien Hsueh returned yet?" An-Mei shouted as soon as he entered the room.

"Have no worry," she said. "She will soon return."

"I cannot die until harmony is restored to the Hall of the Cloud at Rest," An-mei said, half rising from the bed and throwing her voice like a gun-shot across the room.

"Our son speaks of a divorce," her husband sighed.

"A divorce is not proper to the family," An-mei snapped back. "You know it as well as I do. In the old days an adulteress was buried alive—and very properly too. Why doesn't our son bring her back by force?" An-mei lay back and gasped for breath. "In this country there are curious laws," she

said sharply, with one eye on her husband to see whether he was listening. "One may not keep slaves, one may not take part in political societies, one may not order one's life according to the ancient ways. How is this?"

"It is because——" her husband began, but he could not continue. The arguments had been repeated so often that they lost force in his mind, and he preferred silence to an argument that might go on all morning and perhaps half the afternoon. The scented candles were burning low. Nye Chieh came in and placed new candles in the silver stirrups, and left again as silently as she came.

"Is there any news from Meifu?" An-mei asked at last.

"There has been no letter from Malacca," he answered sadly. "She doesn't write as much as she should."

"Why can't she visit us?" An-mei insisted, while perspiration fell in streams down her face. "Are we not to see our children? One would think Malacca was a thousand miles away. A letter every fortnight—it is not enough. I must tell her to be more obedient in future."

From time to time her husband laid a handkerchief on her cheeks and brought the rice-bowl closer to her pUlow; but she would eat no rice until he had promised to discover Tien Hsueh's whereabouts.

"Our son must be made complete," she said in a voice^made harsh and unmusical by disease. "Evil comes from a divided family. I have suffered enough for their sakes. How can I die in peace?"

He knew she was using her illness as a weapon to bring Tien Hsueh back into the family. If Tien Hsueh had known that her mother-in-law was always cursing her, she would return at once; for the shame would have been unbearable. But because she did not know, he was compelled to humour her. He told her each day that Tien Hsueh would soon return to the homestead, although she had been absent for six years. He invented reasons and explained delays.'

"I have suffered enough," she said, and instead of answering her he smoothed her forehead and stroked her hands in passionate grief for his lost hopes and for the divided family over which he ruled so unsuccessfully.

In the Court-yard, under the flame-of-the-forest tree, Crystal Stream and Crystal Talk were playing. They had grown until they were like young willows. They chalked squares on the tiles and gave them the names of the Chinese hours: the rat, the ox, the tiger, the hare, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the sheep, the monkey, the cock, the dog and the pig. There were an infinite number of games which could be played with the twelve squares. There was a form of 'tumble-hop' and 'Eat Square Strength,' and more exciting still there was the 'longevity game' which consisted in keeping all the squares 'alive.' Crystal Stream's fat pigtail was always falling in front of her face. Crystal Talk resembled a small monkey, whose fat cheeks were always puffing into a smile.

"Old uncle, come and play with us," they called, when their great-grandfather appeared at the library window.

"What are you playing?"

"The longevity game. Crystal Stream lives for ever."

There was a long silence. They watched him move away from the window, and five minutes later they heard the soft thud of his footfalls on the stairs.

"Come, great-Grandfather, score a long life," they laughed shrilly when he came into the court-yard.

To their surprise he said nothing at all, but remained very silent, twirling the end of his sunshade. He thought of his long life which stretched from the 1860's, when the Choing Emperors were still secure on the throne, when Singapore was a small entrepot port which no one had ever heard of in China, when life flowed so easily and calmly that the peasants in southern Hunan offered sacrifices to the god of war and nudged each other, asking what manner of thing they were sacrificing to. For nearly four years now there had been war in China, until she was no more than an unrecognisable wound on the surface of the earth. Their great-grandfather stroked the black hairs on his wrist and looked down at them from his immense height.

"Will you show me how to play?" he asked tenderly.

"You hop and you jump," Crystal Stream explained. "Tiger, hare, dragon, snake—these are good. Monkey and pig are bad."

"Monkey is the time you go to bed," Crystal Talk interrupted.

"Yes, monkeys are dark—they're bad," Crystal Stream continued. "Dragon is best, and afterwards comes sheep." He played with the red sticks in the jar. "You take two red sticks from the jar, or two white sticks, or a red stick and a white stick. You close your eyes. Two hops forward for a red stick. Two hops sideways for two white sticks. One hop forward and one hop sideways for a red and a white. Do you understand?"

"How strange!" said grandfather. "They played it at the time of the T'ang Emperors. I remember reading about it in a Court diary."

Crystal Stream began to play by herself. She pulled two red sticks, carefully averting her eyes; and hopped into a dragon. Crystal Talk hopped on to a sheep. Grandfather took two white sticks and hopped sideways into a monkey.

"Is monkey good?" he exclaimed.

"No, it's bad. Have another try."

He pulled at the sticks, carefully shielding his eyes, but he was so blind that he would hardly have been able to see their colour with his eyes open.

"What is it, Crystal Stream?"

"Two white sticks again."

"Then I am where you are. Yes, that's good. We're both dragons."

The children took their sticks, and meanwhile grandfather hummed to himself and his hands rose in tune with the poems flooding through his brain. The smell of swamp and sea, the faint smell of decay and Singapore River, rained down from the perfectly clear sky; and all the while he immersed himself in the games the children were playing. The sun beat strongly on his bald head and on the faded silk gown. He became serious and concentrated like the children. When he pulled at the sticks, he resembled a Buddhist priest consulting the oracles. He closed his eyes, waved his hands over the jar and continually pulled two white sticks.

"Where am I now?"

"Sheep."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes, very, good."

"It's most extraordinary," grandfather murmured in his beard. "I'm always pulling the white sticks, and that means I am going round in circles."

Crystal Stream danced over the tiles, her pigtail whipped her face and as she ran her red silk trousers coiled themselves round her legs. Great-grandfather repeatedly returned to dragon or sheep, and Crystal Stream was no longer immortal. Crystal Talk said nothing. His small monkey face was screwed up with concentration. At last, when they were all tired and great-grandfather was fanning himself and Nye Chieh appeared with small cups of hot flower tea, great-grandfather discovered that he was still standing on a dragon.

"Does it mean I am immortal?" he asked.

The children giggled and turned somersaults on the tiles. Their great-grandfather's appearances in the court-yard were so rare that they considered they had been granted a great privilege; and the only way of showing their gratitude was to turn somersaults. Great-grandfather smiled, fanned himself mysteriously and huddled in the shade.

"Are you going now?" they asked, when he walked to the door without saying a word.

"I'll come and play to-morrow," he answered. "It's too hot—too hot——"

But the next morning he had his first stroke, and he realised for the first time in his life that he was not immortal. The doctor was called, a young tow-headed Englishman from the General Hospital. When he arrived, grandfather was lying on the floor beside his chest of paintings, with a gash in his forehead and one arm paralysed. He was bandaged and put to bed. As soon he recovered consciousness he asked Crystal Stream to read to him. Towards evening, although the paralysed arm refused to move, the rest of his body began to behave normally, he sat up and spoke to Cheong as though it was all a small accident and he would soon recover. He ordered the bed to be carried near the window, so that he could see the lights on the river. He drank a large cup of flower tea and listened to An-mei, who had been carried upstairs, complaining of the absence of Tien Hsueh.

"I'll be better soon," he said with determination.

One evening, three weeks later, Cheong returned alone from the Naval Base. Green Jade was working overtime on a small cutter, a long vessel with a sharp razor-edge keel on which he had been working from the moment when the first lathes of wood were laid on the wooden blocks inside the boathouse. As he left the lorry which brought him into Singapore, Cheong decided to take a ricksha instead of walking. Usually he took a short cut through the back streets and reached the Hall of the Cloud at Rest shortly after four o'clock. To-day he decided to spend the afternoon in the city, which he rarely saw; for his whole life was bounded by the Naval Base and the Hall of the Cloud at Rest.

When he reached the quay, the sun was high in the sky and the ships shone through the warm summer haze. A police-launch with a silver-grey exhaust churned through rows of junks with white masts. The sea was milky blue, grey on the horizon and green near the shore. Dark cruisers swung round with the tide, and a host of small ships from the neighbouring islands bobbed up and down on the waves. Near the old cathedral he dismissed the ricksha and walked through the cathedral gardens. There were flame-of-the-forest trees at the corner of North Bridge Road, and from somewhere in the green gardens came the cloying scent of Flowers-of-the-Cape.

"How sweet everything is this evening," he told himself. "I have never seen Singapore before. Now that I am leaving it, it looks ten times lovelier than I ever imagined."

Suddenly he stood still. He could not imagine why he said this, or why the thought of leaving entered his mind. He sat on one of the benches and gazed at the milky-blue sea, the white masts of the sampans, the riverboats and the Straits Steamship Company steamers bringing tin from the mainland to the islands where it was smelted. Time passed slowly and effortlessly. Old women entered the cathedral to pray, and he was surprised to notice that there were Chinese women among them. The flame-of-the-forest flowers were fading: they were no longer bright red, but already it was growing darker and perhaps the dark orange petals were a vivid red in the morning.

He did not know how long he sat on the bench. The sun was setting, and from the windows of the shops there came a red glow like a flourish of bronze swords. A funeral procession was slowly passing outside the Adelphi Hotel—obviously the funeral of a wealthy rice-seller, for the rice-sellers' chop was everywhere, on the green silk skirts of the drummer-boys and the bright green and yellow banners carried high above the catafalque. The name of the dead man and the years of his life were painted in red letters on white lanterns. Cheong could not understand what was happening. He had never seen a Chinese funeral procession late in the evening. Above the catafalque stood an enormous blue bird with fluttering wings of painted wood—a bird with a scarlet beak and yellow eyes. It was so real that he expected it to fly away at any moment. It would fly above the houses, out to sea, beyond the sampans and the dark-painted cruisers, towards China. The mourners were laughing, and the drummer-boys were beating their drums. "How extraordinary it is," Cheong murmured, shivering with cold and apprehension. "I rarely see a funeral, but this bird was so life-like that I thought it was carrying me away to China."

It was growing dark when he left the bench in the Cathedral garden. He walked along North Bridge Road like someone in a dream, not knowing where he was going, listening to the distant cymbals and drums of the funeral and turning over and over in his mind the words he had spoken on the bench. "I am certainly not serious," he told himself. "How could I leave my children? I 'am too old to fight. Why should I lose all my happiness in returning to China?" But he knew that the old restlessness could only be worked out in physical exhaustion, and he decided to walk until he could no longer stand, down all the side-streets and into all the blind alleys, where washing hung from bamboo poles and the gutters were full of foul-smelling garbage heaps.

In Chin Chew Street the fortune-tellers were lighting their oil-lamps. This long street was famous for its virgins. Twenty years ago, when the Cantonese women came to Singapore to work as farm-labourers, they took a vow of virginity. Instead of having children of their own, they adopted children. They

wore black clothes, stained with red mud, and they squatted in the street every evening among their children discussing the next day's labour. Lamps were being lit in all the houses, but the acetylene lamps of the market on the other side of the road made them seem as pale as candlelight during the day. Half-way up the street someone had died. Tables were being set on the pavement for the funeral feast. Cheong walked up and down the street, admiring the dark sculptured faces of the women and their lean children; then he paused at the corner and looked down at a hairless old woman sucking turtle-eggs as she gazed at her fortune-tellers' cards.

"Ten cents! Ten cents! Ten cents!" the old woman pointed at the bird-cage and the cards placed face downwards in neat rows.

There was a munia bird inside the wicker cage, a small bird with a white head and chestnut feathers. He dropped ten cents in the old woman's hand and watched her opening the cage-door. The munia bird hopped out, pecked at one of the overlapping cards and waited until the old woman fed him with a grain of rice before returning to the cage.

"What question does the honourable before torn wish to ask?" she said, gazing up at him with piercing black eyes. "Come nearer, I can't see you."

Cheong had given no thought to the question he wanted to ask. He looked from the old woman, who was nearly blind, to the small boy who accompanied her. The boy was almost as handsome as Green Jade, with the same thick curling lashes, the same olive-brown complexion. He wore a pair of blue shorts fastened with a white belt; he said nothing, but moved his weight from one bare leg to the other and smiled continually.

"Is he your son?" Cheong asked.

The old woman cackled.

"I'm eighty-four," she answered. "How should I have a son that age."

She is the same age as grandfather, Cheong thought. He looked at her more closely. She was hairless and she nibbled the turtle-eggs continuously, so that the soft white yolk* of the turtle-eggs lay all round her mouth. The fumes from the

oil-lamp were getting into her eyes. She blinked at him and stared at the card the munia bird had pecked.

"What question does the honourable before born want to ask?" she repeated. "He is worried over some domestic trouble. I can see that clearly. For ten cents I can answer questions on love, courtship, marriage, children, stomach-troubles, financial affairs——"

What am I doing here? Cheong thought. I am a shipwright with four children and an unfaithful wife. Why should I allow myself to talk to a toothless old woman? She will say whatever comes into her mind, but Ng Ah will think carefully over everything I tell her.

"I propose to take a long journey," he said at last. "I would like to know whether it will be successful."

The old woman grew silent, no longer cackling. She gazed at the card, which had grown grey with handling. She held it near the light, until he was afraid it would burst into flame, for the oil-lamp was not shielded. She smiled, and putting one hand on the shoulder of her great-grandson, she whispered to him, pointing every now and then at Cheong, who had already determined to leave her at the first opportunity. Only the boy's beauty held him back. He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, and waited without any eagerness for the answer.

"I see a journey to your homestead in China," the old woman cackled at last. "I see great difficulties. I see you will pass many times through the invading armies. I see danger and much suffering——"

Suddenly she was silent; her lips closed like a trap. She smiled, and whispered excitedly to the boy, but her lips were clenched firmly together. Cheong looked from the boy to the old woman, who began to fish in her skirt for turtle-eggs.

"You want to know whether you will be killed?" the old woman's voice rose to a shrill squeal. "*Ai-ya*> you want to know whether you'll be killed, but that costs another ten cents." She cackled in triumph. "Another ten cents," she repeated, holding out her hand. "For ten cents I answer all the questions the high born can ask me. All questions concerning love, marriage, courtship and death——"

Cheong said nothing. Like the old woman, his mouth closed

in a thin line. Sweat poured down his cheeks, but there was nothing he wanted to know. The brilliant flame of the oil-lamp made everything outside invisible. The old woman's face hovered above the darkness, larger than life, larger than the whole world.

"For ten cents I answer any question," she continued, but Cheong was already gone.

All the way back he was conscious of the old woman's eyes pursuing him. Suddenly Singapore had become unreal. In Chinese theatres large placards are brought on the stage at the end of a performance solemnly warning the audience that what they have seen is make-believe, and on leaving the theatre they must be prepared to encounter life's grim realities again. Life in Singapore, even life at the Naval Base, resembled a performance in a Chinese theatre. "I shall sail to China," he told himself as he walked slowly along the river. "What does it matter if I am killed? Is the life of a flower more important than the life of a man? In Singapore every day is the same and there are only two seasons—day and night."

When he reached the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, the pulse in his forehead was beating so loudly that he was afraid it would be heard on the other side of the street. The horn lanterns in the court-yard swung in the breeze from the river. Ng Ah was sewing in the porch, with Crystal Stream at her feet. A white kitten leaped from the wall and pawed at the white bobbins of silk.

"You're late," Ng Ah said, taking off her horn-rimmed spectacles and laying the silk cloth aside.

"Were you worried?"

"A little."

He asked her how great-grandfather was.

"He was singing again this morning," Ng Ah smiled and sucked at a thread of silk. "His arm is better. He will live for ever."

Crystal Stream began to tell him of the occasion when great-grandfather continually drew two white sticks from the jar and won the longevity game. Her black hair was lacquered to her forehead, and with a shock of surprise he realised that she was growing up.

"I'm going to the name-party of Mr. Aw Seng Tee's third concubine," she explained. "She is sixteen——"

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

Cheong was silent. He wondered whether he would receive any more shocks that evening. Green Jade was turning the lathe in the woodshed; he heard the spindle running, and his son's soft tread on the boards. It was the only comforting thing.

"What would you do if I sailed for China?" he asked suddenly, stroking her glossy hair.

Crystal Stream considered for a moment.

"We would miss you very much, Father."

Ng Ah burst out laughing.

"Of course he is not serious," she exclaimed; and she drew him down on the wicker-chair beside her.

"Of course not," Cheong laughed, seeing Crystal Stream's upper lip trembling. "Of course not! Give my best wishes to Mr. Aw Seng Tee's third concubine," he smiled, as she ran inside for her shawl.

When Crystal Stream had hurried through the vermilion gate, wearing an embroidered gown of dusky green peonies and almond blossom, they found nothing to say. The tears stood in Ng Ah's eyes, and she put on the horn-rimmed spectacles which gave her a childish expression. On the trellis-work grandfather had erected many years before a moon-flower was slowly unfolding its petals. Once a year, sometimes once every two years, the moonflower grows slowly from its dark seed until it is as large as a white porcelain plate; but 'm the first rays of the morning the petal shrivels, the kernel falls away and nothing is left except the warm heavy scent, which remains in the air for many days.

"When are you going?" Ng Ah said in a calm voice. "Look, the moon-flower! The new moon and the moon-flower——" she sighed.

"Have you made your wish?" Cheong asked.

"To-night a thousand wishes will be answered," Ng Ah said passionately, and as Cheong rose to look more closely at the strange white flower, she held him back with all her strength.

"Wait, don't pluck it—wait until the morning."

She was crying. The tears in her eyes were crystals which magnified the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud and made all colours dazzlingly brilliant.

They walked quietly to the trellis, afraid of being seen and afraid of disturbing Green Jade. The petals quivered when they drew near, for their breaths were too strong for the fragile white surface, which glowed against the black leaves and cast a benediction on the small peach-tree below.

"Grow straight and tenderly," Ng Ah whispered. "This flower will fade in the night, but next year it will blossom again—and who knows where we shall be?"

Green Jade came out of the woodshed, a door banged and they heard him running in the house. In their confused elated minds, they remembered every detail of their lives together. Ng Ah thought she was still walking among the mangroves of Cloud Temple Hall; Cheong thought he was still young and free from the burdens of middle-age. They held each other's hands so firmly that the knuckles shone silver.

"It's fading already," Ng Ah exclaimed. "Look! The petals are fading."

Cheong nodded in agreement and sympathy. They were fading fast, but he could no longer bear to look at it. They returned to the warmth and comfort of the house, away from the chilly night and the fast-fading flowers. Green Jade was ransacking a cupboard for something. Grandfather was humming as he played on a three-stringed instrument which had never been tuned. Singapore River was silent, but from the open door of a warehouse, where dried husks of flowers were being powdered, came the scent of peonies and chrysanthemums.

For thirty years the Hall of the Cloud at Rest had remained unchanged. While new workshops and factories were raised on the Rochore Canal, and more and more woodsheds were built beyond the court-yard wall, the homestead remained the same. There were the same bare walls, the same smell of peach-blossom and incense, the same wooden floors and the same silk curtains. Only the windows had changed. One day,

walking in Havelock Road, grandfather had discovered the red and green diamond panes in a ship-chandler's shop, and brought them home in triumph. When the sun shone on the windows, the sunlight was broken into a hundred colours and fell on the polished floors, painting them red and green and yellow. The sunlight was never still. Every moment the colours changed, and grandfather shuffled through them in his grey gown which would turn from crimson to green or gold.

As he recovered from his paralysis, he took to wandering more and more around the house. He could not keep still. He would sit and watch Ng Ah in the kitchen, or peer at the children in the court-yard, and he stared for long hours at the sunlight on the walls. In the morning, when the sun poured into the library, the silk and paper scrolls hanging on the walls curled up in the heat; in the afternoon they fell so smoothly along the wall that they seemed to have been painted on the whitewash. In the afternoon, when the sunlight fell on the northern part of the house, he felt lonely; until the children returned from school or Cheong returned from work, when they would be invited into the library.

"Is it true that you are thinking of returning to China?" he asked one day, when Cheong returned from the Naval Base.

Cheong lifted an apple to his lips, and then let it fall.

"Yes, Grandfather," he said slowly.

Grandfather said nothing for a long while. He was slowly cutting an apple into segments.

