

The Oxcart

Lü He-jo

Translated by Robert Backus

I

"Look, if you don't shut up!" His face contorted with rage, Mu-ch'un was on the verge of crying himself as he dealt his little brother a cuff on the head. That made the child scream all the more, high-pitched at the top of his lungs; he lay flat on his belly and kicked and squirmed until he knocked over the can of cooking oil.

"Little brat!" Mu-ch'un clenched his fists and bent over the boy. "You want another one?" But suddenly the upraised arm lost its strength, his voice softened. "Dumb kid. What do you mean crying? Mom will be home soon. Look at your clothes, they're all dirty."

For he had just remembered: a frightening scene was due to be played out again in that house—something that had by now left Mu-ch'un thoroughly intimidated. Day after day, as soon as his parents came home from work in the evening, they would start to bicker and would end up in a scuffle. Nine-year-old Mu-ch'un would watch from where he had hidden behind the bed, while his little brother sat crying loudly.

"Mu-ch'un, get a move on!" his mother yelled through clenched teeth. "Go on, A-ch'eng, go out and play with your brother."

Mu-ch'un crawled softly out from behind the bed and, grabbing his little brother, made a dash for the door. Then they sat down on the path by the rice paddy, where Mu-ch'un talked nice to his brother: "A-ch'eng, you're not afraid, are you? All that crying—"

Mu-ch'un climbed up on the table—it was visibly cracked. He stuck his hand in the rice tub and, scraping up the bits on the bottom, made a ball of them, which he thrust into his little brother's hand. "Come on, stop crying. Eat it. If you keep on crying, you'll be in for it when mom gets home. Come on, A-ch'eng."

The crying stopped right away, and the tiny mouth chewed with gusto. Snivel and tears ran down together to be swallowed with the rice.

"Good, huh!"

The boys were used to cold rice. The rice that their mother put aside for lunch before she left for the cannery in the morning would be all cold and watery by noon. The boys had the run of the house when their parents were gone and helped themselves to handfuls from the rice tub whenever it crossed their mind. That is how they grew up. And little by little their bellies swelled until they were as big as a pregnant woman's, but they never got sick.

Tired out from the day's playing, they were dozing, when the creaking of the bamboo gate outside sounded a warning. Mu-ch'un started awake, wide-eyed. "Mom's home!" He shook his little brother awake and went to the door; but it was not his mother he saw, it was his father, Yang T'ien-ting.

Mu-ch'un greeted his father with a tone of voice that might be a complaint for being away from home all day, or the sulks to play on his father's affection.

"Dad— You're early today."

"Ah—" Yang T'ien-ting turned toward his son. "Has your mother come home yet?"

He was standing with his shirt unbuttoned, fanning his chest with his wide field hat while he fed cut grass to the ox, which he had just put into its stable.

"No."

"Oh." His father nodded lightly. "Are you hungry?" he asked after a moment.

The boy bobbed his head emphatically yes.

It was already growing dark. In the evening sky, streaked with blood-red clouds, flew a file of snowy egrets calling to one another. No breeze blew, an oppressive swelter lay sticky on the skin,

and swarms of mosquitoes hummed ahead as one walked. Foreheads dripped with sweat.

Yang T'ien-ting ignited a sheaf of dry sugar cane leaves and tossed it into the stove. Then he stood up; he poured water into the pot and scrubbed it.

"Mu-ch'un, I'll make the rice. Your mom isn't back yet." The children were peering at the fire in the stove as Yang T'ien-ting spoke gently to them so as not to make them cry.

Just then, from around the field in back, the mother, A-mei, came home.

She put down her field hat and lunch box quietly, without a word to her husband, and returned to the kitchen. Pulling the younger child to her, she looked him over critically. "You've been in the dirt again, haven't you. If you keep getting your clothes so dirty, I won't be able to wash them anymore—" Her words trailed off into something that was not quite a scolding. Sensing a threat in the air, Mu-ch'un huddled behind the stove.

"So you're late again. How come?" Yang T'ien-ting confronted his wife head-on. "Fool woman! Can't you see what it does to the poor children when you don't come home on time?"