"Have you thought of the family?" he asked at last. "Your mother is ill. Who will bury her when you are gone?" The afternoon sunlight poured over his shoulders and set light to the chrysanthemums on the table. "There is another thing I have to ask you," he continued. "You have lived for thirty-five years in this vale of tears, yet you have forgotten the proprieties. Such an important question cannot be decided by the family alone. Have you prayed to the ancestors?"

"I have prayed, Grandfather."

Grandfather looked up sharply. He was nearly blind, but he saw clearly what was happening inside his grandson's mind. Ng Ah entered with the inevitable cups of chrysanthemum tea. He motioned her to remain, and for the first time in her

life she disobeyed him. Grandfather shrugged his shoulders, and looked at Cheong closely. He leaned forward and touched Cheong's blue shirt with his right hand, then he sat back in the wicker-work chair with a satisfied smile.

"Have you thought of all these things?" he said. "Nowadays few families pay attention to the ancestors. In the struggle for existence I have noticed that the old habits are dying, but there was more contentment in a single village in China in the old days than in all Singapore to-day."

"I have thought of everything, Grandfather," Cheong said quickly and breathlessly. "China is fighting for her life. I must go back. The Chinese armies need men who are skilled in the knowledge of the west—strong men, a great wall of men——"

"You want to fight in the army?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Only the refuse of a civilisation enters the army."

"But not now. Everything has changed. China is fighting for her life."

He leaned forward eagerly as he spoke, his fists on his knees, sweat falling in an ivory stream down his chest. Grandfather was tugging at the pearl buttons on his grey gown. He hated the idea that a member of the Cheong family should enter the army. That it should be Cheong, his favourite, made him recoil with horror at the thought that was obstinately gaining control of his mind.

"If you must go, you must go," he said despairingly. "This generation is more obstinate than any I can remember." He paused and shook his head sadly. "In less than four weeks comes the Chinese New Year, when the Hall of the Cloud at Rest must be in harmony. We shall need you to celebrate the New Year. Later, perhaps, we may discuss the matter again."

Cheong was uncertain whether his grandfather had given his blessing to the journey. He looked up hopefully, but there was no expression on his grandfather's face. Suddenly the face had become withdrawn, ancient, like one of the ivory Buddhas found in T'ang graveyards, absorbed in its own splendours. There was no life in it any more, no welcome light in the eyes. He sank within himself and thought of the newspapers which he trampled with rage each day.

"You will let me go, Grandfather?" he asked shortly afterwards.

"Yes, yes," grandfather replied impatiently. "But first there must be harmony in the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. Tien Hsueh must return. Your business affairs must be completed. If you respect the will of the ancestors you must never allow the household to be in disharmony."

For the first time Cheong felt relieved of his anxieties. If he could find Tien Hsueh everything would be well. She was staying with her parents; but no letters were ever answered, and whenever he went to the house, she was out. As he walked slowly downstairs, he passed Ng Ah. He remembered that she had never been received into the family. He promised himself that before he left the house, he would present her to the ancestors. Her name would be entered among the family names, her pigtail would be cut off and she would be a servant no longer, but a strong corner-stone in the fortunes of the Cheongs.

"Leong Chye wishes to speak to you," Ng Ah smiled as he passed.

"Now?"

"Yes, he says it's urgent."

Cheong's forehead puckered. His first thought was that Leong Chye had been taken ill and wished to be pensioned off. In the court-yard the ricksha-puller was walking up and down the paving-stones and absent-mindedly rubbing out the carefully drawn squares Crystal Stream used in her games. He wore black silk trousers and a wide-brimmed straw hat. There was a blue scar just above his waist, and Cheong searched dimly in his memory when he saw it, but failed to understand why it caused reverberations through his mind.

"I have come about a certain matter," Leong Chye began.

"Well, what is it?" Cheong asked grimly, thinking now that a wheel of the ricksha was broken, or new springs were required.

"It's a heavy matter, your honour," Leong Chye began, moistening his lips, and Cheong knew by his expression that the request would be difficult to comply with.

"Well, what is it?" Cheong repeated curtly.

"It's about your honourable wife."

As soon as the ricksha-puller mentioned his wife, Cheong imagined her entering the court-yard. She came from the street, her skirt crumpled a little after sitting in the ricksha, her lips set in a firm line and the white powder on her face shining in the strong afternoon sunlight.

"Where did you see her?"

"I don't know anything, your worship. It's only what I've heard. Someone I know has seen her."

"Where?"

"Here in Alexandra Road, and in Victoria Street. A friend of mine says he saw her."

"In Alexandra Road?"

"Yes, your honour, but how do I know whether it is true? They say there are twins born in different families. How do I know?"

Cheong knew he was lying. The ricksha-puller gazed at his master with his old awkward, pathetic look of helplessness. When he arrived at the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, he was still young and vigorous; but already he was showing all the signs of excessive opium-smoking. His eyelids twitched, his cheeks were sunken and greenish-yellow, his bones showed plainly in his thin arms and around his chest. The sun fell full on his face and the blue weal shone like a new scab.

"You don't suffer any pain?" Cheong asked tenderly.

"No, master."

"It must hurt you. You have never allowed it to heal. You should see a doctor."

Leong Chye laughed and the sweat dripped from his nose to his chin.

"It's nothing—nothing at all, your honour—just ten threads of silk."

He shuffled away, leaving Cheong to the silence of the court-yard. At first he thought he would go in search of Tien Hsueh at once. Then he decided to return to his room, where everything that reminded him of her had been locked away in a carved camphor-wood chest—her shoes and Shanghai gowns, her combs and coverlets and breast-bands, her scents, her powders and her paint-box. But when he reached his room, the scrolls on the wall, the paintings of leopards and tigers, the

colourwashes, the bronze statue of an old god riding a pony, Confucius dreaming of the Duke of Ch'u, all these disturbed him. When he thought of his wife, he saw her petal lips and lavender silk gown embroidered with peony flowers, and he forgot Ng Ah in his hunger for her beauty.

"Everything is too bright this evening," he said half-aloud.

He was pleased when he heard Ng Ah singing in the kitchen. Her voice recalled him to life, but he was soon in a day-dream again. He sat on the edge of the bed with his chin cupped in his hands, thinking of her with a furious imagination, until he thought she was already in the room. In the six years of their separation not a day had passed when he had not thought of her. In the six years he had grown so accustomed to her absence that she no longer troubled him; yet whenever he thought of her, he saw her so distinctly that he knew he was only half alive without her.

"Caw-w-w-wauk!" the magpie settled on the branches of the flame-of-the-forest tree and awakened him from his day-dream. As though to prevent him from dreaming again, Crystal Stream began to fill the court-yard with the hideous rattle of crackers. "I must hurry," he told himself. Without brushing his hair or washing his face, he ran into the court-yard and out through the vermilion gate. It was nearly dark. The sun was setting over the islands. Dray-carts and yellow-roofed taxi-cabs rumbled along the crowded street, where rice-sellers and fish-sellers were crying their wares, and small boys flew kites, and girls in silk trousers and embroidered coats walked arm in arm with clerks in their white uniforms. How quickly Singapore had changed! He could remember a time when no Chinese women were seen on the streets, when there were few rickshas and fewer taxis, when children and young girls were kept securely locked behind bars, and buffaloes grazed in the meadows where now there were tenements. The labourers were returning home after the day's work. Peasant women walked with easy strides, big-boned and sturdy, their teeth flashing under the ribbed cotton caps of scarlet. "In the new China everyone will work," he murmured to himself. "I shall have women to work in my ship-yard, and there will be no more painted ghosts."

As the light thickened, the scent of flowers and incense became overpowering. Blue neon lights crackled over shop-doors. Army lorries, heavily camouflaged, raced through the black city; and everywhere there were people in aimless groups. He walked up and down Alexandra Road: there was no sign of her. He searched the faces of the Chinese women he saw, thinking that perhaps she had changed, and he would be unable to recognise her. Towards nine o'clock he found himself in the dark side-streets of the Malay quarter near Kampong Glam. The air was heavy with incense. Somewhere among the small white houses he saw a Malay bride on her throne. The bride's downcast face resembled Tien Hsueh's. She was small and dark, while Tien Hsueh was tall and fair-skinned, but both possessed soft hands and almond eyes, and both were beautiful. Dogs were barking, a *kathi* was chanting prayers, the guests at the Malay wedding were shouting and throwing water at each other, but the Malay bride on the golden throne remained with downcast eyes beside her husband.

Half an hour later he decided to return home. The streets were deserted. Rain was falling and the last tongkangs were being moored in Singapore River. Yellow lights moved under their curved palm-leaf roofs and shed a faint glimmer on the water. Cheong walked slowly along the Boat Quay, where empty wicker hampers lay among the dead chickens and fish-heads on the embankment. The moon was riding the clouds, and he saw the rain falling on the river in speckled bands. When he reached the bridge the rain was falling in torrents. Suddenly he saw a woman in an embroidered white gown leaning over the bridge and staring at the dark shadows of the river.

"Tien Hsueh!" he shouted. "Tien Hsueh! Have you come back? Look at me!"

He ran up to her like someone possessed, shouting at the top of his voice. Her back was turned to him, but he was sure he could recognise her.

"Tien Hsueh!" he whispered urgently, when she was within earshot. "Tien Hsueh, look at me. Don't you recognise me?"

She was damp and shivering, her face swollen with weeping.

The rain had tightened her breast-bands and she could scarcely breathe. Her embroidered gown clung to her body, and when he touched her, she whimpered like a child suddenly frightened in the dark and laid her head slowly on his shoulder saying nothing.

"Tien Hsueh!" he murmured her name over and over again. "Are you well? Listen to me. Look at my face. What has happened to you? Don't shiver. There's no need to worry any more."

The words tumbled from his mouth in a ceaseless stream. Tien Hsueh made no answer. She sobbed and moaned, and rolled her head on his shoulder.

"How is Crystal Stream?" she asked through her tears.

"They're all well. Don't shiver. There's no need to worry any more."

She looked up and smiled. Her face was white with tears. A curtain of hair fell over her face, and she brushed it impatiently away; then she allowed her head to fall once more on his shoulder as a new fit of shivering swept through her body.

"Don't worry, don't worry," he kept on repeating, stroking her hair.

"How is Crystal Talk and Crystal Virtue?"

"They are all well."

He sighed and suddenly he felt calm and the weariness of the evening disappeared as they shivered together in the rain. There were no passers-by, the lamps in the sampans went out or mysteriously reappeared. They heard the river swishing below the bridge like an accompaniment of their sorrows, and Cheong noticed that whenever he looked at the river, she drew back and hid her face in his shoulder.

"You're so warm," he murmured stupidly, "and the night—the rain, yes, the rain——"

In the Hall of the Cloud at Rest all the lamps were extinguished. Cheong was glad the children would not see their mother when she returned. Even the gate-keeper's house was in darkness, and for some reason the lamp before the familiar altar had gone out. The house was quiet. As they crossed the court-yard, they heard the rain rattling on the roofs, but they no longer felt the rain on their own bodies.

"Don't turn on the lights," she whispered urgently.

He carried her into the bedroom, thinking how strangely light she had always been. Her face was white in the darkness like a fountain at night. She sighed and whimpered, and continually pressed her hands against her breast. On the cold wooden bed her damp body refused to lay still. In an agony of grief for the past she leaped and struggled against the invisible forces enchaining her.

"I must see them," she exclaimed suddenly, so loudly that Cheong was afraid they would be overheard.

"Ah keep still, keep still," he said compassionately. "You'll see them in the morning."

"Would I frighten them?"

"No—but keep still."

He stroked her thin eyebrows and her petal lips, which were thrust forward, as always when she was crying. He stroked her shoulders and her forehead and untied the taut breast-bands; and at last when she seemed to have stopped crying, he laid her head on his lap and stroked her face and her throat.

She was still crying when he awoke the next morning. She was crying as though she would never stop, as though she was weeping out her life in an agony of despair and repentance.

XII

EARLY in 1940 An-mei began to complain of the heat, and for the first time in the history of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest an electric fan was bought and the flex was solemnly uncoiled in her bedroom. Grandfather was continually trying to persuade her to invite a European doctor, but instead she sent out a message to a Buddhist soothsayer, a doctor famous for his herbs and the length of his meditations. Three weeks before the Chinese New Year he arrived in a ricksha, wearing a soiled yellow gown, three strings of almond beads, a brown cap and rope sandals. The electric fan frightened him with its continual whirring sound, and as he squatted on the floor, his eyes closed and his white hands folded like lotus leaves, he

looked ill at ease. He looked so disturbed by the electric fan that An-mei asked him whether he would prefer to have it removed, but instead of replying he rose and began to build a pyramid of small sticks on the wood floor. Under the sticks he threw small crumpled sheets of rice paper.

"What are you doing?" An-mei exclaimed in alarm.

"It won't burn the floor," he answered, and began to chant as the flames rose amid a cloud of white smoke.

The fire burned furiously. The scented wood burned, the rosin simmered and the white ash retained the shape of the wood long after it was consumed. The soothsayer prayed in a loud voice. He danced round the smouldering fire, waving a wooden sword, praying earnestly and incoherently in a low melodious voice which reached every room in the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, although all the doors were closed.

An-mei stared at the smouldering flames and sank into a stupor. Tears filled her eyes and fell down her cheeks, and all the while the soothsayer was' chanting and waving his sword round his head. He moved round the room like a mechanical toy, lighter than air, more solemn than the patient in bed, the yellow gown continually changing colour in the diamond panes through which the sun was trailing ribbons of red and green light. All the while the fan whirled over their heads, cleansing the room with its cool draughts, and the fire smouldered. Some scent had been mixed with the wood, which pumped new life in her veins. She felt light-headed and calm, where before she was drowsy and afraid. Before the soothsayer came, she expected him to decapitate a cock and draw circles on the floor, but instead he only lit a fire and danced round the room. She sighed with relief and excitement. The drawn yellow face of the soothsayer shone with a brilliant sweat. He was no longer running round the room, but hurling himself from one side to the other, waving his wooden sword. Suddenly he paused and gasped for breath.

"It is finished," he said, sinking down on the floor.

For the rest of the morning the soothsayer squatted in the porch, saying nothing, his dark eyes turned to the sun, the silk scent-bag at his side and the wooden sword hidden under the folds of his gown. An-mei searched the place on the floor where

he lit a fire—there was no sign of the fire, and the embers had disappeared. The soothsayer had gone, but during the last twenty minutes she had grown ten years younger. She felt cool and calm, relieved of all her anxieties, without pain—simply because he waved his sword and lit a fire!

From that moment An-mei became better. Once more she began to take an interest in the homestead, and no longer spoke of dying. But in gratitude to the soothsayer she allowed more and more Buddhist nuns to enter the house, and the clash of cymbals and drums was heard by the sampan-rowers on Singapore River. After days of concentrated thought, she decided to erect a new altar in her bedroom. Everyone was asked to contribute to the furnishings. Ng Ah discovered in the attic a richly embroidered curtain showing the life of Buddha from birth to death. Grandfather painted a bodhisattva among the Liu mountains, while Cheong carved a small sampan and his father ordered wooden tables for the fruit offerings: melons, mangoes, durians and mangosteens. The altar was blessed by the abbess of a nunnery. And one day a small parcel arrived bearing the seal of a famous monastery in the Liu mountains. An-mei believed the beads had been blessed in the holy fountain of Liu river and smiled all day with pride and a kind of exaltation which made her appear younger than ever.

Although still in pain, she threw herself into the preparations for the New Year festival. Gold pins shone in her hair. Her grey cloak was exchanged for a bright red gown. This was the season when the flame-of-the-forest trees were in flower. There was red everywhere—on the door-posts and the window-frames, in the corners of the rooms, on the white walls and even on the dwarf pines were red scrolls inscribed with suitable characters. "May joy last forever." "From this house of harmony may blessings flow in ten thousand streams." "May wealth and long life descend on all who pass this homestead." These scrolls were inscribed by grandfather, who spent the days before New Year's day in the library with the doors closed. He wrote clearly and with deliberation, forcing himself to write in spite of his unsteady fingers and the paralysed left arm. For hours he stared at the sheets of red paper before suddenly and almost frenziedly inscribing the characters. He,

too, looked younger than he had looked for years. Since the return of Tien Hsueh the house resumed its accustomed ritual, there were no more quarrels and the children played in the court-yard, no longer afraid of their grandparents' frowns. And one evening, when they were playing mahjong, Tien Hsueh appeared downstairs in a lavender-grey gown embroidered with a squirrel eating grapes. An-mei ordered her to sit on her right side—a sign that she was once more accepted in the family.

On the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth moon Tsao Wang, the kitchen god, ascended to Heaven and made his report to the Jade Emperor. Fire-crackers were lit while grandfather bowed before the smoke-grimed portrait of the god in the kitchen. With a small ladle he poured wine and honey over the image; with a prayer for the future of the household he allowed the image to be carried into the court-yard, where it was placed on a table, petrol was poured over it, a match was struck and in the sudden explosion the god disappeared heavenward for seven days accompanied by the smoke of incense and honey and straw for the heavenly horses. Then Crystal Stream was allowed to come out of her hiding-place to throw more crackers on the court-yard tiles, while Crystal Talk rode round the house on a broom, imagining he was the kitchen god, shouting: "Lend a light, lend a light—make way there!" During the evening grandfather came down for the second time that day to announce that New Year's Day must be celebrated as an important occasion in the history of the family, for it marked the returned harmony in the house, the recovery of An-mei and the continued prosperity of the homestead.

The kitchen god remained in heaven, but the kitchen was a hive of busy activity. All day and nearly all night the kitchen was full of the odour of baking fowl, the steam from the rice-bowls and the crisp fragrance of noodles. As Ng Ah stood over the fire, stirring the white sauce, she kept looking out of the window for a sign of Cheong returning. He had hardly spoken to her since Tien Hsueh's return. Instead of worrying, she threw herself into the work in the kitchen.

"There's not enough salt, Mistress," she kept complaining. "They will need salt," pouring the last remains of salt over the

white sauce. "And then we haven't enough ducks. This fire, too; I really need someone to help me——"

But there were too many cooks in the kitchen. Even Tien Hsueh came to help stir the rice-bowls. Nye Chieh groaned under the weight of silver plates and porcelain bowls she carried into the kitchen.

"Nye Chieh is too lazy," Ng Ah exclaimed, as gusts of white smoke poured down the chimney. "Look at her! She stuffs her mouth with sweets and does nothing to help me. Don't laugh, Mistress. She will come to no good, because she has no heart."

An-mei burst out laughing. Ng Ah whispered in her mistress's ear: "The poor girl needs some money to buy false teeth. Really we should help her, Mistress. Couldn't we lend her a little?"

Ng Ah was bathed in sweat from the wood fire. She rolled the pasties on a wooden board on which the character for 'long life' was inscribed; she stuffed yams with sweet-bread and wrapped the fresh pomeloes and mangosteens in coloured paper. The table was littered with porcelain bowls containing salted almonds, olives and chocolates, prawns, oysters, slices of chicken, melon and sunflower seeds. Since the illness of Green Jade, Ng Ah spent more and more time in the kitchen with Nye Chieh. "Smile, little one," she said, while Nye Chieh curtsied and almost dropped the spoons. "She's blushing, she's blushing," Ng Ah exclaimed; and immediately Nye Chieh raised her small boyish face and laughed nervously. "Why do you always make fun of me?" she asked, hiding her hands, which were red from being held too long in boiling water, under her apron. "Ah, because we love you," Ng Ah answered tenderly.

When Nye Chieh had disappeared behind the bead curtains, Ng Ah recited her virtues to An-mei.

"She's a good girl. She doesn't drop things. She is very careful and well-mannered. We're very lucky to have found such a girl."

"Yes, indeed," An-mei said, caressing the pears with her finger-tips, and she added for no reason at all: "In these days we must always pray for a long life."

Grandfather Cheong had already decided that New Year's

Day should be spent royally. In his neat calligraphy he began to write the menu. There would be grilled shark's fins in brown sauce, bird's nests in sweet almond soup, shredded chicken with bamboo shoots, fried shrimp-balls, crabs, lobsters and stewed noodles. There would be roasted duck-skin, boiled pigeon and sweet-and-sour-spare-ribs. When he completed the menu, he settled down to composing a poem in honour of the Cheong family, and more poems in honour of single members of the family. Meanwhile the Hall of the Cloud at Rest was being swept clean from attic to cellar. The old curtains were burnt and replaced with new brocade, the broken chairs were repaired, the mirrors were polished, the teak cupboards fumigated and cleaned with lavender water. The faded gold lettering of the ancestors' names on the spirit tablets was repainted and new clothes were bought in the market. A store of presents was bought for the children—spears covered with silver paper, kites of feathers and soft Nangpoo silk, shuttlecocks and footballs for Crystal Talk, a necklace of amber for Crystal Stream, a drum for Crystal Lotus. In the library grandfather was reading the newspapers when the presents arrived. The newspapers wearied him. He felt sick and angry, exhausted by the years of treason and the long pilgrimage of self-destruction. His eyes were large and deep and dark. Under the unshaded electric globe, he seemed to shrink within himself, deeper and deeper, until at last he reached the quiet place where wars are incomprehensible and the free spirit speaks through the tongues of the T'ang poets and heralds a greater conquest than the war of knives.