"Humph, you talk about the poor children—" A-mei grabbed the pot from her husband's hand; she went up to the rice tub, snatched off the cover, and peered inside.

"If you knew anything about it, the children wouldn't have to eat cold rice and I wouldn't have to go out to work in the town cannery. What does a shiftless man like you have to say, anyway?"

"Wha-at? How dare you—" Yang T'ien-ting took two or three steps away from the stove, but stopped short as if he had been struck.

"That's right. I'll say it any time, any number of times. If a man who runs around all day and can't even make thirty *sen* isn't shiftless, what is he? There! The rice tub is empty and they're crying. Is tomorrow's rice going to fall from the sky?" A-mei thumped the wooden bottom of the tub meaningfully.

"So you're saying it's all because I'm lazy?" At the sight of the woman who so unjustly attacked him, Yang T'ien-ting felt a surge of emotion well up in his throat. "I work as hard as I can for what I get. I've never slacked off for a minute. I leave the house every morning at the break of day without a good night's sleep. Even you see that, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't want to hear it. Once you're out of the house, what do I know? Anybody can figure it out anyway with a little

thought. Before, when rice was way up, we had it easy, and it's only now, when rice is cheap, that we're short of rice. I never heard of such a silly thing!"

"That, that's the way it is. I used to take it easy and got hold of a *yen* a day, but now I get less than thirty *sen* no matter how much I run around. Do you know why?" Yang T'ien-ting turned to face her, heaving with anger.

"What do you mean do I know why? You can dodge all you want, but I know. What else would you do but gamble or slack off or spend it on women?" A-mei busied herself at the stove, with her face turned away from him.

"No, that's all wrong. How could I do those kinds of things when I don't even have enough to eat on? It's because there aren't as many people now who will hire me." Yang T'ien-ting gave her a straight answer.

"Humph, playing innocent, eh? It's up to you whether someone hires you or not. If you ask seriously and do a good job, you can't tell me no one will hire you. But a shiftless man..."

"Stupid woman!" Yang T'ien-ting shouted in a rage as he stepped up to her; he gripped a handful of her hair and tugged hard. A-mei bent backwards with a shriek and, grabbing a cup that was near to hand, threw it at him. The younger child began to wail.

"When a man's poor that's fate. You bitch!"

It always ended in scuffle—, he recollected for an instant and glared at his wife with bloodshot eyes. "Why do you keep saying that I don't make any money because I'm lazy?"

Slow as he was, Yang T'ien-ting still perceived that his family was being pushed little by little into the depths of poverty in recent years. In the days when he walked with the oxcart, inherited from his father, on the precarious narrow county roads, drowsily slapping the rear of the ox, he had always had money in his pocket. Even when he mooned around the house, customers would compete with each other four or five days in advance to get their order in first—carry my rice, carry my sweet potatoes. But when the county roads were widened into thoroughfares thirty-six feet across and made convenient for traffic, nobody gave him a second glance even when he went out looking for orders as he was doing now, and things stopped going well for him. At last they ended up so pinched they could hardly put rice on the table unless the wife left the children at home and went out to work in the cane fields or pineapple cannery. Serious effort wasn't enough? Yang T'ien-ting answered the question by asking it. No, he was using a hundred times more effort than before; he never slacked off a day.

The more he thought about it, the more it infuriated him, short-tempered as he was, to have his wife attack him every day, calling him lazy and shiftless, so much so that he even felt like killing her. However, his aversion toward her would always disappear when he had time to rethink the matter quietly and see that her behavior was due to worrying over how they were going to make a living. He fretted at the way they had to keep up a persistent battle for their livelihood with some invisible oppression that operated at a distance from them.

Next morning at daybreak Yang T'ien-ting was walking along beside the ox, his ears echoing with the rumbling-on of the empty cart. Mornings were cool in the country in summer. The dew was still heavy in the grass and felt cold as it wetted the soles of his feet when he walked. From the road he could discern the figures of farmers and oxen here and there as if afloat on the surface of the paddies. Bicycles and bike-trailers kept coming up steadily from behind to overtake the plodding cart, and each rider caught a glimpse of Yang T'ien-ting's face as he passed.