"The way of the rose is to close its petals at night," he murmured, and at that moment Ng Ah came silently into the room with the parcels heaped under her arm.

"Forgive me," she murmured. "I have brought the presents for you to hide." •

Grandfather removed his tortoise-shell spectacles and gazed at the doorway. At first he thought it was Tien Hsueh. Then he thought it was Crystal Stream. Then he thought he saw no one at all, and stared out of the window at the sampans floating down-stream. Ng Ah, knowing that he was deaf and half-blind, made a scraping noise with her feet and walked

noisily over the wooden boards, bowing all the time with the parcels balanced precariously in her arms.

"Forgive me," she murmured again. "I have brought the presents for you to hide."

She knelt at his feet, surrounded by cardboard boxes wrapped in red paper with good-luck ribbons. He saw her and leaned forward, gazing for a long time at her white face and trembling lips, then he leaned forward and placed his right hand on her shoulder.

"Since the day when the Cheong family arrived in Singapore," he said slowly, "you have served us with a crystal heart. May your life with my grandson be blessed with peace. May you prosper when I have gone. I see dark clouds in the world—there will be more stupid wars to tear sons from their families and daughters from their homes. May the Hall of the Cloud at Rest be a harbour of rest and peace in a world gone mad."

He spoke gravely and hesitantly, resting his right hand heavily on her shoulder, while the left hung paralysed at his side. He ordered her to place the presents on the camphor-wood table below the painting of T'ien Kuan, the god of happiness, and dismissed her with a gentle inclination of his head and a flourish of his long grey sleeves.

As New Year's Day came nearer, more food passed through the kitchen on its way to the larder. There were rice-cakes seasoned with onions, shelled eggs dipped in vinegar, silver baskets full of walnuts and crinkled Swatow oranges. On the table lay a row of thimble-cups polished and shining. In each of these a few drops of lotus wine had been poured. Soon they would be placed on a lacquer tray, the wine would evaporate in the heat and colour the glasses with a pale green stain. Ng Ah remained all day in the kitchen. Now and then she opened the oven and looked at the rice-cakes, the braised duck skins, the bird's nests, the bamboos and the slices of red meat spindled on wooden skewers. She sprinkled red pepper and green salt on the bamboos, tasted them and pushed them back in the fire until they were crisp on the teeth. She worked in a fury of concentration, darting from one end of the kitchen to the other, praying that everything would be prepared before the kitchen god returned.

On the morning of New Year's Day, after the whole family had taken part in the ceremonies before the ancestral spirits, Ng Ah returned in hot haste to the kitchen. She looked at the fowls and basted them with spluttering brown gravy, sniffing the rich fragrance of baked flesh. The sauce had thickened to a white cream, the flesh was white and tender. Musicians had been hired to play during the dinner. Ng Ah went back and hovered over the mountains of food on the kitchen table with an expression of pervading happiness and contentment; so happy that she whispered and sang to the food on the table, and laughed like a mad woman at the flames like waving blue silks which rose from the log-fire.

Tien Hsueh came into the kitchen wearing a long red gown which reached to her ankles.

"Our grandfather has been taken ill," she said in a quivering voice: she licked her lips and leaned against the door-post. "This is the second time! God knows whether he will recover."

Immediately after the morning ceremonies grandfather had suffered another heart attack. His face turned grey, the same colour as his gown. He stiffened and then crumpled up on the floor. In the fall his paralysed arm was broken. Ng Ah listened to the confused murmur of voices from the library, dropped the silver canister she was holding and hurried upstairs. An-mei was wailing in a corner. Meifu was sitting in a chair with her mouth wide open, while tears streamed uninterruptedly from her eyes. Cheong was bending over the couch where his grandfather lay with his eyes closed and his breathing came in short painful gasps. A small rain hissed on, the roof-tiles and ran down the diamond panes of the window. Grandfather opened his eyes.

"Is he dead?" Crystal Stream whispered in a hushed voice.

Ng Ah wiped the warm sweat from grandfather's forehead.

"How are you?" she asked tenderly.

"The way of the rose at night is to close its petals," he murmured, then he lay back and shut his eyes.

As the morning advanced the small rain gave place to a transparent blue sky. Over Singapore gulls wheeled in lazy blue circles. The flame-of-the-forest tree, washed by rain,

waved against the window and painted the room a brilliant red. Everywhere there was a continuous whispering and sucking sound, the sound of the land drinking up rain.

The doctor came early in the afternoon. Cheong led him to the library, where Ng Ah and Tien Hsueh were standing beside the bed. The broken arm had been placed in splints. The bed was covered with water-bottles and cushions. Incense candles were being lit, and the windows were closed to prevent evil spirits from entering. The young English doctor felt his pulse and lifted the eyelids. He gave orders that the ceremonial robes should be laid aside as far as the stomach, and when the robes were removed Cheong saw the thin yellow skin and black dry nipples with the expression of someone seeing sacred things. The doctor explored with his stethoscope.

"He has had a worse attack before," the doctor said. "He must have no excitement—rest and sleep. And no opium."

There was quiet in the room. No one showed emotion. In a yellow gown, his face shining like a peasant boy's face, his beard carefully combed, grandfather murmured the names of his family and of the ancestors, confusing them, speaking of Crystal, Talk in the past tense and of his great-great-grandfather in the present. Then his mind cleared and they heard him saying: "I will not spoil the festivities of my family." Everyone was silent. No one knew whether he would live through the day. The blood throbbed at his temples, and suddenly he asked everyone to leave the room except Cheong. When everyone had gone, he turned sharply to his grandson, his eyes wide open.

"When are you leaving for China, my son?"

"As soon as possible."

"Alone?"

"No, with Ng Aik—one of my workmen."

"Don't let my illness disturb your plans."

There was something so definite and pleading in the old man's voice that Cheong was startled. He had not expected the voice would be so resonant, or so controlled. He thought his grandfather was play-acting and the illness a kind of game played between himself and the family, but his breathing was laboured, the throbbing veins on the forehead spoke of inward

suffering barely endurable and Cheong watched with an expression of deepening anxiety, which only amused his grandfather. He laughed, and his laughter was heard in the kitchen. Ng Ah was burning joss-sticks made of sandal-wood dust in a large metal vase when she heard him. She looked up suddenly and said slowly: "He must be much better to laugh like that. The illnesses of old people are unpredictable."

From the moment when grandfather laughed, two things became clear—that grandfather would get well again and Cheong would disappear to China. During the long evening callers came and lanterns were lit in the court-yard, and the workmen floated the raft into the river where the actors would dance and fireworks would be let off late at night. While the crackers were being burnt in the court-yard, grandfather summoned Cheong once more to the library.

"You are still determined to go to China?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Then go now—go this evening after the fireworks. Here is the money for the aeroplane."

"What aeroplane?"

"There is no time to waste if you are going to China."

Cheong thought for a while. He looked at the familiar paintings on the wall and then at his grandfather, who showed no signs of dying. "There is no blood left in him," Cheong thought, "yet he lives like a mummy." And as though grandfather could read his thoughts, he said: "One of our ancestors reached the age of a hundred, but that was in the time of the Han Dynasty when men lived more strenuously."

Late at night the guests sat in deck-chairs facing the river, behind the woodshed wall. The night was dark and there were no stars, but when the actors had gone, the fireworks were lit and great golden rockets were reflected in the river. There were green Catherine wheels and shoots of yellow fire, and there was one firework like an immense glowing spider which burst and threw down a thousand silver legs. When the rockets dived into the water, they sizzled and a gasp of delight came from the throats of the onlookers. Green Jade was sitting with the girl he intended to marry, Meifu had come down from Malacca with Goh Seng, An-mei was wrapped up

in shawls and Cheong Ehr Sung thought of the days when only a few logs floated under the woodshed. When the guests were about to go, Cheong called them back and told them that he was leaving for China the next morning, but they were so dazed by the fireworks that hardly anyone understood that he was really leaving. Tien Hsueh said nothing, but Cheong noticed that she suddenly clutched Ng Ah's hand in sympathy. Late at night, when Tien Hsueh had fallen asleep, Cheong crept into Ng Ah's room. A candle was burning before a small painting of Kuan Yin, and beside the candle stood the small green jade Buddha from which Green Jade had taken his name. Ng Ah was wide awake. She lay with one arm over her eyes, shielding them from the candlelight.

"Why must you go? Why must you go?" she repeated the words over and over again. "In a week you will be in China."

He shook his head dumbly. She began to regard him with extraordinary quietness, saying nothing, and suddenly torn between love and pity for her, he kissed her desperately, first on the forehead and then on the lips, losing himself in the stillness of her body like the stillness at the centre of a wheel. He blew out the candle, but the moonlight came flooding through the open window. "Don't change, always be as you are now," she repeated, but even in sleep she saw him change, and suddenly he wore grey uniform and he was marching at night against the enemy and no one could tell whether he would return to offer sacrifices to the ancestors.

The first faint ribbons of light rose over the horizon. Ng Ah slipped her feet into cotton slippers and went down into the kitchen, sobbing.

XIII

CHEONG went to the aerodrome alone, because he was afraid of long farewells. He left messages for every member of the family, and there were presents of sweetmeats for the children and rolls of cloth for the women. As he rode to the aerodrome, he reflected that for three days he had been thinking of his

children as though they were young again, but now Green Jade was as tall as himself and already there was talk of Crystal Stream's marriage. "They grow too fast," he kept murmuring, and through the crowded early-morning streets he kept repeating: "Too fast." It was the constant refrain of his life now that all the other problems were settled. "But this is a problem which I shall never be able to settle," he murmured as the car drove into the aerodrome.

Fifteen years ago there was no airport facing the sea in Singapore. Like the Naval Base it was built on piles. Where pirates once roamed among mudbanks and mangrove swamps, the ingenuity of man constructed a wide level field, hangars, beacons, workshops. Cheong never ceased to be surprised at the foolhardy way in which men attempted the impossible, and succeeded so well that anything, at any moment, was in danger of becoming something else. He watched a red aeroplane flying low over the roof-tops, sailing so gently to earth he was afraid it would be tossed away by a gust of wind. But it was the aeroplane which caught his attention: the great three-engined Douglas seemed to be constructed like a ship or a very fast yacht; it was painted silver and there were silver rudders, and the wings resembled sails. He was not afraid of the aeroplane, though he had never flown before. He gazed at it with a curious affection, the same affection which he felt for the motor-boat which brought him each week-end to Cloud Temple Hall. It was half-past six. In the distance the white dome of the Sultan Mosque caught the sunlight, and at that moment he knew there would be no storms, the aeroplane would sail effortlessly through the sky and soon he would be in China. He left the hotel and wandered into the smaller hangars nearby, where wingless aeroplanes were stacked together like dead beetles. How lifeless they looked! Just as a sailing vessel looked lifeless without her sails! He looked at his watch: there were still twenty minutes to go before the aeroplane sailed, and he cursed himself for starting out so early. He thought of Ng Ah and Green Jade. Crystal Stream had cried because he would not be present at her marriage, Crystal Talk was talking of winning a scholarship and going to a University in England. He could not understand these things. They were no longer

important. He was flying to Chinese territory, not because he wanted to, but because Singapore held nothing for him except his family life, and in a world maddened by war, it was absurd to cling to family traditions and enjoy the continual comforts of family life. He could not explain these things to himself. He could not explain anything. He gazed at the dead beetles in the hangar, thought for a moment of grandfather and returned to the hotel.

Five minutes later another silver Douglas flew low over the immense landing-ground and at the same moment when its wheels touched the earth a bell rang, and he realised it was time to leave. Then, for the only time during the journey, he felt a pain over his heart and he saw the members of the Cheong family so clearly that they seemed to be standing in the air-field. Blenheim bombers were zooming overhead. Every time they passed, he ducked instinctively. They were so noisy that he had to shout to make himself heard, and they were so fast that the rush of air from their wings threw the morning paper out of his hand and sent it whirling over the grass until he lost sight of it. Someone was making signs to him and talking in English. The hotel corridor was almost empty. Suddenly he realised that he was the only passenger, and the aeroplane was slowly coming to a pause at the gates of the hotel. "This is absurd," he said aloud in English. A Malay smiled at him, and a Chinese boy, all starch and smiles, came running up to see his ticket. The Chinese boy was detestable, because he had the manners of a clerk, but even more detestable was the thought that you had only to walk through the hotel lobby and you were already in the aeroplane. In a sailing ship at least you had to unfurl the sails.

They were flying due north before he had time to think where he was. As they rose through the upper air through a summer haze three cormorants rose and followed them out to sea. Below him lay Singapore island, all red laterite and green forest, and there were no signs of houses except along the coast. Changi was grey and yellow; Singapore city was a cluster of white frogs' spawn, and the Naval Base on the other side of the island was invisible through the heavy haze. "Where am I?" he shouted above the roar of the propellers. The great

rigid wings slanted over, the cormorants trailed away and the earth had gone mad. It had heaved itself up, it was coming straight towards him, half the earth was silver-grey and the other half deep green. Then slowly, as though settling into its stride, the wings lay parallel to the earth again, and he saw the red laterite beneath the forest and the white coral beneath the sea. In spite of the roar of the propellers, he had an impression of quiet and deep seriousness; it was as though the aeroplane was exploring uncharted roads in the sky and was compelled to labour secretly and with the utmost gravity. "If I had known it was like this, I would have flown before." He leaned forward and spoke to the wireless operator, but his voice was carried away and shortly afterwards the door between the pilot's stool and the cabin was closed to. "I must rest and go to sleep," he told himself, "and on no account must I think of my children." Nearly all night he had been awake. He smiled gratefully at the thought of Ng Ah and then fell asleep.

When he awoke the sea was still silver-grey, and they were still coasting above interminable forests. The aeroplane rocked gently, leaping over clouds and into white mists, which obscured everything, even the wings of the aeroplane. Someone had placed a paper bag at his feet, but he was not sick and he could not understand how anyone could be sick when they were flying so smoothly. While the fireworks were playing over Singapore river, Meifu had pressed something in his hand. He had forgotten it until he suddenly felt it in his pocket. It was a small square of crystal, and inside imprisoned in the glass, were two coloured birds of porcelain or metal. He held the crystal in his hands and spun it in the light, and it seemed to him that the birds imprisoned in the glass were exactly like the airmen imprisoned in the air. How did they know whether they were travelling? There were no lug-sails to unfurl, and there was no sensation of movement. Imprisoned in the air they seemed to be surrounded by a thick glass wall from which there was no escape, because the wall was as thick as the whole universe. Then he noticed that they were losing height; they were losing height so quickly that he was able to follow the motion of a single white-capped wave. Surely they were

returning to Singapore. The sea was the same colour, the trees were the same colour, but something had changed. Then he realised there were no islands and he wished he had spent more time looking at the islands when they were above Singapore. So this was Rangoon! He looked down at the mud-flats and the small circular aerodrome and the houses on piles, but their roofs were more sharply pointed than the Malay houses on Singapore island, they were a warm ochre colour instead of grey and the Irrawaddy was crowded with house-boats ten times larger than the sampans in Singapore river. The wings wheeled round sharply; the earth was coming up to meet them and at the same time one wing of the aeroplane was shearing almost vertically away from the earth, and for the first time Cheong felt sick and conscious of being in a strange land. He looked at his watch. The journey had taken nearly four hours, and suddenly he realised that the sun had been shining on him throughout the journey, for his forehead was blistered with sunburn and there was a warm gritty dust in his eyes.

On the aerodrome at Rangoon he met a young Chinese pilot who was flying to Kunming and offered to take him as a passenger. At first Cheong refused. Later, after wandering through Rangoon, after smelling all the smells of the mud-banks and losing himself in the narrow streets of the European quarter, he agreed with the young Chinese pilot to fly to Kunming.

In the afternoon sunlight the Burmese highway shone like a red river among rocks. The earth beneath the forests was red like the earth in Malaya. But gradually as the afternoon faded into evening Cheong was conscious of a colder air, and the forests were becoming a darker green. They were no longer almost yellow like the forests of Malaya; they were black and grey on the hills, and green below. They stood out sharply against the horizon like tufts of hair, or else they sprawled like islands on the bare uplands. Burma was not all forest. There seemed to be deserts and oases; there were solitary trees and solitary villages. And here no cormorants flew with the aeroplane to remind them of the sea. Cheong could hardly imagine the sea now. The dappled silver-grey mirror, which reflected in perfect miniature the spread-eagled aeroplane

below had disappeared; instead, there was a curious black spider for shadow, far too fat, crawling up yellow hillsides, disappearing down ravines, becoming clear again only when they reached still another loop of the interminable rivers of Burma. It was cold at twenty thousand feet; Cheong envied the pilot's leather coat, which gave him the strange appearance of being no longer a man but a machine with a human face.

"How soon shall we be in Kunming?" he asked suddenly; for none of the villages below resembled Chinese villages.

"After dark," the pilot answered, sucking chocolate and pointing to the moon rising over the forest—a moon like a yellow kitten rolled up in a ball.

"Then we'll land by the light of flares?"

"Surely!"

Cheong gazed at the eighteen instruments, exactly eighteen more than he possessed on his motor-boat. When he saw China, it would be dark, he thought. He could not think what China would be like in the dark. In his elated mind China resembled the interior of a temple he occasionally passed through in Singapore; there was dust everywhere, and there were leering gods painted the colour of fresh blood. China was not like Singapore. It was a deserted temple at night, with strange shadows from swinging oil-lamps; it was the sweating face of the temple priest and the sound of gongs coming from the temple court-yard. In Singapore the annexe of one of the larger temples was used for teaching Chinese mechanics how to repair motor-cars. Kunming would be like this. Suddenly he would be walking across the decorated tiles of a temple court-yard, and he would see the beam of head-lamps illuminating the terrible bloodstained gods.

"Are you going as a technician?" the pilot asked.

"No, I'm going to fight," Cheong said quietly, overcome at the enormity of his statement.

"In the army?"

"Perhaps—I don't know," Cheong shook his head from side to side. "Or perhaps I shall join the guerrillas. I thought of building ships in China, but the Japanese have occupied all the coast." He stared at the faint flickering lights below, while a cloud with outstretched fingers, as black as burnt ivory,

sliced the western sky. "Let me see—soon we should be near Kunming," he said, following with all the concentration he could arouse in his sleepy brain the course marked in red pencil on the chart.

"We're already over China," the pilot said five minutes later.

But by then it was dark and the five fingers of the cloud had spread over the sun and buried it beneath the horizon. Cheong saw only a strange hummocky earth, and somewhere to the left a great lake and a few black towers. Cheong suddenly realised that they had been travelling at enormous speed in a fighter aircraft destined for the Chinese National Air Arm. The aeroplane was even swifter than the Douglas which brought him to Rangoon. It was trimmer and sturdier, and there was no cabin, and no ammunition, because no one would have allowed the ammunition to pass the frontiers. "Where is China?" There was a thin line of trees and a small wood fire near the lake. For ever afterwards he thought of the boundary between Burma and China as a wood fire shining through a mist near the lake.

Ten minutes after landing he learned that he had almost been killed. At the time he felt nothing but elation, for he had seen a Chinese drum-tower and his mind was carried back to Ai-lin. But almost at the moment of landing the mist had turned to fog, and the pilot had been unable to see the flares on the landing-ground. They came down with a great ineffectual sweep of their wings, beating up the air and then rising again, because there was no sign of earth below the fog-bank. Afterwards the pilot had caught a glimpse of the beacon-light somewhere behind the tail of the aeroplane; he swung round, flicked the joy-stick forward and waited too long before flicking it back. The aeroplane touched the earth, staggered, righted herself and churned up the grass on the field until it resembled to the onlookers an immense lawn-mower. Then she taxied in the direction of the beacons.

They walked through corridors of streets, where the mist hung heavy as ice and the slats of shuttered windows dripped with water.

"Is it always like this?" Cheong asked, his teeth

chattering, his forehead covered with beads of hot sweat.

"Nearly always," the pilot said. "Do you want to see the Army authorities now?"

"Yes, now."

The electric light in the streets glimmered faintly through the mist. Gradually he realised that the mist came front the lake, for whenever they turned westward he felt the mist more coldly on his cheeks. The pilot led him to a small house hidden in one of the back-streets. Washing hung from poles from upstairs windows. Candlelights flickered on the walls, and beggars jostled one another on the steps. Inside the house the walls were bare; in some rooms there was candlelight, in others unshaded electric light. There were portraits on the walls of Chiang Kai Shek and Sun Yat Sen, but the portrait of Chiang Kai Shek was taken when he was a young general at the military academy and the portrait of Sun Yat Sen was taken even before he came to Singapore. At the back of the house there were baths. Steam came to mingle with the mist, and the sweat of human bodies clung to the walls. In a room near the baths Cheong came face to face with a young doctor who looked overworked and who was so short-sighted that his spectacles were like glass spheres.

The doctor prodded his chest.

"Open your mouth—you're too old to fight in China—have you ever seen a Chinese winter—you come from the south and you expect to become acclimatised immediately."

He spoke so fast that Cheong was left breathless. He was made to strip, and he stood under an arc-lamp surrounded by half-naked soldiers. A steaming rice-bowl was placed in front of him. China was not at all what he expected. It was hard and unsentimental, full of naked soldiers sweating and joking, full of glaring lights and small doctors educated in American universities with spectacles like two glass spheres tied to one another with strips of steel. With a small iron hammer the doctor rapped his teeth. "None of the men from the South Seas are fit," he said, hammering at Cheong's knee with the same instrument with which he hammered at his teeth. "They're no good—better if they stayed in Singapore and saved enough money to send us a few

cigarettes occasionally." Suddenly the doctor looked up sharply. "How old are you?" he snapped.

"Thirty-eight."

"And you want to join the army?"

"Yes."

"Where were you working before?"

"At the Naval Base in Singapore, and I had my own woodsheds and timber-yards."

"Are you married?"

"Four children. One of them is going to be married soon."

The doctor sighed and his tongue clicked in his cheeks. A soldier was sitting cross-legged and naked in a jet of steam, picking his teeth. His body was the colour of an old penny. Other soldiers were coming out of the bathroom. They gathered round Cheong and the pilot, they made jokes and jerked their thumbs like ricksha boys, and one of them imitated every gesture he made. Cheong felt frightened and alarmed. He longed for the peace of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. He longed to be in the woodsheds with warm wood under his thumb. He longed to see grandfather sweeping into the court-yard with a book under his arm, or to hear Ng Ah singing in the kitchen. Above all he longed for the comfort of Tien Hsueh and the questions of his study: making accounts, balancing balance-sheets, looking over the books of the woodshed, while one by one every member of the family walked in, said a few words and departed after eating some of the sweets he always kept on his desk. The soldier in the jet of steam uncrossed his legs, threw down the tooth-pick and began laughing at something someone had told him. Suddenly the doctor told him to be quiet.

"You come from Singapore—I've forgotten how many miles it is away—you have a house, four children, perhaps three or four concubines and you come to China! Excellent! The road to Hell is paved with good intentions, but it is still excellent. You have deserved well of your country, no doubt, and you expect to find some excitement in China. You will find considerable excitement. You will find more than you ever dreamed of finding—"

The doctor emphasised each statement by hitting him

somewhere with the iron hammer, but Cheong had lost interest in him. The naked soldier in the steam-jet jumped up and threw himself upon Cheong.

"Don't you recognise me?" the soldier shouted. "Look at me! Don't you recognise me?"

Cheong thought the whole room was going round in circles, but suddenly he recognised Ng Aik, who worked with him in the Naval Base and who left Singapore a week earlier. Ng Aik was already a soldier. Although he was naked and although his hair was cropped close to his skull, he was no longer the Ng Aik he had known, but someone harder, tougher, sterner, unrecognisable in the uniform which all soldiers wear even when they undressed. Cheong burst out laughing. He forgot the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, he forgot grandfather and his wife and his children; he forgot his concubine and his father and mother. He was a soldier! He told himself he was as hard and vigorous as Ng Ah—it was the highest praise he could offer himself, although there was nothing hard in her.

Ng Aik led him to the bunks where the soldiers were sleeping. He was introduced to Ah Chee, a small wiry little man-without any teeth, who was the same age as Cheong. He was shown where he was to sleep; he was fed on sardines and he was told to wake early in the morning; but instead of falling asleep, they talked all night about Singapore. When dawn broke Ah Chee pointed to the bunks.

"To-night we're going north in the lorries. You had better have some sleep."

In the few moments before he fell asleep Cheong realised that he had become another animal altogether. He could not remember the aeroplane journey. It seemed to him that he had suddenly stepped into China after leaving the vermilion gate of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest. At any moment he might step out of China and return to Alexandra Road. "How extraordinary it is," he murmured, wrapping himself in the heavy woollen blankets, watching the mist on the window-pane and listening to Ah Chee's soft breathing. "When I wake up, will I be Cheong or some other animal altogether?"

As the lorry turned into the side of the road under a lip of

overhanging rock, a searchlight hung over the valley and then remained still. The Lewis gun on the lorry was manned. Although the aeroplanes could be heard, five or six hundred feet up, there was no sign of them. The moon shone like a bronze bowl through the clouds, illuminating the bridge below and the grey rocks in the swift-flowing river; but the aeroplanes were in hiding.

Ah Chee leaned over the Lewis gun and swung it until it pointed straight at the moon.

"If they pass the moon, I'll see them clearly enough," he murmured to Cheong. "Have you ever fired a Lewis gun?"

Cheong shook his head. He had never fired any gun before.

"Well, here's the barrel like a piece of lead piping, and here's the plateful of bullets, and here's where they come out when they're fired." He spoke quickly, as though making up for lost time, and all the while he followed the sound of the aeroplanes with the gun. The searchlight flickered out. It was such an extraordinary sight that Cheong gasped; for the light seemed to move downwards until it was swallowed up in the reflector,

"Look out," he whispered suddenly.

Quite plainly, less than three hundred feet away, above the clouds, an aeroplane was flying over their heads. The shadow of the aeroplane lay on the clouds. The moan of the engine grew louder until it merged with the grinding roar of the bombs. There was a flash like tropical lightning, followed by a momentary silence; then the bomb screwed its way into the earth with a never-ending grinding sound. The searchlight awoke into activity, but the aeroplane was flying so low that it avoided the impact of the brilliant white-blue shaft of light.

"It was a time bomb, do you see—half a minute interval," Ah Chee whispered, and he stared at Cheong, who was sweating and shaking his head dazedly from side to side. "You shouldn't sweat so much—you won't notice it in time. We're going north, you understand. There will be bombs every day in the north."

This remark seemed to console Cheong, who became suddenly silent. He wished he was handling wood in the woodshed, and he thought frantically of his children; but the

air was steady now, it no longer revolved dizzily with the blast from the explosion, and he was sufficiently awake to realise that the bomb had fallen in the Mekong and not on shore. But how extraordinary the aeroplane had been when he saw its shadow racing across the clouds, and yet could not see the aeroplane itself!

Ah Chee left Cheong in charge of the Lewis gun and ran back to the cabin of the lorry. The gears groaned and once more they were passing small stone temples and broken walls. Through a forest of stunted willows he saw the river winding in the deep gorges; but no lights were being shown. On both sides of the road coolies were marching. He saw they were carrying planks of wood over their shoulders, and his heart warmed to them. He would have liked to get out and talk to them. When they reached the beginning of the long road which led down to the bridge, he saw that coolies were already working on the bridge, which had been damaged during a bombardment during the morning. They worked silently without lamps. Even the sound of the hammers was muffled. By the faint bronze moonlight the bridge began to take shape, the broken trestles were repaired, the stunted willows were cut down to provide lashings for the beams and ropes were slung round the webbing-frames to strengthen them. There was something so uncanny in their silent hammering that Cheong felt afraid for the first time since he entered China.

One by one the lorries crossed over the quaking boards. Headlamps were lit for a moment and then dimmed. Below them they heard the swish of the river over naked rocks, and this too added to the uncanny sounds of this night. Cheong gripped the trigger of the Lewis gun. He was afraid that any moment the Japanese aeroplane would reappear. He repeated all that Ah Chee had told him about aiming a hundred yards in front of the wings when the aeroplane was five hundred feet up, fifty yards when she was two hundred feet up; and it all seemed so complicated that he thought he would never bring down an aeroplane. And then suddenly, because the lorry was no longer shaking on the loose boards, he realised they were once more on solid earth.

Ah Chee was shouting: "Come in now—we won't need you!"

"How do you know?"

"The aeroplane was brought down."

"I didn't know."

"No, but it was brought down nevertheless. Come in out of the cold."

Cheong settled beside the driver's seat. In front of him lay China, cold, dark and mysterious. From the banks on either side of the road shadows rose in confusion. Across the marshy hills and granite valleys, swallows flew in vast flocks, the colours of their wings changing in the reflected blue lamps of the headlights from steel-grey to white, and from white to sombre black. There were other colours, but they were so faint that Cheong could not recognise them.

"Where are we going?" Cheong asked after a long pause.

"We're going north—straight for the Japanese," Ah Chee answered.

All night Cheong stared ahead at the two faint pools of blue light on the road. China was a country of luminous shadows and intense reliefs. This long road, winding into China, was even longer than the Thomson Road which winds into the Naval Base; it was even more serpentine; it was darker and concealed more mysteries, which he thought he would never be able to solve. But in the morning, when he would have been able to recognise the small temples and stone quarries, he was fast asleep with his head on Ah Chee's shoulder. At first Ah Chee refused to wake him. Later, however, he decided to shake him.

"Oh wake up, man," he bawled. "We're going north—straight for the Japanese."

Winter was approaching. The cap and sleeves of Cheong's blue army gown was quilted with cotton and lined with astrakhan; his trousers were brown canvas stuffed into rag boots. He rode a mule with long silky ears and innocent brown eyes, but after half a day's journey he realised that the mule was not in the least innocent, but the most unruly animal in the Chinese army.

A mist gathered on the mountains. All morning they had passed burnt-out villages and ruined temples. A sharp winter

wind broke over the valley, and that night he saw the first snow falling in the distance like a cloud of descending smoke. When he woke up the next morning, his face was blue, his teeth chattered, his hands were numb and when he tried to mount the mule his clammy fingers slithered on the bridle. Instead of dew on the grass, there was thick frost. In Malaya he slept almost naked. In China, ever since he arrived in Kunming, he rolled himself in blankets and furs, but always awoke chilled to the bone.

"What is this thing called snow?" he asked apprehensively. "How big is it?"

Ah Chee grumbled over the unsteady flames of the charcoal burner.

"It's like rice-cake," he answered. "Like rice-cake it's always cold and turns into ice."

Cheong's hands were red with chilblains. Already in October he was looking forward to Spring.

"Will it become worse in December?" he asked, smiling in an effort to delay the coming of winter by thinking of the promise of spring.

"Surely," Ah Chee replied.

There was silence between them. Ah Chee stuffed his mouth full of rice and leaned forward over the charcoal fire.

"Eat your rice-cake, Cheong," he said, spilling grains of rice down his blue chin. "When winter comes, you'll have no time to think of snow. In the South Seas you are all too soft. The palm-trees drop bread-fruit in your lap. Oh, it's a weakness to live easily, elder brother."

Cheong shivered in the cold wind. In Singapore the stars spoke, they were so close, but he had not yet seen the stars in China. Here winter moved like the slow progression of armies, bleak and unchallengeable, promising only that each day would be more fruitless than the last. The days were so short that night swept them into oblivion before they were hardly begun; and the earth turned as black as the thin forests and the earth was moist with thawing snow. Cheong was afraid of the night, when the landscape flwked with a river's turbulence, when waterfalls and gorges appeared suddenly through the black mist. Even in the plains, where there were

few trees and the farmsteads were scattered, travelling by night reminded him of the dimly lit temples of Singapore, where blood-red gods stared down from the walls.

"You'll have to stand it, or go home," Ah Chee said bluntly. "There's no hope for you if you are always shivering."

"How can I help shivering?" Cheong asked. A little later he said: "I can stand it."

In the morning they washed in ice-cold water. The winds of the northern desert covered them in fine grit. They were marching north in an effort to control the loop line south of Nanchang. When they finished their meals and stuffed their bedding in the saddle-bags, Ah Chee rode ahead on a lame mule, which never kept to the road but wandered away on strange ineffectual errands. Many times he had determined to slaughter the mule, but whenever he thought seriously of shooting it, the mule would forget his lameness and begin to trot slowly and delicately under a load of Lewis guns.

"Shall we see Nanchang?" Cheong asked.

"Perhaps no, perhaps yes. If you want to see the dancing-girls, they are all Koreans."

"I don't mind about the dancing-girls, but I would like to see some houses."

This was the most extraordinary thing about guerrilla warfare—how they avoided the villages. They lived in the open, hiding in the forests and the gorges, in the fields and on the sloping banks of rivers. Perhaps once a month they saw a house, and once in three months they stabled their mules and ponies in empty barns and slept peacefully with their horse-blankets under their heads in deserted cottages.

For four days Cheong had not seen a single Chinese beyond the straggling line of guerrillas. On the early morning of the fifth day, when the sun was low on the horizon and the ice hung on his thin moustache and there were streamers of ice on the mule's mane, he saw smoke rising from a village on the horizon. They hid in the trees, hoping no one had seen them; but the villagers were too quick for them. On the skyline he saw a sight he never expected to see—eight or nine men with pitchforks running forward to the attack.

"What's happened?" Ah Chee yelled. "Are they Japanese in disguise?"

The air was sharp and frozen. Frosted willows sighed in the unbroken wind from the north. Ice lay on the field-paths and on the lakes. Cheong broke a piece of ice and sucked it, and all the time he watched the strange apparition on the horizon. The Chinese peasants were coming nearer, led by a tall peasant wearing a long blue cloak with a fur collar and cap.

"They're coming to join us," someone suggested.

"Not so soon, brother," Ah Chee said. "Keep well loaded. They may be Japanese. They're up to all the tricks—those dwarfs."

"Perhaps they're going on a tiger-hunt," Lu-lung expostulated, as the sun caught the pitch-forks.

"Perhaps it is nothing of the sort," Ah Chee replied. "Perhaps they are devils from Hell."

They laughed nervously, because they had never been attacked by Chinese peasants before. In some parts of China the peasants hated the wars so much that in the old days they killed all soldiers, friends and enemies alike. They were coming nearer, flying over the ice-covered fields, and they brandished their pitch-forks and spades and shouted at the top of their voices. Above them a few birds wheeled, but their wings were so heavy with ice that they were compelled to fly low. Suddenly Ah Chee left the trees and ran into the open, and as soon as they saw him the peasants drew back. Ah Chee was unarmed, his face was pale and he stood a hundred feet away from the peasants waving his arms like windmills.

The village elder came forward with the pitch-fork pointed at Ah Chee. -He came nearer and nearer, and sometimes he looked over his shoulder and shouted warning messages at the rest.

"Are you Chinese?" Ah Chee roared. "Then don't shoot the Chinese guerrillas."

The village elder, in the blue gown and the fur cap, lowered his pitch-fork.

"We're Chinese, but what are you?" he shouted back.

Ah Chee ran up to him.

"Look, man, we're all Chinese. Have the three-island dwarfs

faces like these—arms like these—shoes like these." He wiped the hot sweat from his brows. "And these guns," he continued, jerking the automatic in the old man's ribs and laughing aloud, opening his mouth wide, showing his fine milk-white teeth, swelling his lungs and his breast with the strong sound of his laughter. "Look, man—we're only Chinese!"

The old man smiled, at first sheepishly, then openly. He could not laugh, but the tears rolled down his cheeks. He called to the rest to come up.

"We thought you were Japanese," they all exclaimed. "Ah, Heaven worship you."

"What made you think we were Japanese?"

"They have been known to be about," the old man said, breathing heavily. "A hundred of them were seen twelve months ago."

Ah Chee laughed and clapped the old man on the shoulder.

"Twelve months ago—it's a long time," he said.

"No," the old man answered confusedly. "It's only a short time, a very short time indeed."

They were silent for a while. The frozen air made feathers of their breath. Cheong looked at the old man and the villagers. I am becoming one of them, he thought. I am no longer taking any interest in good workmanship, I am not a carpenter any longer, I am a peasant. He looked at his hands. How easy it would be for me to spend the rest of my life tilling the fields! How easy it would be for me to spend the rest of my life wandering round China with a mule and a Mauser automatic. He smiled, and for some reason the old man smiled back at him.

"You must come to the village," he said, pointing beyond the horizon.

At the sound of the men's laughter in the fields, the women and children left their hiding places behind the rice-lofts. One by one they came out and stood on the road, shielding their eyes against the sun. After ten minutes' walk the guerrillas found themselves in a walled village, like Ai-lin, with a temple outside the walls, a drum-tower less than twelve feet high, a pond where ducks were floating and painted bins where the rice was kept in winter.

"When the war's over, I shall find a wife here," Lu Lung said. "Look how fat they are. Is there such a village in the whole of China?"

"Though they speak a dialect we can hardly understand, they behave like superior people."

"Look what fat cheeks they have. The young girls, too——"

It was the first time for many weeks that the guerrillas had been among friends. They took the children in their arms, and were consoled for their wearying night-marches by the smiles of the women.

"We thought they were Japanese," the old man kept on saying. "Iron is more enduring than lead," he said, tapping the shining blades of the pitchfork.

The children, muffled in quilted coats, stared with round eyes at the guerrillas on their short ponies, with the bronze or sea-blue glint of guns peering from under their saddle-bags and over their shoulders.

"Come and rest now, you must be tired," the village elder said. "Rest for a week—as long as you like. The village is all yours."

Cheong looked at the heavy tranquil presence of the elder, and thought: All village elders are alike. He is exactly like my grandfather, who would prefer nothing better than to be in China among us.

"Come and rest now," the old women were saying, while the girls looked on, blushing and hugging each other.

Fires were lit. Cheong stirred the warm broth over the charcoal fire, thinking of their wearying night-marches, the torn soles of his cotton shoes, and faces of the villagers and the fat cheeks of the girls and children. After eating, he rested on the floor in a bed of straw. Some of the guerrillas were already snoring. Unused to comfort, they fell asleep as soon as their heads touched the pillows. The elder moved: among them, continually murmuring: "I thought you were Japanese." "Ah, don't worry so much, old father," the guerrillas replied. "The sun will rise to-morrow." Ah Chee gave the order that they should rest for three hours. The sun rose higher, but in the silent village everyone slept except the guards.

Four weeks later they were still marching. They seemed to be going further north, but Cheong had lost his sense of direction. There were no villages in sight, there was no food in their saddle-bags, their cotton sandals were threadbare. They walked beside a river all day and half the night, but there was no sign of the great river into which it flowed. "When we reach the great river," Ah Chee said, "there will be no more tramping at night." But already two of the guerrillas had mutinied. Instead of being shot, they were left behind.

"When we reach the great river——" Cheong fell into a dream as he walked at night beside the mule. "When we reach the great river, how far shall we be from the sea?"

"What are you thinking about?" someone shouted behind his shoulder.

"A great river—and then the sea," he answered confusedly.

"Fm thinking of food," the unknown voice replied.

And suddenly it occurred to Cheong that all over China everyone was thinking of food. For eight hours in every day, sometimes for twelve hours, men thought of food. They tilled the earth, ploughed and harrowed the fallow rice-fields, and all their thoughts were concentrated on food. There was no leisure, no leisure for anything, no leisure even to think of the great river and the sea.

"What else do you think of?" he turned round and saw Lu Lung smiling sheepishly. "Your family? Your friends?"

"No, only food."

They were silent after that. Cheong realised slowly that he too would be thinking of food if he was not so weary. His feet marched, but his brain possessed no volition.

"I've just had a dream," Lu Lung smiled half^xan hour later. "I saw an old woman—my mother or another, who cares?—she sat on the floor and looked at the stars through the chimney."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

"We'll stop here," Ah Chee shouted above the sound of marching feet.

The mules and ponies came to a stop. The guerrillas fell

down where they stood; there was no life left in them. Some slept crouching by the river, others possessed sufficient energy to remove their saddle-bags and tie up their pack-animals, still others leaned against a tree and fell asleep standing. Of all the men in the company only Ng Aik had enough energy to go out through the pine forest and search for rabbits.

The most extraordinary things were going through Cheong's mind. Visions of his children, of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest, of Cloud Temple Hall and the Naval Base poured through his mind in a golden shower like glinting sand.

"Yes, a child sleeping," he said. "Is there anything more beautiful than a child sleeping?"

"Ng Aik has caught some rabbits," Ah Chee whispered in his ear.

Cheong looked up and saw a fire burning. Up on the hill Ng Aik was boiling a rabbit in a copper kettle. Steam rose, and yellow flames cradled the base of the kettle and danced like fireflies into the still, cold air. Cheong shook himself into motion, threw his goatskin over his head and* walked slowly in the direction of the flames. His eyes were shut with weariness, but he knew in which direction he was going by the warm smell of boiling rabbit.

"Have you got a rabbit there?"

"Ah!"

"Did you catch it yourself?"

"Ah!"

Ng Aik stirred the juices and buried his head in the warm smoke. There were four or five guerrillas sitting round the fire on their haunches. They said nothing. Hot sweat hung on their cheeks which only a few minutes before were wet with frozen dew. In the red glare of the flames, Ng Aik resembled a priest stirring the sacred vessels. Under the shelter of the pine-trees, with their rifles at their side, their faces the colour of September plums, the guerrillas sat in silence. They wore patched grey cotton coats held together with hemp, cord leggings, cotton boots; only their rifles shone, for their buttons had been torn off during the long march. One by one they came nearer, until their clothes began to burn in the fire, inhaling the hot steam. As Ng Aik stirred the kettle, the purple

rabbit swam in circles. On the skinned belly were tufts of white hair. The embers glowed. From time to time the guerrillas moved their heads still further into the warm steam, and sometimes they passed their hands over their faces as though to wring from their intolerable sufferings an answer to their weariness. Shining in the flames Ng Aik's face resembled a painted pigskin bladder.

When the rabbit was sufficiently cooked, and Ng Aik was cutting it in small basins, rice-bowls mysteriously appeared. They were filled with the juices and small slices of rabbit. No one said anything. The rice-bowls were handed round. The flames crackled. Ng Aik reserved for himself a whole leg, and this was considered to be fair. Cheong received a portion of breast, Lu Lung the head and a thin slice of shoulder. All were content. The air was full of the rich odour of boiled rabbit, the steam from the juices and the crisp fragrance of burnt fur. The flames died down, and only a few red sparks danced among the embers. Without thanking Ng Aik—for it was impossible to express such gratitude—Cheong returned to the river.

The crystal river flowed with the sound of silkworms gnawing mulberry leaves. Cheong stretched himself at full length, his heart warmed by the taste of rabbit which remained on his tongue. Lu Lung was whispering with a peasant boy from northern Chekiang; then they were silent. It was so dark that they could not see the river. After the groans of the day came the groans of the night. Although they were fast asleep, the guerrillas coughed and talked, and sometimes they sat up and gazed with sightless eyes at the river, or wherever there were any sounds, imagining they were being attacked; then they fell back on their saddle-bags and snored louder than the bull-frogs,

Cheong slept. He dreamed he was floating among the islands in the early morning. A bright mist shielded the sea from the intense glare of the sun, and slowly the mist parted and the islands lay beneath him like jewels on the gown of the goddess of mercy. The scent of cinnamon and cloves rose among the palms, taking his breath away. Here, in the South Seas, everything was calm and peaceful, the islands were ringed with white surf, the sampans sailed between the harbours. The

islands were jewels on the gown of the goddess of mercy, and her blue gown was the sea. She sailed through the clouds, smiling in benediction at the peaceful ships and swaying palms. In the train of the goddess a Chinese boy with long, dark eyelashes was swinging a censer; Cheong thought he recognised Green Jade, but everything was changing so quickly—now he was looking down on the islands, now he was floating beside the goddess of mercy, now he was sailing along the green coast of Singapore. "How peaceful everything is!" he sighed. "Yes, yes, I understand, the goddess wishes us to remain——" But everything was changing colour so quickly that he could no longer remember what the goddess desired.

He woke up suddenly. Lu Lung was shaking him roughly by the shoulders. In the darkness all contours were changed: a rugged fur cap was larger than the tallest mountains. The moon lay reflected in the stream, but the surface of the moon was broken up and resembled a basket of silver fish.

"What's the matter?" Cheong looked round sharply, listening to the rumble of gunfire on the distant hills.

"Nothing is the matter except you are crying out like a baby."

Cheong felt ill. The hot-cold sickness was returning. He shivered in his blankets and fell asleep again. Throughout the night he dreamed of the goddess of mercy, but he never saw her so clearly as when the islands were jewels on her robe. Cool winds bathed him, and the sea was warm like milk; but the goddess sailed high above the earth, smiling mysteriously, followed by a small boy swinging a censer. "I understand it all," he whispered in his sleep. "There must be peace on the islands. This is the message of the goddess. Crystal Stream, Green Jade, can you hear me? I'm shivering, with the hot-cold sickness on the mountains of China. If you hear me, offer incense to the ancestors and say we are keeping China safe for those who come after us."

For the next eight days they followed the river due east. On either side of the river mountains rose, but only the foothills were visible. Low clouds hung over the horizon. In the world of the guerrillas, only the

swift-flowing river remained unchanged from day to day.

"Look at the river," Ah Chee growled. "She's quiet now, but soon the rains will come down and there will be a white mist in the morning, but in the afternoon the water will rise above the highest trees. That's why the roots stand out so. There's no topsoil left in China—all rock and dust and a few thin trees on the straggly earth. Ah, if only we had leisure enough to build the dykes."

Cheong nodded in sympathy. Whenever he looked at the banks of the river, his hands itched to form concrete banks. All these wars in China were a waste of time. There was so much to do, so many elemental enemies to combat, that men struggling with one another was an anachronism, as stupid as the quarrels of ants; and the earth was hardly worth possessing. In his own province there was a proverb: "In Hunan the hills are many and the fields few. Three-tenths are hills, six-tenths are water, one-tenth fields." When half of China was covered in fields, it would be time to quarrel.

A light rain began to fall. It sharpened the fading green of the winter fields and broke up the light in the sky. It was early in the afternoon. A glow of winter lay over the meadows, the air very still and clear, the quietness broken only by birds' song. Cheong stumbled beside the mule, but his heart was in another world, listening to the clear liquid notes of the birds and seeing in the distance, beyond the pine-trees, the great river and the curving railway lines. Within five minutes he heard a lark singing shrilly and saw through the quivering mist the river and the raised embankment where the trains passed twice a day. After three months of marching, they had reached their journey's end.

The day passed, heavy and cold. The guerrillas threw their blankets over their heads and huddled in the grass. There was nothing to do but to wait. After the mines were laid under the embankment, Cheong lay in the wet earth with his rifle fixed in the direction of the oncoming train; but as yet there were no signs of the train. The guerrillas were whispering. He heard a rat scratching on the embankment and kept looking towards the hills, and when another hour passed, and there was still no sign of the train, he crept closer to the embankment

until he saw the steel-grey rails shining in the weak winter sunshine. The air was full of blue mosquitoes, a soft haze of insects hovering in the mist rising from the fields.

"What time are they coming?" he turned to Ng Aik.

Ng Aik shrugged his shoulders.

"Any time," he answered. "Ah Chee says the divisional commander of the Japanese is coming in the train."

"How does he know?"

There was no answer, and they buried themselves deeper in the soft yellow mud, waiting for the train and the divisional commander and the promise of victory when it was all over. Far in the distance, shimmering in the sun, lay the walls of a large town. In spite of the cold the air was hazy and continually quivering like the air in Spring; and now the yellow walls of the town sparkled in the rain and the roofs shone like spear-heads. Then suddenly they heard the throbbing of the engine and a plume of white smoke appeared near the walled town.

"They're coming," Cheong said, and he buried himself still deeper in the soft mud and listened to Ah Chee explaining why the curved rails would be blown up first and why the machine-guns would be posted over a hundred yards from the train.

The train came nearer, belching white wood-smoke over the unploughed fields, a magnificent train with steaming flanks, a high smoke-stack and a snow-sweeper of bamboo poles. It came slowly, growing larger each second, but nevertheless slowly.

"The wind's in our favour," Ah Chee said. "They won't hear the mules."

Suddenly they heard the sound of neighing, high-pitched and continual. It did not come from the direction of their mules and ponies, but from the railway track. Cheong shook his head. He thought he was suffering from delusions. He was certain the sounds of neighing came from the train. Once more Ah Chee went over his plans. His men were distributed over a wide-semi-circle where the embankment turned sharply. The fuse was buried in the embankment a little to one side. He hoped the train would fall on the side further from his guerrillas.

"Can you hear the train *neighing*?" Cheong asked with a surprised stare.

"It's full of horses," Ah Chee answered grimly. "Do you think the divisional commander would travel without his horses?"

Cheong looked doubtfully at the fast approaching train. Men were staring out of the windows of the train, their machine-guns covering the landscape. Through his glasses he saw the fresh-faced soldiers, all young, many of them resembling Chinese with round faces and hairless lips; they wore brown forage caps, khaki tunics, gleaming bandoliers and leather belts. Cheong had never seen soldiers with so much equipment. Ah Chee was distracted, because he thought the dynamite charges would not explode. He held the plunger firmly in his hands, which were so cold that they were wound in cotton rags. He decided to press the plunger when the train was a third of the way across the curved rails; but the embankment was so steep that he was tempted to press it now.

There was snow on the bamboo snow-sweepers. Far in the north the sky was white, the dull white of snow-laden clouds occasionally lit by lightning. The soldiers were peering out of the window. They were talking to one another, and seemed to be disturbed. As they lay in the wet mud, the guerrillas felt the vibrations of the pistons in the pit of their stomachs and in their elbows. Already they could see the two horse-wagons half-way down the train. The iron wheels roared over the railway lines, puffs of white smoke escaped from the high smoke-stack and they saw the red glow of the furnaces. Then the train seemed to come to a sudden pause, there was a blinding yellow flash and Cheong thought the train was running down the embankment on top of him, the huge weight of the engine blocking out the sun, the wood-work splintering, the steam roaring from the funnels, but as he lost consciousness the most extraordinary thing of all was the white horse which somehow shook itself free of the splintered wood and sailed high above his head in a cloud of wood-smoke.

Cheong lost consciousness. In the last split second before the white horse disappeared over his head, he saw a great black wheel advancing upon him. All the power, all the life, all the

succulence of earth, the song of birds, the rustle of rice-paper windows, the singing of the boatman and the hoarse voice of his grandfather—all these were obliterated in the dark wheel bearing down upon him. "They are coming, they are coming," he murmured, but his eyes were closed tight and he did not feel the blow which knocked him unconscious.

Above him there was only the blue sky, distant and cloudy, soft with rain. He opened his eyes, hoping to see how the fight was progressing, whether the Japanese were destroyed, whether his revolver was still loaded and whether the white horse was still sailing across the sky. He saw nothing only the waving grasses. "How quiet and peaceful it is," he thought. "There was a Japanese train a moment ago—now there is nothing." He watched the red ants crawling along a blade of grass. He was filled with a divine drowsiness—not opium fever, or the drowsiness which came over him after three or four cups of Teochew wine, but something altogether different. He was at peace with the world. The sun was in his eyes, blinding him, and the sun possessed great iron spokes like the wheel. The sun was bearing down upon him, revolving at immense speed. "Perhaps I am dead," he murmured. "Perhaps I have turned into a tree. Ah Chee told me we should be prepared to die——"

He woke up with a start. The Japanese were coming nearer; the sun danced on their bayonets. They were short, with cropped hair, and they wore khaki tunics and brightly polished Sam Browne belts. He waited until they came nearer. His revolver was a Webley .455, which would throw a man over at a distance of twenty yards. Two Japanese came crawling along the embankment. When he fired, they jumped in the air and fell head-downward along the embankment. Pigeons were wheeling in the sky; the sun danced on their feathers and turned them silver. The Japanese soldiers with fixed bayonets were coming nearer. They had left their hiding places behind the overturned box-wagons. They were advancing across the field and he was in their line of fire. Suddenly he heard the faint sound of machine-gun fire—as though someone on the other side of the room was pushing through bead curtains—and one of the Japanese fell. Dazedly, like someone drunk with

sound, Cheong realised that Ah Chee's four machine-guns hidden in the long grass had mown down nearly all the surviving Japanese. As they lay on the embankment they screamed, and it occurred to Cheong that they screamed exactly like Chinese wounded, and this was the only universal language in the world.

For a long while he had been thinking of nothing else but the white horse. There was a white horse calmly grazing in the field, but at first he did not associate it with the horse he first saw sailing through the air in a cloud of wood-smoke. This was a real horse, white and mottled, with long ears over the curved brow, a shaggy white mane and a curving white tail threaded with ribbons. There was a decorated saddle of embroidered leather, which smelt sweet when he approached, a silver snaffle and stirrups of some red metal. The sky was growing darker. The fields were tawny with the afterglow of the sun, though the horizon still glowed like molten quicksilver and the walls of the town stood out like a huge yellow square in the path of the sun's beams. The mare's flanks were quivering. Still dazed by the explosion, he walked up to the mare, whispering endearments. "Keep still, my precious. Don't bite, please. I'll take you to a drinking-well. Ah, what a smooth coat you have!"

Snow was beginning to fall like white thistle-down, settling on the steaming flanks of the mare, melting as it fell. The long-expected snow had come at the moment when they least desired it, for they were shivering with cold and the whole earth seemed to be shivering, weighed down under the burden of clouds. A flock of starlings flew over the wrecked engine, but the snow obscured the bodies of the dying Japanese soldiers and muffled their cries. In the snow the white horse seemed to be larger than the walled town, larger than the mountains or the heavy clouds flying low over the winter fields.

"You're like a ship," he kept whispering to the mare. "You're like a ship—and you're cold, and we're all cold, and we're all dying for the sake of peace."

Afterwards he could not tell what he had been whispering in his strange delirium. The air was brilliantly lit with the wonderful darkness of slow-falling flakes of snow. Like

plum-blossom the sky arched above his head, almost within reach. Darkness and snow and the silence seemed to increase together, the silence strangely inadequate, as though there were still greater depths of silence to be plumbed, the darkness disappearing to give place to unbearable light, and everywhere the sound of bells and guns. Over the bodies of the Japanese soldiers both silence and the darkness fell, at first slowly and then more quickly, until the wounded sobbed themselves to sleep and the dead opened their eyes which the snow covered again.

"The earth is a veritable wonder of darkness," Cheong said as he led the mare in the direction of the faint lights on the foothills. "How little the earth has been explored. We have travelled so far that we are in danger of losing our way, and how else shall we discover the promised land except by listening to the silence and the snow?"

He was half asleep with weariness and the shock of the explosion. He put his hand to his breast. It was covered in blood, warm and sticky like petrol. Ah Chee was shouting to him, but he heard none of their excited cries of victory. The mare ambled by his side, prodigiously strong and eternal—she seemed to be carved out of snow-flakes, and he could hardly believe she was real until he had touched the sweet-smelling leather saddle a hundred times.

"What have you got there?" Cheong shouted, pointing to the machine-gun belts, mortars, cartridge belts, bayonets, hand-grenades and horse blankets lying in the snow. "Did we capture everything? I don't remember. Are any Japanese alive? It's a pity we killed them all."

"You're wounded," Ah Chee shouted suddenly. "And what's this—a horse?"

"It's the divisional commander's horse. I saw her sailing through the air. It's a pity the others were killed."

"Are you going to keep her?"

"Well—perhaps. She belongs to China. I don't know who is going to keep her."

He was too dazed to understand what he was saying. When Ah Chee pressed the plunger which ignited the fuse, his hands were shaking with cold and he pressed too soon. The engine had hardly rounded the curve before there was an explosion.

The couplings broke and the carriages were thrown on the opposite side of the embankment, but the engine rolled down the slope nearly *on top* of the guerrillas. At the same moment the boiler had burst, and a piece of metal caught Cheong on the chest, breaking three ribs and knocking him silly with pain.

"Oh, we'll look after her," Cheong said, stroking the mare and glancing carefully at Ah Chee.

"Yes, we'll look after her," Ah Chee answered. "Now we'll attend to your wounds."

The last party of skirmishers returned to say that there were no more Japanese alive. After Cheong was bandaged, he was wrapped in a blanket and he fell asleep. Once during the night the mare licked his face and he awoke with a start; and when he fell asleep again, he dreamed he was riding at the head of the victorious Chinese army under the walls of Peking on a white mare with a sweet-smelling saddle of decorated leather.

Three weeks later, after passing through the Japanese lines at night, the guerrillas reached the headquarters of the Seventh Chinese Route Army. The stars shone clearly in the blue sky. Camp-fires were being lit, and the thunder of guns echoed from the cliff-walls like continuous explosions inside the mountains. Almost as soon as they reached the camp, letters were passed round. Cheong received a bulky letter; there were photographs, ribbons, a letter from his grandfather on pale red note-paper: there were letters from his wife, from Green Jade and there was even a note from Ng Ah.

Tien Hsueh wrote:

"Sorrow, it seems, is our common lot, dear husband, and my anxiety to write to you is only equalled by my desire to hear your words. No one knows what the next day will bring forth, but the Lord Buddha watched over everyone with compassion. Now that you are no longer with us the house seems empty. We take courage in looking at your photograph and tell each other of the great success of our armies, but would to Heaven you were here.

"Our grandfather has deserted us. He is now visiting Java to see a certain temple. This temp¹₂ is called Chandi Mendut

and is said to contain a Buddha more beautiful and greater in size than any in the islands. Our grandfather is well. He prays for you and sends a message of love.

"You ask me whether I am still young in heart. In truth I have many cares. Since you departed I have not once been dancing, but occupy my thoughts with the Lord Buddha and the safety of my husband. If you returned, perhaps I should pray less and love more, but all I know is that since your departure I have been heart-broken. Think of me often. Look sometimes at my photograph. The Hall of the Cloud at Rest has not changed, but our hearts have changed. Our children are well and ask for you tenderly. In the court-yard our father has placed a large map, so that all who visit us can watch the progress of our armies.

"Yesterday was a day of great joy, dearest husband. The fifteenth day of the eighth moon was celebrated in obedient observance to our duties to the ancestors. Moon cakes and sessamine cakes were exchanged within the family, and your children held candles to light the way for the hungry ghosts. Your faithful wife prayed at the temple and lit candles. Remember always that my love for you is firm and unquenchable. For ourselves we remember the words of Confucius: The people are the root of the country, and when the root is firm the people are tranquil. We send you with this letter our desire for your safety and a pair of cow-hide boots. May these small comforts remind you of our love and our greatest wish that you will return unharmed to the Hall of the Cloud at Rest."

His grandfather wrote:

"My grandson, the word of the superior man often comes to my mind. The melancholy war has not brought strength to my bones, but neither has it weakened them. I look forward to the reign of the Jade Peace with ever-hopeful eyes. Praise to Heaven that you are alive and your body is healthy!

"They tell me that the war of iron has come. In my youth men still fought with wood. Even, in Singapore the war of iron has come, and I have seen with my own eyes great fire-carts

from which guns are made to revolve in turrets on the roof. They are painted grey, the colour of disease. Praise to Heaven that so far the disease of war has been spared from us!

"A new world war has come. In this war I see no virtue except in victory. According to the Chinese characters, the Germans are virtuous, and the Japanese dwarfs are children of the sun. Our Chinese characters are misleading. They are altogether too beautiful for this age. To comfort myself I go often to Johore. From there, at night, I see the great wireless masts of the Naval Base, and the red lamps on the masts shine like a benediction upon my hopes. How is this so? My grandson, do not speak to me 'in words of iron³' but from your heart.

"Your handwriting is more beautiful than mine. I acknowledge this with pleasure, though the strangeness of your strokes alarms me. This is a terrible world. Can beauty spring from terror? Will poets flourish? In this new strong China I see beautiful bodies, lovely children, eternal peace, but the memory of the sufferings of our people in this war will endure perhaps forever?

"To-morrow I shall leave Singapore for a few days. I have heard of a great Buddha in Java so wonderful that it is almost equal to the work of our T'ang sculptors. I am eighty-nine. Few more years remain to me. The beauty of China I shall never see again, but this beauty I must see. I give you this message. Hammer from your heart a world of beauty, and loving-kindness. As soon as we have destroyed the enemy, let us banish steel and destroy iron. In perishable wood and with immortal souls let us construct a world of freedom."

Green Jade wrote:

"Father, listen to me. I love you and think of you all day. While I work in the Naval Base, I think of you beside me. While you 'fight in China, my heart yearns to be with you. I work hard, and the training you have given me with wood is indeed valuable. You say that wood and stone are the most beautiful. In this I agree though there are also paintings and music, which I have heard, that please me. Also, many people are beautiful. Now I beg your permission to marry a girl who is as beautiful as wood or stone. She is called Hsiung Mei Yu.

She is seventeen years. She has read many books and can recite the Four Classics. Our great-grandfather approves of her, though grandfather thinks her beauty has swept me off my feet. My Father, your small son Green Jade wishes you Golden Peace and offers you this letter on bended knees."

At the bottom of this letter Ng Ah wrote:

"Your loving concubine bows at your feet. Tears come. She can write no more."

Cheong read these letters by the light of guttering oil-candles. His nerves were taut, and he heard the drumming of artillery on the railway twenty miles away. In his ragged uniform, his face lined with hunger, he gazed at the letters, which shook uncontrollably in his hands. Then he folded the letters carefully and slipped them between his tunic buttons, so that they lay against his heart. His heart was beating, wildly, and he smiled with satisfaction at the thought that he was not forgotten. If only he could touch them or hear their words! "How curious it is!" he whispered. "How curious it is that they understand us. They live at peace, but their hearts are with us."

Ah Chee pointed to the blue stamps on the envelope.

"Look at the palm-trees," he said in a crotchety voice. "What good is a palm-tree?"

"It gives us husk and milk."

"What else? No, the palm-tree is no good. One should work to live, not sit under a palm-tree and wait for the ripe fruit to fall in one's lap."

Cheong half closed his eyes. At that moment, listening to the roar of the artillery, nothing could be so desirable as a palm-tree—a single palm-tree on an island. He could understand why grandfather was seduced into quietness by the wireless masts with their red lamps, for they too were palm-trees shooting out of the earth, and all the strange whispers of the world were heard among their high branches.

"They say it's as hot as Canton in summer in the South Seas," Ah Chee said, while beads of rice trickled down his blue chin.

"Yes, that's true."

"And the trees flower all the year round?"

"Yes."

Ah Chee was quiet for a moment.

"Is there any news?" he said at last.

"My wife sends her love and a pair of cow-hide boots, but only her love has arrived."

The sound of artillery died away; the floating wick of the candle sank to a pin-point of light. One by one the guerrillas fell asleep. Somewhere beyond the range of the faint lamp Cheong saw an old guerrilla stroking his rifle. He was toying with the rifle on his knee as though it was his child. "Go to sleep, good gun. Go to sleep and rest for a while. To-morroW the day will come. Go to sleep, good gun, and sleep with the stars and the moon shining on your barrel."

A mist like opaque paper rolled down the cliff walls. Once, when Cheong was half asleep, an explosion in the Japanese lines twenty miles away awakened him, and he saw the terrible yellow flame leaping over a distant forest. The lamplight became fainter and fainter. Cheong huddled under the cliff and from time to time he slipped his hands through his tunic and felt the letters beating against his heart. The old guerrilla was singing: "Go to sleep, good gun, rest awhile and sleep with the stars and the moon shining on your barrel."

XIV

ON the fifteenth day of the seventh moon all the members of the Cheong family were summoned into grandfather's room. On this day the spirits of the dead left their tombs and took part once more in the life of the family. Grandfather prayed by the ancestral shrine. He was weak, and his paralysed arm kept shaking, but he read out the names of the ancestors and prayed that they were enjoying their brief respite from the slavery of the tomb. He informed them that no members of the Cheong family in Singapore had died since the last 'hungry ghosts' festival, and he laid on the altar silver dishes piled with

moon-cakes, salted almonds, melons and fruit. Then the children were free to exchange moon-cakes among themselves. An-mei had been carried upstairs. She smiled at the children and seemed particularly anxious to please them. She accepted their presents of dried persimmons and star-fruit and black water-chestnuts from China, then she touched the head of every member of the family, including grandfather.

"This day is a very serious day in the life of the family," she said. "The dead leave their tombs and the sky is thronged with an invisible procession. Green Jade has been very ill. There were moments when we thought we had lost him, but the hungry ghosts have spared him for many years in this vale of tears. I want you to bear in mind your duties to the dead, for while many families in Singapore are forgetting them, those who remember will themselves be remembered by their descendants."

The children listened with serious expressions, Green Jade and Crystal Stream seemed to be particularly impressed by the change which came over An-mei as she spoke. She was no longer the tyrannical old woman who ruled the house in defiance of grandfather from her bedroom. But since' Cheong was in China, the ceremonies were more solemn than ever before, for everyone thought he might already be included among the dead. Cheong Ehr Sung seemed dazed by the ceremonies. He continually asked the children whether they had prayed and whether they had prepared fruit for the dead. When, evening came, he accompanied them to the door where square lanterns were hung out to light the dead back to the dwelling-place. He stood there, looking out at the sky over Singapore River, waiting for the moment when the stars would appear. Green Jade had noticed that he had given up mah-jong parties. Even Tien Hsueh seemed to have become quieter since Cheong left the house for China, and only Ng Ah seemed to be unchanged, perhaps because it was impossible for her to change—she was too old and her habits already settled. The wind came up, and they looked silently at Cheong Ehr Sung, expecting he would talk to them; but he remained silent, as silent as the hungry ghosts who whirled in the dark air.

On the thirtieth day of the seventh moon the ghosts returned

to their tombs, the offerings were removed from the altar and the Hall of the Cloud at Rest resumed its accustomed ritual. Green Jade continued to work in the Naval Base, Crystal Stream returned every evening from the Convent of St. Joseph and the Blessed Mother Mary with her satchel full of strange books in French and English. Crystal Talk learned the Chinese characters under grandfather's supervision and Crystal Affection played with her kites in the court-yard and purposely cut their strings so that they flew high over the river. Cheong's absence finally broke down the reserve between Tien Hsueh and Ng Ah. Ng Ah still called An-mei 'mistress' but she was allowed to sit with the family at meals. At first she could not understand Cheong's absence. When Cloud Temple Hall was destroyed, her heart ached and a curious numbness overcame her, so that she believed she had nothing left to live for; then gradually it occurred to her that even in Singapore she would be able to enjoy the company of her husband and her son. On the day when, Cheong left her at the landing-stage, the same numbness swept over her and she thought nothing would be able to fill the gap in her life. For three weeks this numbness had endured, and then gradually, by imperceptible movements of revived affection, she saw that she still possessed a place in the hearts of the Cheong family. An-mei began to treat her more kindly and grandfather would lay his books to one side and talk to her of the Liu valley. The days began to pass more swiftly. The children were growing up. And although she no longer had to run after them and satisfy the wants they could not satisfy themselves, she thought of them more often and more searchingly, with an enduring love and understanding which made their enthusiasms her own.

When Green Jade returned at four o'clock in the afternoon he immediately came to see her. She asked him how he had worked.

"It's so big!" he exclaimed proudly. "You could travel all day, and not see half the things which take place in the Naval Base."

"Well, tell me what you have been doing to-day."

"We worked, Mother——It's good wood, better than any

we have here. They don't care about money. They buy the best wood——"

His eyes gleamed, but he would never tell her more. She imagined him in a great factory where thousands of terrible steel instruments descended from the roof. These instruments would cut wood, but they might also cut her son. Chu Ehr had lost three fingers on the circular saw. She shuddered and drew close to him, admiring his strength and air of self-possession. His face was pale under the sunburn, but his skin was golden. He smiled at her frankly, with a disarming and understanding smile exactly like his father's, and the more she saw of him the less she felt the loss of Cheong.

"How old is great-grandfather?" he asked one evening.

"Eighty-seven."

"Then if I marry and have children, he will be a great-great-grandfather," Green Jade laughed.

"But you're too young—you're only fifteen."-

"Ah no, Mother."

Ng Ah clasped her hands to her breast. She knew the smooth-limbed girl who played tennis and rode on a bicycle. She could not understand these young Chinese girls who spoke English in preference to Chinese. They did not bow to the ancestral altars, they did not bind their breasts, they grew tall and slender like the palm-trees and played tennis and basketball as strenuously as men. Green Jade stood before her stripped for running, wearing only a pair of very short shorts and a white singlet, his hair glossy and black, his strong legs quivering for action.

"I must run and get strong, Mother," he laughed.

She sighed quietly and laid her hand on his wrist.

"In the old days men wore gowns and did not show their bare legs. Perhaps I am old-fashioned, but I would prefer you to remain covered."

He laughed, showing white teeth.

"The old days are finished, Mother," he said, laughing. "After I have worked all day, must I have no pleasure? In Chinese there is no word for freedom. We must make our own freedom and learn from the West how to use our bodies in building the new China."

Already he was taller than his mother. As he stood on the housesteps under the flame-of-the-forest trees, the sun pouring through the red petals turned his body a deep gold. Ng Ah choked with pleasure, watching him. Work in the shipyard had tightened his muscles and darkened his face. It gave him pleasure to run his fingers down the smooth tight muscles of his thighs, to harden the sinews of his arms and feel the power of his voice deepening in his chest. He was thin and tall, with fine bones, but the muscles were already developing.

"Tell me about this girl," Ng Ah insisted.

"Ah Mother, she is like every other girl."

Ng Ah refused to be turned aside from her purpose.

"Tell me, will she marry you?"

"How should I know?"

"You're not betrothed yet. I want you to marry——"

As she spoke she wrung her hands unconsciously. Although she had never thought of her son's marriage before, the idea took possession of her. She wondered whether they would be able to live in the Hall of the Cloud at Rest—already she saw them at table, speaking with bowed heads to grandfather and continuing the family name. In them she saw herself fulfilled; with them she became no longer the slave-girl from Hunan but the guardian of their happiness.

"Don't fret so, Mother," he said, stroking her cheek.

The warm hum of bees in the flame-of-the-forest tree awoke her from dreams of the future. With an impulsive gesture she slipped the golden wrist-watch from her wrist and gave it to her son.

"This is for you," she said quietly. "Take it—please. Keep strong, Green Jade."

She was nearly sobbing. Green Jade stared at the small watch and held it to his ear, his full lips quivering with eagerness when he heard the subdued ticking sound.

"I must run now," he said at last, and suddenly she saw him run through the vermilion gate towards the playing field near the river.

"Yes, run," she said, but he was already out of earshot.

She returned to the house silently, like someone in deep thought; but there were no thoughts in her brain. She was

numb with excitement. Like a young girl on the eve of her marriage, knowing nothing of what marriage brings, she waited eagerly and expectantly for the revelation which might never come, although she was certain it would come when she most desired it. Suddenly she noticed that her left arm was light, as light as air, and there was no golden bracelet to remind her of Cheong. It was as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Henceforward she never thought of her husband fighting in China. All her thoughts were directed upon the future of Green Jade and the smooth-limbed girl who rode a bicycle and played tennis.

She left the court-yard and went into her room. The windows were fastened and the air smelt stuffy and dead. She swept some dead flies from the window-sill and opened the window and threw out the flies. Sweet air, fragrant with sawdust, blew against her face. She thought of her son—his long pale golden face, with silky eyelashes. There came to her from the past an indistinct' roar of memories—Green Jade running and playing tennis, Green Jade shouting as the fireworks rose over Singapore river, Green Jade in the temple and in the ship-yard, Green Jade everywhere. "How terrible it is when a child grows too old to love his parents," she said wearily. Then she remembered that An-mei had asked her to wear the gown of married happiness as a sign that she was no longer a servant but an honoured guest in the Cheong family household.

She put on the gown of embroidered green silk and stood before the mirror. She could not recognise herself. Her starched coat lay on the chair, her black silk trousers carefully folded underneath. "I am like a real wife," she laughed. "All my life I have wished I was married, but now I cannot recognise myself."

As the light grew darker, she thought she had become as much a part of the family as Tien Hsueh. She could not believe she had changed since the day when An-mei was taken ill after an accident and she became the second chambermaid. But the mirror told her there were lines on her face. Something was changing inside her. The smallest things, a fallen leaf, the way Green Jade parted his hair, a horn-lantern in the wind,

grandfather's soft footfalls—these things transpierced her heart, and she could not tell whether she derived pleasure from them. The children were away. The house was quiet. Downstairs Cheong Ehr Sung, the merchant from Ai-lin, was reading his accounts and thinking of the mahjong party he was giving that night. Suddenly there was a scream from An-mei's bedroom.

Cheong Ehr Sung placed the accounts on a small glass-topped table and rose to pray before the family altar. He felt suddenly weak and childish. He had not heard the scream, but he felt sick and uneasy, knowing that his wife was ill and that the children had left the house to go to a party at Tanjong Rhu. He thought of telephoning to Malacca, but Meifu would be too busy with her children to pay attention to him. Loneliness came over him in a wave.

Before the family altar the ground-nut oil in a silver canister was burning furiously; and great grey shadows like cobwebs fell on the statue of Kojan-Yin. This was how the house had always been in the evening—the grey shadows racing one another, the red robes of Kuan Yin, the darkness and the smell of Singapore River. For years he had accustomed himself to the laughter of his children, but now they were growing older and he was left with An-mei, who gave him no pleasure, and Ng Ah, who obeyed him dutifully like a servant but showed no love for him.

Ng Ah raced downstairs when she heard An-mei screaming. "What is it?" she called.

There was no answer. An-mei lay in bed, her head thrown back and her arms outside the bed-clothes, death caught her at the moment when she was about to seize something from the air.

"Your honourable wife is ill! Come quickly!"*

Cheong Ehr Sung looked up from the altar-flame with an expression of despair.

"Ah, no—no," he shouted aloud; "it couldn't happen—not yet——" The candle in his hand was burning to a pin-point of light, but the oil in the canister was smoking and burning brightly. "Ah—no—no" he repeated softly, in a toneless voice, without knowing what he was saying, looking at the

bruised distemper on the walls, with a curious fixed intensity of gaze. "It could not——" But he did not go into his wife's bedroom, and instead he stood before Kuan Yin with his hands raised in prayer. He thought of the time when his children were young in Ai-lin, before he sailed for Singapore, before the heat had soaked into him and made him too proud to return. He stood there for an hour, not daring to leave the bright flames. From the flames he derived comfort against despair and something less terrible than comfort—strength and silence. All the while his lips formed half forgotten prayers. His face was lined, his hands rose up and down with the motion of the flames. He did not dare to enter his wife's bedroom. Better if he had remained in China, where he would have faced his wife's death with equanimity. Better if he had never left the village of Ai-lin, for bandits and wars are not worse than loneliness. "It could not——" he murmured, and then at last he walked into his wife's bedroom.

She was lying with her hands on the counterpane, her face low on the wooden pillow, an expression of extraordinary ferocity on her bared lips. He touched her hands. They were cold and humid, like hands which have been kept for a long time in water. He muttered a prayer, tried to think how he would inform grandfather and the children when they returned and then he watched Ng Ah methodically, trying to understand how she could be impassive under the weight of this sorrow.

Ng Ah was praying at the foot of the bed. She told herself that her mistress would become a saint in heaven among a thousand perfumes. For countless centuries she would remain within the lotus bud until the flower opened beneath a cloud of jewels. The flower would raise a starry head above the quiet waters in the pure land when men and gods are of one colour—a gold so deep that the earthly gold is as pale rice-paper. She counted her beads and prayed earnestly and interminably in a voice of deep passion. Cheong Ehr Sung gazed at her with admiration. He could not understand her fervour. Why should one grieve for a woman who possessed eight grandchildren? There were grey hairs at Ng Ah's temples. Her eyes were red with weeping.

"How did she die?" he asked gently.

"I was not there, Master," Ng Ah replied. "Her hands were lifted above her head. Perhaps she was trying to find something."

There are some things that cannot be told to men. When Ng Ah entered the bedroom, An-mei was laughing and holding an imaginary grandchild above her head.

"How did she die?" he asked again.

"I cannot tell. She was ill, Master. Perhaps she was looking for the golden lotus."

Cheong Ehr Sung could bear the strain no longer. He walked into the court-yard like someone who has lost his sense of balance. He was not grief-stricken, but afraid. Soon the children would return, but before they returned he would have to send the gate-keeper to tell his friends not to come to the mahjong party. Above the voice of his own grief he heard the musical click of the tiles.

The smell of salted eggs and yams came from the kitchen and mingled with the smell of incense before the family altar. All day the incense burned; at night it filled the house with a quiet somnolence. But in the early morning, when the sun beat pitilessly through the windows, the incense seemed to have a sharper odour and a more cloying scent.

An-mei lay in her coffin downstairs surrounded by mosquitoes and cockroaches. Her eyes were like quiet, dark pools, full of peace and contentment, and her hands, lightly clasped across her breast, were relaxed and still. Her hair was combed out, and the fan over her head whirled continually and wisps of grey hair were continually being blown over her forehead. In the white coffin she looked thinner than ever, her face shrunken and freckled with brown spots. Her husband felt no grief or resentment, only a dulled ache in his brain and a curious light-heartedness. The coffin had been a present from Cheong. He examined it anxiously, afraid that it would show signs of its long confinement in storage, but it was smooth and clean, the wood pure and brightly polished. Along Alexandra Road a blind man tapped on the pavement and dray-carts rumbled. He left the house and went into the garden, thinking

of the interminable complexity of the funeral arrangements. Everything would have to be white. Gold rings would be spirited away and white or silver rings substituted. The red and green dresses of his grand-children would be exchanged for white dresses. He began fanning himself gently. Crystal Stream came down the steps in her padded slippers. She was subdued and her face was swollen with tears. Cheong Ehr •Sung noticed that she was dressed in brilliant red. He laughed softly, then told her to change into white.

An hour later, accompanied by his father, he offered prayers to the ancestors and informed them of the death of his wife. Before the wooden tablets cooked foods and fresh fruit were placed. There were pomeloes and mangoes, small lettuces cut away to show their hearts, ripe durians, oranges with wrinkled red skins, pears, apricots and mangosteens. Because An-mei was a Buddhist a bowl of gold-fish was placed near the altar, and because she belonged by adoption to the Sacred Triad Society a red gown like the gown she wore at ceremonial Masses was draped over a near-by chair. When the ceremony of informing the ancestors was completed, he went down to the woodshed and told the workmen that his wife had died and they could have a holiday. He was surprised by the fervour of their condolences. He watched a red dragonfly flashing over the grey murk of Singapore River. It occurred to him that the soul of his wife may have entered these delicate veined wings. The sun rose higher over the logs piled on the shore, throwing deep shadows like iron bars down their sides; and one by one the workmen left the wood-yard.

In Malaya, when a man dies in the morning, he is buried the same afternoon. For a few cents an embalmer will prepare the body to last three days. If the body must be kept for more than three days, it is sealed in an air-tight chamber and sweetened with drugs specially imported from China, with cassia roots, ginseng and sambals. The embalmer came during the night. He had painted the face with a white rosin, but already the skin was breaking up and small balloons were pushing up on the forehead. Ng Ah lit spills at the foot of the coffin and repeated Buddhist prayers. She did not know what the words meant, or whether they would be conducive to the

health of her mistress's spirit, but she prayed because it was natural to her to pray and because anything else would have been unseemly. A cockroach crawled out of An-mei's mouth. Ng Ah watched it with a fascinated expression, not believing it possible. She almost cried out: "Look out, mistress! There's a cockroach in your mouth!" Instead she laid the white cloth, which had been prepared with spices during the night, on An-mei's face. It was only then, when An-mei's face was covered, that Ng Ah realised that her mistress was indeed dead. The heavy scent of the spills deadened the smell of decay. She bowed continually as she left the room, and at any moment she expected her mistress to rise from the coffin with a request for a cup of chrysanthemum tea.

The details of the funeral ceremony were so complicated and delicate that Cheong Ehr Sung left them in the hands of Ng Ah and his father. As he walked through the house, which had suddenly become full of pale-faced children, he upbraided himself for allowing Cheong to go to China. Now there was no son to pray over his wife's coffin. Grandsons and granddaughters are often too irresponsible to be heard in Heaven. He sighed deeply, and returned to his accounts.

During the afternoon a red pole was set out over the carved gate, lanterns were hung in the court-yard and pasted with strips of white paper showing An-mei's name, her age and the date of her death. The servants stitched mourning bands on their dresses, and scrolls began to arrive with inscriptions: "Why has she not lived for a thousand years?" "The Blessed mother of many children." Cheong Ehr Sung received them in silence. When Crystal Stream and Crystal Talk plucked his sleeve to remind him that the Carpenters' Guild had sent a particularly beautiful scroll, he shook them away impatiently, as though he was at a loss to deal with such small affairs.

In the evening visitors came. Ng Ah prepared sweet cakes, roasted almonds and red eggs. Chairs and tables were arranged in the court-yard under the hanging horn lanterns. The visitors examined the richly embroidered death room, where the curtains were suitably inscribed and An-mei lay in her coffin on a raised platform surrounded by incense sticks and tapers. The children listened to the whispered words of

condolence without understanding them. Everything became unrecognisable. Green Jade felt out of place in this world of laughing people, who recounted their memories of An-mei with an air of improvising a tragedy. There were more chairs and tables in the court-yard than there had ever been before. Under the glare of the horn lanterns the flame-of-the-forest petals were pale pink. Crystal Affection was still too young to realise what was happening. She discovered, in the unrecognisable court-yard, strange unexplored stairways, frightening shadows, trees she had never seen before and servants who pretended to speak with kindness of a woman whose tyranny they deplored. Through all these ceremonies and feasts Tien Hsueh moved like an actress, completely at home in any circumstance, wearing a white silk gown slit to just below the knee, her face thick with white paint and the shadows under her eyes so deep that many thought she was affected by grief.

Later in the evening the nuns arrived. They wore brilliant red gowns, their heads were shaven, their faces were remote and unfriendly like the faces of very young babies. They brought triangles, small silver drums and little bells shaped like fishes. They sang in high-pitched unmelodious voices which continued long after the point where everyone expected they would end. The abbess pleaded beside the bier for a blessed journey for their sister, the Lady of the Willows. Neither her husband nor the children had heard this name before. Gradually the repetition of the name forced itself upon their attention and they recognised, in the slowly decomposing body on the platform, a saint who clung to her hair-shirt and fervently obeyed the laws of the Buddhist society to which she belonged. The children were at first frightened by the nuns, whose impassivity was like a strange beauty, intimidating them. Their nerves, which could have withstood an earthquake at any other time, suddenly grew weary of the continual high-pitched voices and the beating of cymbals. To prevent themselves from breaking down, they ate greedily and screamed with laughter at things which would have passed unnoticed at any other time.

Towards midnight the guests began to leave. More and more incense bowls were placed round the coffin, for the stench was

becoming unbearable. More scrolls and red candles were exchanged. Just before midnight a swarm of white moths suddenly flew into the house. They alighted on the coffin and frightened the nuns, who thought it was an apparition. No one could explain it. Honey-bowls were offered to the moths. They paid no attention to the honey, but circled madly round the tapers until at last they were all burnt and their shrivelled black wings fell on the embroidered cloth beside the coffin.

"How strange," said grandfather as he walked upstairs to the comparative silence of the library. "Who would have thought she was so great a saint?" From the court-yard the children saw his shadow on the window. From the motions of his arms, they knew he was smoking opium.'

On the next day the coffin was taken on a hearse, surmounted by an immense papier-mache* bird with blue wings and orange beak, to the cemetery. But first, An-mei's face was washed and her body was placed in a white gown; her hair was combed out; sacred paper was burnt and a packet of paper money was placed under her head with her necklaces, a jade Buddha, a silver walking-stick and a mirror. Paper dolls were placed at her feet to the number of her descendants and a scroll carefully inscribed by grandfather was placed in her left hand. Then quick-lime and bundles of money were packed tight in the coffin.

It was Sunday. There were few people in the street. The Carpenters' Guild sent its band. They were dressed in green and wore silk sashes of bright red over their shoulders. They played on trombones and twirled their brightly coloured sticks above their heads. Behind them came the members of the Cheong family in white, the workmen and their friends, the servants of the Hall of the Cloud at Rest and last of all the old Malay gate-keeper. When the procession arrived at a turning in the road the chief mourners bowed, the hearse was brought to a standstill and the papier-mache feathers of the immense blue bird on the hearse trembled violently and it was as though the bird was about to take flight. Cheong Ehr Sung threw paper money in the air. At the corner of River Valley Road a packet of paper money fell in a brazier, and the golden bank-notes burst into flame and crackling in their rubber bands' were

swept by the wind inside a ship-chandler's store and on to the roof. The thatch caught fire and soon the whole store went up in flames.

"She must have been a greater saint than anyone dreamed," grandfather murmured as he peered from the windows of his carriage.

When the funeral ceremonies were over, when the white clothes and candles were distributed and nothing remained to remind him of An-mei's death except the hooded lanterns in the court-yard, Cheong Ehr Sung returned decided to write to China. At first he thought of writing in the kitchen, where the children were playing mahjong, but he could not concentrate and the sound of the clicking tiles reminded him of the evening when he invited his friends and was compelled to send the gate-keeper to their houses to warn them not to come. He decided to ask his father's permission to work in the library. The children were silent when he left. They thought his departure was a rebuke and threw the mahjong tiles on the table and formed disconsolate groups. Grandfather was humming poetry when he entered the room.

"Sit down, Son, there are many things we must discuss," grandfather said, laying his opium pipe aside.

"Yes, Father, but could we leave them for another day?" He sat in a wicker-work chair and gazed fixedly at the ceiling. "May I use your table to write a letter to my son in China?"

Grandfather nodded, and with a gesture of acquiescence took up the forgotten opium pipe. For a long while there was no sound except the bubbling of his pipe. A butterfly flew through the window, exhausted by its long journey from the Dutch islands, the slender brown body throbbing, the wings jerking feverishly. Cheong Ehr Sung gathered it in his palm and carried it to the window.

"What are you doing, Son?"

"It's only a butterfly, Father."

"Oh let it rest, let it rest."

The blue flame of the opium lamp went out. The pipe with the silver mouthpiece trembled in the old man's hand. Suddenly grandfather leaned forward and gazed in his son's face.

"We must go back to China, Son."

"Yes, Father, but how can we go until the war is finished? We have enough money to buy our fields, but what good is it? There are bandits everywhere—and worse than bandits."

"All the same we must go back."

"Perhaps the war will be over next year."

"Yes, perhaps," grandfather said impatiently, "but how do I know it will be over?"

They were silent then. Downstairs the children were going to bed without saying good night. Cheong Ehr Sung heard them shaking off their red sandals as they crept to bed, and afterwards the house was quiet except for the roar of a police boat on Singapore River. He began writing:

"Singapore, March 4th, 1941.

"O my son, my son, the flame-of-the-forest petals are falling, but I remind myself that soon there will be more petals on the tree. I write to you from your grandfather's room. Your image comes clearly to my mind, and I see you fighting like Ch'uan Kuan on the glorious battlefields of China. We have been separated so long that your absence pains me. I regret my weakness and call upon the gods to make you strong, and may all China be strong also.

"Your honourable mother is dead. She died alone, before help could be brought, away from her children and grandchildren. On the evening before the funeral a cloud of moths settled on her coffin. This we take as a good omen. My sins have been great, but I have prayed earnestly to the ancestors to receive her spirit. It appears that the nuns of the Sacred Triad Society regard her as a saint, who will be given a special place among the celestial spirits. For her sake I enjoin upon you to treat all Buddhists with great sympathy.

"Your grandfather is well. He reads the newspapers without glasses, but he says he cannot understand the wars raging everywhere. These wars, according to him, are evil eruptions of the earth due to evil thoughts. Since the war began, the price of wood has gone up \$1.75 a pikul. Your children are growing swiftly, but lack the care of a grandmother.

"Your wife is devoted to her children, but behaves in a way which is not worthy of you. I shall not speak of her love of

enjoyment, which you know to your sorrow. Ng Ah is always obedient and gentle. She pays particular attention to the health of Green Jade, who is now taller than his mother. My son, remember not to sit in draughts, and cover yourself well in winter, for you were always liable to have colds in the head. For many moons I have dreamed of you, and always I see you in the vanguard of the army. Be brave, my son, and careful of your health."

He wrote his name in the right-hand corner of the page and looked up to see grandfather nodding vigorously.

"Perhaps it would be better if you did not speak of his wife," grandfather said. "Such things are painful."

"Have you read the letter, Father?"

"No, but I watched your expression as you wrote. I can tell many things from your expression."

"Then what shall I write?"

"What you have written is good, but hesitate before opening old wounds."

Cheong Ehr Sung re-wrote the letter, without mentioning Tien Hsueh's love of pleasure. When he placed the paper aside, his heart ached with a drowsy numbness; autumn had come, and the monsoon weather was sapping his strength. At moments of indecision he counted his blessings. He told himself that he possessed seven grandchildren—Meifu had recently presented her husband with twins and a boy was born the year before—his own father was still living, he was rich and possessed an honourable name. When the war was over he would return to China and buy the Cheong estates. Now that his wife was dead and Cheong was away, he would no longer play mahjong or look enviously at the old scholar smoking opium. He decided to work with all the strength of his remaining days and to live as long as the old scholar. "At the age of fifty-nine I have not yet smoked a pipe," he said proudly; then he walked out of the court-yard into Alexandra Road and posted the letter to his son.

When he returned Ng Ah was standing at the foot of the stairs pointing to something on a glass-covered table smothered in chrysanthemum petals.

"A letter has come," she said in a soft voice. "A letter from China."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked sharply, his heart sinking. He swept the chrysanthemum petals away. "It's from my son, my son!" he shouted, forgetting that when he saw the letter he was overcome by the thought of bad news. His hands were trembling. He was shouting so much that the children were awakened, and Tien Hsueh came running into the hall. "A letter from my son!" he shouted, waving the letter in the air. "How did it happen that I did not see it?"

"It was there," Ng Ah answered. "Perhaps the chrysanthemum petals hid it."

"We must let grandfather see it," he said, still waving the letter. "I notice that it is addressed to me, but the scholar can read better than any of us," he added, running upstairs, followed by the rest of the family.

Grandfather read slowly and haltingly:

"With the VII Army near Changsha,

"Fifth day of the sixth moon.

"I send you my love, my Father, for all the good things you have done for me, and especially for the parcels of warm clothing. Since the fifth day of the ninth moon last year I have been with the Army. Let no one believe that China is a small country. In nine months I have worn through four pairs of leather boots.

"I have thought deeply about these wars. A hand which has killed many men becomes strong, yet grief-stricken. To-night I amuse myself by drawing the Chinese characters—our beloved characters—in a way which makes them express terror and defiance. These characters express everything I have to say. They are cries of the bombed peasants, the cries of hungry children and violated girls. I have drawn with my frozen pen the characters for 'poor children.' Such is my country, and the country of our enemy. Read, my father, the last book in the Bible. Everything is there except our suffering. May the gods grant that you never see an armed Japanese facing ten unarmed Chinese peasants.

"This is no time for thinking. The great strength of the

T'ang painters was that their colours drew Heaven down to Earth. Now it is the peasants of China who draw Heaven down to Earth. In the old paintings, which I have seen, how small are the faces and bodies of men! To-day the faces and bodies of men are larger than life, the human soul is larger than the sacred Tien Shan, the spirit of man more powerful than the flooded river. If I shall die, I shall not wholly disappear. I too shall bring down Heaven to Earth. In Heaven I shall pray with the holy gods for the blessings which pour over China in the ages of peace. I enclose some grains of dust from China.

"Your obedient and dutiful son bows to the ground."

When grandfather had finished reading, he placed the letter down on the table and looked at the family. Tien Hsueh was weeping silently. Cheong Ehr Sung was repeating over and over again: "A letter from my son! A letter from my son!" Green Jade's brows were furrowed and Crystal Stream, who was already learning to paint her face, looked even more beautiful than her mother. Ng Ah was smiling wonderfully and saying under her breath: "Look, look, my heart is beating so much——" and Crystal Talk, his face screwed up like a benevolent monkey was peering over grandfather's shoulders at the thick brush-strokes of the letter. The letters seemed to have been written with a brush dipped in molten steel. They were hard and angular. No one had ever seen such handwriting before. At first grandfather did not see the grains of yellow dust in the envelope. At last he spilled them out on the table, and one by one the members of the family approached to touch the small mountain of dust on the table, and bring it to their lips.

"This letter will be framed and placed near the ancestral altar," grandfather said afterwards. "It must be read by each member of the family every-day until another letter arrives. This evening the family is indeed a Cloud at Rest."

When the family had been dismissed, grandfather dipped his brush in the ink-stone and wrote in red letters: "The Han Dynasty Pilgrim sees in his grandson the courage of the Ming Emperors. Let us bind ourselves in eternal faith for the achievement of our country, which has produced such sons."

Then he lay back in his chair, holding the letter in his hands, thinking of his grandson and the rigid characters and the grains of dust from China. Over the stream of his life memory flowed like a glacier. Far ahead of him the ice was melting on the mountains, and on the pinnacles of these mountains, above pain and suffering, a new China was born.

The rain fell on Singapore river. The lights of the sampans went out one by one. He shrivelled a flame petal between thumb and finger, then turned and made a half bow to Tien Kuan.

"Such sharp strokes show defiance, such beauty shows sympathy," he said, holding the letter to the light.

Then he lit the blue flame of the opium lamp and began to dream of the Ai-lin valley.

XV

THEY had journeyed for five days, they had crossed two mountain ranges and lost themselves in interminable swampy forests. When at last they came into the sunlight, the blue glaze of the pony's snaffle reflected a bronze sky where plumes like red horse-hairs flourished over the pale green mountains.

Over the wasted fields and moorlands deserted by the peasants Cheong recognised suddenly the smell of tea. Heavy rains had swollen the valleys. Pine-trees grew from the lakes and trickles of silver rope dangled over the granite rocks. The trees were an army of black and haggard ghosts; at night it was difficult to distinguish them from the guerrillas. Then the rains ceased, the trees stood out of the lakes and the scent of tea, like cinnamon in Malacca, came on the raw east wind.

"We'll soon be in Hunan," Cheong exclaimed, sniffing the tea-scented air.

"Well, what about it?" Ah Chee answered. "It's all the same—all the same yellow earth."

Cheong squeezed the perspiration from his cheeks and rubbed his drenched gloves on his padded cotton coat. He sniffed the air and gazed at the mountains. There were no

tea-plantations in sight—only deserted terraces where the rice lay abandoned, stone houses with crumbling roofs from which the paint had flaked away and the dead bodies of mules like the backs of elephants in the flooded streams.

"Do you know, it's not in the least like Singapore," Cheong said gravely. "Here the mist rises late in the morning and falls early in the afternoon. There's no sun, only mist. But in Singapore it is always summer and the trees never fade——"

"Yes, yes, go on," Lu Lung said, his mouth opened as he inhaled the scents of Singapore.

"Well, my grandfather, who is a scholar, told me that Singapore has never been conquered since the Ming Dynasty. So there are no soldiers, and the law-givers are good, and justice is the same for all men, rich or poor."

"Did you dream all this?" Lu Lung asked. "It's always summer and the trees never fade," he repeated.

"No, I dreamed I saw Kuan Yin."

"That's the goddess."

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"I dreamed she was floating over the islands. The islands were at peace. She wore a blue gown like the sea."

"Do you think there will be peace soon?" Lu Lung interrupted.

Cheong glanced down at the blue-glazed snaffle.

"Yes, I think it will come quite suddenly, and when it comes, people will be so frightened that they will march from every corner of the world to offer sacrifice at the T'ien Shan. Everything will be new—new fruits, new woods, new trees, new colours—and the rivers will be full of new boats—and there will be new children and——"

"Extraordinary!" Lu Lung's small peasant face crinkled into a smile. "Did you dream all this too?"

They rode in silence. Lu Lung glared up from under his Japanese peaked cap and gazed at Cheong who was sunk in thought. There was nothing remarkable about Cheong's features except his long eyelashes. His face was thin, a small black beard grew under his bony chin, his sharp-pointed ears stuck out like the handles of a Han sacrificial bowl and when he

was sunk in thought, he lost whatever expression he possessed before. "He looks like a scholar/" Lu Lung grimaced, "or a priest—yes, certainly a priest." But what kind of priest, Taoist, Buddhist or Confucian, he could not tell. Darkness was gathering. The stunted trees assumed curious ghost-like shapes and the mist swirled over the hard yellow ground on the uplands.

"How long will it be before we reach Hunan?" Cheong asked.

"We're already there," Lu Lung called out. "We crossed the border three hours ago."

At midnight they came to a ford. The moon was up. Cheong dismounted and scooped the water in his palms, and for the first time for many weeks saw his own reflection. He was big and powerful, his flesh was white, not sunburnt, so white that it seemed to have been dusted with powder: when he smiled a broken tooth made a small gap in his mouth which enabled him to whistle louder than any of the other guerrillas. There were deep black rings round his eyes, and his hair was long and grew lank over his forehead. Then the reflection was disturbed by pellets of water which broke the surface into a million rings.

"Hurry up," Ah Chee shouted above the thunder.

Suddenly in the distance the lightning crackled; the rain hovered in black veils over the mountains. The darkness was black and evil, like a coin slipped in the mouth of a dead man. When lightning whipped the clouds, his face was no longer white in the river, but blue and streaked with muddy sweat. He climbed into his saddle. The rain was cold and had no smell.

"If it lasts all night, where shall we be?" Lu Lung growled.

"It's all right," Cheong protested. "You're well-fed, you're well covered, what else do you want?" But he was not convinced by his own words. After rain comes fever, especially rain at night. They were all sick of the rain. "One is always calm in despair," he murmured. "One may even be more brave." But he would prefer to fight Japanese than the rain, which was gradually undermining their spirits. In the darkness trees rose like the dead from their coffins.

The earth became soft and porous when they forded the river. The mules and ponies were pushing against one another.

The storm came out of a cloudless sky. Less than a quarter of an hour before there were only a few black clouds at the foot of the mountains. spurts of green flame appeared on the hills. Darkness swept the moon aside. Cheong shivered. All the time he was rubbing the neck of his pony and whispering consoling words. "It won't last long—keep moving." The thunder, like the gnashing of immense teeth, made her rear on her hind legs and throw him. When he climbed into the saddle again, the pony was shivering. A single drop of rain fell on her glassy yellow eyes. "Why should I be afraid?" Cheong asked. "The heavens are not afraid; the earth is not afraid, the sun and the moon are not afraid." The pony neighed, flicked her long white tail and cantered in the direction of the disappearing army.

"Tether your horses," Ah Chee roared above the thunder.

They had reached a clearing among grave-stones. For four hours they wound up the steep road. The rain lashed the grave-stones and the burnt furze; the feather-grass sprung on steel springs. There was no shelter, for they were all afraid to stand under the trees.

"Do you think it will ever end?" someone asked with chattering teeth.

"Yes, it will end all right," Cheong answered, while the rain dripped from his muddy cheeks.

The pony nibbled grass, flung up her head, her pasterns trembled and a wave of trembling passed over her flanks. Down below, in the valley, the rain was a whirlpool of conflicting rivers; the rain was spinning from a vertical iron bar driven deep in the earth.

"Yes, it will end all right," Cheong said slowly. "I have seen a basketful of rotten fish by a stream. One of them found a hole in the basket and slipped back into the stream. Then one by one they all followed. That's how it will end—we'll find the hole in the basket, and all the fish will slip back into the stream."

"What are you talking about—the war or the storm?"

"Oh, both. The war, perhaps. I was thinking of the sentence of Confucius. If for a single day, a man might return to *li*, the earth would return to goodness. Perhaps one day we shall find this single man—and then immediately, like a bottle of milk

falling over, all the wars and storms will cease." He squeezed the him from his face. "What a curious day it will be! People will no longer be frightened by noise, but perhaps they will be frightened by whispers. There will be no wars and revolutions, no murders, no sharp practices—all will be at peace."

The rain flung the branches of the willow-trees to the earth. In the lightning flashes the rain was not black, but blue and green. When the lightning set a tree on fire, it burnt to the ground in less than a minute. Lu Lung sheltered under the willows by his side.

"I don't understand your honourable conversation," the old peasant said. "What's all this about a bottle of milk falling down?"

Suddenly Ah Chee, who had taken shelter under his pony, rose and pointed to the horizon, where they recognised the stone walls of an old mountain fortress. Pennons flew from long slender masts; they twisted in the rain like animals in the death agony. The fortress clung to the slope of the mountain, beyond the cemetery; grey in the lightning, invisible when darkness concealed the whole forest.

"We'll ride over there and take shelter," he blew on his cold fingers and then pointed in the direction of the fortress.

As they rode over the grave-stones, Cheong was convinced he had seen the fortress before. He shook his head from side to side in an effort to recapture his first impression of the extraordinary fort. Steam rose from the pony's flanks to meet the descending rain. They rode through deserted orchards, where the blackened fruit lay among the roots of dead trees, while the rain sprang up from the grass turf and hid the ponies' hooves. Among the tree-stumps the ponies trotted steadily, but they moved more slowly over slippery graves. By the light of incessant lightning flashes Cheong read the inscriptions on the graves. They were all dated in the years of the Rat and the Tiger in the early Ching Dynasty. Now nothing was left of them except the broken stones, the faded inscriptions half concealed under lichen and the stone lions before the curving gaping doors. They rode in silence. Below them the valley floated on a rain-cloud, but in front of them lay the old fortress, of hewn stone and wood, with cracked walls, a

drum-tower as high as the waving pennons and small temples of red stone outside the gates.

There was no more conversation until they reached the walls, which rose high above the small ponies. Cheong noticed that the pennons were torn to ribbons; there was no sign of a gate, but there were many openings. The sky was clearing. The rain fell, but it did not kick up the mud in fountains. The moon shone through the rain, and warm steam rose from their sodden clothes.

"It rains," Lu Lung said, shivering in a blanket of steam. "Is Singapore like this? Nothing, nothing—only orchards and the ripe fruit under water. Are the graves as old as the fortress?"

"The inscriptions are dated in the early Ching Dynasty."

"Then the fortress is older?"

"Yes, I should say the fortress is older."

They rested in the fort all that night and most of the next day. Inside the stone walls, the damp dust and mildew-flourished under their feet. The shaded stone grew light, not instantaneously, but with long pauses. Dawn came suddenly, presaged by a hundred incomprehensible signs. Cheong noticed that the corners of the small stone rooms were full of pigeons' skeletons: a round white head, like a marble of ice, then the curved bones and vertebrae. Loose feathers hung inside the cage of bones, but all the flesh had been eaten away, and when he touched them, the bones crumbled into powder and turned the feathers grey. Rice grew between the floor-boards, but the stems were white, not green. Here and there, among stunted thorn-trees, there were small red temples with porches and altars. Cheong lit one of the black dust-pitted candles and admired the brilliant yellow flame which rose from the thin flaky wick. The golden altar-cloths had vanished; probably stolen by the bandits who lived here before they were recruited into the army. Rain fell and the guerrillas camped under the stone walls, while Cheong wrote to his father.

"Hunan, January 8th, 1941.

"I have returned to the province of my birth, honourable Father. When I last wrote to you I had not heard of the fall of France. Ten days ago a messenger from headquarters brought

the unwelcome news. Now indeed the whole world is in flames, and we know that every moment of peace must be fought for, every moment must be bought at the price of the greatest suffering.

"It rains in the province of my birth, dearest Father. We have arrived at an old fortress and must be somewhere near the Liu valley. Since the whole world is at war, if I could choose the place where I would fight, it would be Malaya, among the islands and the scent of cinnamon and musk-rose. In the forests of Malaya an army can hide for ever. Among islands ships are well-guarded. Our life is not for pleasure, but also not for hating. And what if I should die? Is it more important for a flower to fade than for a man to fall? Soon the bright clouds will part, the sun will shine on the yellow grains of dust and the time will come when the peasants, no longer starving, see their own grain harvested in the fields. Soon perhaps we shall recapture the village where I was born. The misfortunes of Fan Li and T'sao Mei command the sympathy of all, but the Chinese have won great battles in the past. Let us pray that we shall no longer write poems of regret.

"I send my love to my wife and children. I bow before your exalted name and the name of my grandfather. I desire to hide the truth deep in my heart and to fight silently and resolutely with courage and a fair name as my guide."

He finished the letter and watched the afternoon sun climbing the mountains. In the watery autumn light, the rain still falling further down in the valley, even the mountains seemed to form part of a lake. At five o'clock Ah Chee ordered them to leave the fort, and they walked back over the mildewed grave-stones, not certain whether they had really rested. Before they left Cheong hung the red, white and blue flag of the Kuomintang among the pennons flying from the wall. It flew bravely and the sun caught it squarely, and at that moment all the other pennons began to wave. Cheong caught his breath. "This is a good omen," he said, bowing to the assembled pennons. Then he jumped into the saddle, leaned over and rubbed his forehead on the pony's neck, while they cantered into the dark forest.

Five hours later they left the forest and came to open fields. It was already dark. In the darkness no lights shone, although here and there blue steel glinted in the rain; then darkness fell once more, and the struggling column forged through the bamboos towards a thicket of pine-trees. They had covered seventy *li* in five hours.

"We'll take the road to the left," Ah Chee whispered hoarsely. "First the bamboos—then the pine-trees——"

Cheong nodded.

"You'll wait here?"

"Yes."

There was no more thunder, though the air creaked as if there were thunder in the air. Suddenly Cheong opened his mouth and his tongue clicked. Surely this was Ai-lin! The pollard willows rustled in the wind and showed the pale silver undersides of their leaves, and down below the river rippled softly. Cheong's forehead was bathed in sudden sweat. How extraordinary it was! He knew the names of all the hills they had scaled, the names of the families who owned the rice-fields and the peasants who tilled them. On the brow of the hill, among pollard willows and stunted pines, he looked down upon his own birth-place; the walls and the peach-trees, the road running over the river-bed, the pug-marks of buffaloes and the green scum on the village pond. They were all here, though darkened by the mist and the night. Ah Chee came up, struggling for breath, because it was cold. Standing on the brow of the hill he saw a village in a valley, a walled village like hundreds of others in Hunan, with a drum-tower and mill-ponds and long stretches of level rice in the fields. There were square tea plantations where the river falls from the mountains, and clumps of acacia trees where the road to Hsiao-hsing widened. But more curious than the village were the shuttered lights in houses and court-yards. Shadows were moving behind greased windows. From the houses and the cobbled streets, the wind brought the sound of men singing, and the scampering of feet. Tarpaulins were stretched along one side of the wall. Under them Cheong recognised the blue noses of Japanese army lorries.

"This is my homestead," he breathed softly. "You sec the

house with the high gable roof and the pawlonia tree in the court-yard. I was born there." He sighed and shaded his eyes. "We'll go down. My uncle will give me baked duck and onions mixed with garlic sauce—and pepper. The three island dwarfs must be miles away. Baked duck and garlic sauce, eh?"

"Wait," said Ah Chee, gripping his arm.

Straining his eyes Cheong saw someone moving in his own court-yard. A lamp threw a shadow on the wall. He had forgotten the blue noses of the army lorries. The shadow on the wall was the shadow of a Japanese officer, with peaked grey cap and heavy military overcoat. Ng Aik had been crawling round the face of the hills.

"The Japanese dogs have made their nest here," he muttered. "Four hundred lorries——"

"Not so many?" Ah Chee interrupted.

"Well, perhaps forty. It's a tidy number," Ng Aik said with satisfaction.

The moon shone down on the walls and the tarpaulins stretched over the lorries. There was no sign of rain. The moon resembled the thigh-bone of a prehistoric animal, so clear that Cheong thought he recognised the groins on the knuckle. A cold wind ruffled the grass, the bamboos and willows stirred their sharp-pointed leaves, and sometimes the barrels of the Chinese rifles shone through them.

In the valley a petrol engine was humming. A lorry, with Japanese signs painted on the roof, came down the road. The drumming of the petrol engine could be felt through the soles of their boots. The lorry came to a pause outside the gates, where a sentry barred the way. There were whispered conversations, curt orders and even curter replies; then the sentry stepped to one side and the lorry passed silently through the open gates.

The guerrillas in the bamboo grove locked their teeth to prevent themselves from groaning aloud; The mules and ponies were taken into the forest, to prevent the enemy from hearing them. All the guerrillas had seen the village in the valley, all of them possessed the same thoughts, all felt protected by the darkness and at the same time they were afraid of the night; all thought of their families; all of them

were alone and miserable. Their clothes were so sodden that they did not look forward to the fighting. Cheong gazed at Ai-lin with the expression of a boy gazing at a new toy. He remembered little of the village where he was born, but it seemed that the high turreted walls had grown smaller with the years. The great lake was no more than a muddy pool.

"So you used to live here?" Ah Chee said gently.

"Yes."

"Is there a river anywhere about?"

"Why do you ask?"

"We'll need a wash when we have cut their throats."

"Yes, there's a river—large one when it rains."

He pointed to the river which lay between the rice-fields. Ah Chee seemed contented with the information, and walked back for the Lewis guns, while Cheong lay on the muddy earth, so that only his eyes and his forehead were visible from his native village. No sounds came to him. The last shadow had disappeared from the walls. Behind him small pieces of accoutrement shone in the moonlight—the holster of an automatic, a leather shoulder-strap, metal badges, buttons. The grass was stiff and rustled in the wind. Cheong dug in the mud with his finger-nails—the earth of his native village, which he had trodden in the days when he was allowed to ride the buffaloes with the herd-boys.

"You must be trained to love us," he whispered earnestly to the earth. Suddenly it occurred to him that there would be no end to wars, no end to the everlasting expectations of attack and counter-attack until the earth had been trained to love the men who worked her. Not only the mud in the rice-fields, but the hills and the river-beds and the granite slopes of mountains, every blade of grass and every grain of loess.

"Oh how good you'll be," he said over and over again. "Oh how good you will be when we have you to love us. No more floods, no more earthquakes——"

"Ng Aik wants to know what the devil you are talking about."

"I was talking about the Chinese earth," Cheong said in a sing-song voice. "Good for the plough, and the rice-fields, and no more bandits, and the rivers dammed, and the sun will

always shine. Old father, old mother, succour me. Yes, this is how it will be—old father, old mother, old earth."

Ng Aik had never seen him behave like this. He rolled over on his side until he was lying beside Cheong, who was shivering with cold and excitement, his eyes fixed on the village below. Down below in the valley a girl was singing. Cheong rubbed his eyes in astonishment. The girl was not singing Chinese songs: they were Japanese songs and the sound of her voice rose clear and vibrant to the hills. A door opened, there was the sound of subdued laughing and then the spear of light from the open door was gradually withdrawn.

"Was it a girl?" Ng Aik asked. "It might have been a girl, or perhaps a boy before his voice has broken." He laughed and threw himself still deeper in the mud. Ah Chee was coming back.

. "Did you see the lights?" he asked urgently.

"Yes."

"That's the Japanese headquarters. They are going to cut the Canton-Hangkow railway."

"Suck; their mothers," Ng Aik said softly, his index finger on the trigger of his automatic.

There was silence again. The guerrillas in the bamboo groves re-formed. Cheong felt in his pocket for the letters from his family; then Jie laid them reverently on the earth.

"Yes, you must first be trained to love us," he said, staring stupidly at a mound of earth under his eyes. "In the old days men prayed to the spirit tablets, but now every grain of dust is sacred. This yellow earth is our flesh, our bread and wine."

Ng Aik must have heard him, for he leaned over and whispered: "Don't think of peace too much—it drives men mad."

Ah Chee was constantly coming and going between the brow of the hill and the guerrillas in the bamboo groves.

"We'll wait till just before dawn," he said. "Then we'll attack from three directions. We'll take cover among the thorn-bushes. Is that clear?" Cheong nodded. "There are three roads into the town. We'll slide down the buffalo track and take the gates from each end. Another column will take the lorries. Is that clear?"

There were no more orders. There was no need to divide the guerrillas into groups, for they knew where to go, and who they were to follow. In the bamboos they were silent like earth-worms. Once Cheong heard the neighing of a pony, but the sound was so faint that it was impossible to have been heard in the village. The moon rose higher. Small foraging parties returned to Ai-lin through the rice-fields. They were the Japanese who had been sent out on patrol, and returned empty-handed. One of the lorries swung clear of the tarpaulin. From the mast came the faint flicker of electricity. "So they are sending messages for help," Cheong thought, then he gripped his revolver tightly and clenched his teeth. "The help will come too late," he said decisively.

Dawn was creeping forward, but the sky was still dark. The heavy clouds of the afternoon disappeared and left a sky of polished steel. "In five minutes we shall attack," Cheong whispered to Ng Aik, but there was still two hours to go. His hands were steady, but his legs were jerking uncontrollably. His village had never seemed lovelier. He could remember now all the forgotten details of his homestead, the vast courtyard, his grandfather's carefully pruned pawlonia tree, his mother's room in the Three Bird Tower and the carvings on the vermilion gate. The wind was a steady breath on his face, and the grass rustled like silk under copper shears.

The sky was growing light. Already the warm steam was rising from the valley. "This time we shall really attack!" he said. Half an hour later at the precise moment when he was about to rest his head on his forearm and fall asleep, he heard Ah Chee's slow whisper moving along the grass like the sweep of a plough.

One by one, their faces blackened with mud, the guerrillas left the bamboo grove. In the darkness the walls of Ai-lin stood out like the battlements of a small fortress, grey and impenetrable. The wireless lorry had disappeared under the tarpaulin shed. The air was without wind, cold and transparent, although the earth lay concealed under a brown haze. Above this haze the guerrillas advanced warily, their bodies bent double, their guns clasped in their gloved hands. Cheong saw freshets of dew on the mountains and a faint straggle of

sunlight on the topmost pines. Then he crawled along the buffalo track with his column, while two more columns dispersed over the hill.

He was within twenty yards of the gate when he saw the sentry dosing over a machine-gun. The sentry wore a quilted overcoat and long ear-pieces hung down from his cap. Beardless and shivering he crouched by the gate with the machine-gun at his feet. Cheong motioned to his men to keep in the shadow of the wall, then he drew his knife. The sentry was humming. He was young and his face ahone. He was not like a Japanese, but like a Chinese, with a smooth face and full lips. Cheong drove his knife into the sentry's back. The knife grated on the bone and the sentry swung round with a surprised stare. It seemed extraordinary to Cheong that because he had driven a knife into a man's back, blood should trickle from his mouth. The boy in his death agony was kicking the machine-gun into unrecognisable fragments. Firing could be heard from the other end of the village. One of the lorry-drivers attempted to drive the lorry over the rice-fields. The rubber tyres were riddled with bullets and the lorry fell over when one of the tyres exploded. Already the guerrillas had opened the gate. From the drum-tower a machine-gun was trained on them. The court-yard of the village elder was surrounded. Cheong was surprised to discover that he was crawling beside his own wall. The sun was rising, and all the puddles turned to gold.

From every house in the village came the sound of struggling. The drum-taps of distant machine-guns were interrupted with long silences. All the Japanese lorries had been captured by a small column under Ah Chee. Now the lorries were being driven through the village with Lewis guns mounted on their roofs. Among the Japanese only four officers were captured; the rest were killed in the street fighting or hacked to death with knives as they crouched in water-jugs. There was little blood in the streets. Half an hour after the sentry had been killed, Ai-lin was once more at peace.

The sun rose in a cloudless sky. The puddles reflected the faint stain. Ah Chee, his long legs scraping the ground, rode on his mule through the streets, where the guerrillas collected

their treasure in small dumps—ammunition, breech-locks, gun-barrels, and then again ammunition, more ammunition, so much ammunition that they gaped like scarecrows and danced like children. Some of the guerrillas rode on the buffaloes through the streets, chanting in unison. Their weariness had disappeared. In the houses everything was in order. From the four officers they learned that when the Japanese occupied the village, the villagers had fled. And it was true that there was no sign of the villagers anywhere.

During the morning, when the sun hung in glory in a clear autumn sky, Cheong looked up and heard the whistle of the wild geese. They came from across the marchland, flying very low, their long grey necks were craned forward and the beating of their wings disturbed the unplucked rice. Steam still rose from the earth, not in clouds, but in single plumes like the plumes of warriors on a Chinese stage. It grew hot. The old market-place was crowded with guerrillas cooking over charcoal braziers. Suddenly, as he turned round a corner in the narrow cobbled streets, Cheong fell into a puddle. Ng Aik laughed, threw his cap in the air and an immense smile grew over his face, while millions of small wrinkles were etched at the corner of his eyes.

"Have you seen the scroll?" Ng Aik asked, still laughing. He laughed so much that tears rolled down his thin cheeks.

"What scroll?"

"The scroll in the market-place."

"No, I haven't seen it."

Ng Aik took him by the arm. His breath smelt of hot pepper, proving that he came from Hunan, although Cheong had always thought he was Cantonese.

"I can't read it properly," Ng Aik said, as he pointed to a banner which hung over the market-place. "It's a scroll—something written. The characters are very bold, but we don't write like that nowadays. Well, what does it say?"

Cheong gazed at the damp banner hung between two red poles. He expected to find a message in Japanese. Instead, as he read the characters slowly, he was surprised to discover that it was in Chinese, and written in the cursory style his grandfather always used. Perhaps it was written by

his grandfather. Ng Aik stood there gaping, surrounded in the smoke of innumerable small fires, while the scroll hung damp in the wind, the red ink running on the white banner.

"What does it say?" Ng Aik asked impatiently.

"It says: *Out of the thousand calamities rises the everlasting peace*"

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

Cheong was silent. He mumbled something and looked across the market to where Ah Chee was stuffing himself with chicken and rice.

"Out of a thousand calamities rises the everlasting peace," Ng Aik repeated softly. "Do you know, I have never seen a scroll so large. It seems to cover the whole sky."

He shouted to all the guerrillas and pointed at the scroll, Cheong was surprised to see them stop eating. They crowded round the banner with their mouths open and full of half-chewed food; they stood in groups and watched admiringly while Ng Aik slowly read out the words. One of the guerrillas discovered a ladder, and leaning it against the posts, succeeded in wringing the banner dry, so that it floated like a white cloud over their bowed heads. Then suddenly, for no reason at all, the guerrillas began to dance.

Now they threw their bodies in slow abandon to the string-thrumming of a guitar and suddenly the forests and sandy uplands where they had lived for three or four or even five years were forgotten. They had lain in sheltering misery, taking their food where it could be found, stealing their weapons, and their ponies, and now all at once their suffering was no more. They threw their rifles aside, danced over the Lewis guns and threw empty shell-cases in the air. Smoke rose from fires where rice and chicken were being stewed to cinders. They pulled down the scroll and bore it high over their heads as they marched through the village streets, intoning the words they seemed never able to forget.

"Out of a thousand calamities rises the everlasting peace"

These words, repeated in all the dialects of China, amid gusts of insane laughter, amid cat-calls, echoed over the village and rolled down the valley and re-echoed against the Liu mountains. Cheong wandered through the Hall of the Sleeping Cloud

like a ghost. He saw the shrivelled pawlonia tree, the small court-yard, the rooms where he could hardly squeeze himself through the narrow doors, which were once so wide that they allowed the whole world to enter; he groaned, carefully closed the camphor-wood chest he had opened and fled into the street. And now, at the sight of the well-known, familiar faces, at the sound of their friendly voices and the touch of their strong handclasps, the evil spirit deserted him and he heard once more the words of a scroll written many years before by his grandfather. Ah Chee was giving orders, but he did not hear them. From a hundred throats in the deserted village there came the cry of faith and hope. Ah Chee shouted until the rope-like muscles of his neck were swollen like the muscles of an ox.

"We're going south, men. There's no time for celebration. We're going south against the Japanese."

"Yes, we're going south," Cheong said slowly, and suddenly like a drowning man, he saw the whole of his past from his childhood in this village to his manhood in Singapore flowing past him like the curtains of a dream. They were going south; but meanwhile the islands were floating on the blue gown of the goddess of mercy, and he could not recognise the village through his tears. He thought of his wife and his family, he thought of his concubine who had given him more happiness than anything else in the world, and suddenly he paused and saw the banner floating above his head like a flame caught at the moment when it sets fire to a house. The words hammered on his brain. They were not the words written by his grandfather's brush, but the words written by a god who had descended from the highest mountains. These words awoke in him an unsuspected determination and a curious light-heartedness. They breathed life and benediction, love and exaltation, wealth amid poverty, strength amid weakness. Then very slowly, he repeated them again in a voice which no one heard, though he thought they were spoken so loud that they must be heard on the other side of the world:

"Out of the thousand calamities rises the everlasting peace."

THE END

Singapore, January 1941—July 1941.