The town was, as ever, a lie-abed. It could be roused only by crowds of farmers thronging in from the countryside. Even so, the two-storey buildings in the center of town remained sunk in a deep stupor of dreaming; only the market and rickety wood structures under grimy sheet-metal roofs on the outskirts of town were caught in the flood of jostling and din. With faces looking as if they had just gotten out of bed, the people kept rushing around in the morning air, constantly shouting things. The place seemed awl in a vortex of anxieties, rivalries, annoyances, and jubiliations.

The humming of the Wanfa Rice Mill downtown could be heard as Yang T'ien-ting stopped his cart in front by lightly stroking the muzzle of the ox. After placing his field hat in the cart, he pushed stolidly through the entrance to the mill. The humming came from an electric engine in the room inside. Some farmers were sitting there talking.

"Morning."

Yang T'ien-ting addressed the proprietor, who had been wedded to his desk since early morning, clicking an abacus. "Mr. Ch'en, you wouldn't have some—something for me today?"

"Ah," grunted the miller by way of an answer, without raising his head. But that was all; he would add nothing more but remained silent, absorbed in the abacus. Yang T'ien-ting watched him from where he stood at the entrance.

A wrinkled old man, puffing on a long-stemmed pipe, had been talking, but Yang T'ien-ting had not been able to catch what he was saying until then.

"The way rice has gotten so cheap, I've never seen anything like it in my life. Looks like the farmer is growing rice for nothing. Yeah. Besides that, when you add in the cost of hulling it here, you're not going to make a penny no matter how much rice you sell. It's crazy."

One of his listeners, who had mottled teeth, interposed, "Look, old timer, you talk that way because you've got rice that you grew for sale. Take me. I don't even have enough to eat. You can bet I'm glad it's cheap."

"Faugh. I'll bet you're the only one saying so. Everyone says times are good when the price of rice is high. Right? Take it from me, everybody wants it to go higher. You can be sure that if it gets cheaper that's the end." With a rap of his pipe, the old man spoke forcefully.

"Right!" Gulping spellbound, the farmers were all ears.

"You think so? Well, as far as I'm concerned, it's the same either way. You see, it's like this . . ."

"Idiot!" roared the old man, interrupting Mottled Teeth in mid-speech, flecks of saliva foaming at the corners of his mouth.

"Hah, I've got it. Eight *yen* fifty-one *sen*. Total," the miller said to the old man as he hung the abacus on the wall.

The old man opened his eyes wide. "There. What did I tell you?" He gestured with his chin to the farmer he had been talking to as if to say he had been vindicated.

"Mr. Ch'en, what about it—today?" Although fidgeting, Yang T'ien-ting seized the opportunity and hurried to ask the question.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" The miller looked at Yang T'ien-ting as if he had just noticed him for the first time. "Yeah, there's a lot of unhulled rice that needs to be moved . . ."

"Well, I could take a load."

"The thing is, though—I'm using a truck now, so I'm sorry, but there's nothing for you."

With a glum look on his face, Yang T'ien-ting stood stock-still and looked hard at the miller.

"But, Mr. Ch'en, if you could just use my oxcart where the truck can't go—" Because the necessity to make a living was so urgent, he found himself all the more unwilling to accept the situation and hurry out of there with a polite "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

"I could, yes. But think about it, T'ien-ting. I've already got three or four bike-trailers for that job. My business is not big enough

to call for another carrier, and I'm not so sure I could use your oxcart anyway. Yes, I admit you did a good job hauling for me in the past, but now, you see, I can't use an oxcart. You should try somewhere else."

Speaking from his chair, the miller made his point in a kindly tone of voice. The old man with the wrinkles nodded in agreement and interposed a comment as he looked back and forth at the miller and Yang T'ien-ting. "Nowadays the oxcart, yeah—anybody who does this kind of business, or for that matter, even people living in the mountains have a bike-trailer ready to go and all, because it helps you better than a plodding oxcart. When I was a boy there used to be a whole lot of oxcarts, but now it seems you can't see all that many. Anyway, they'll be no match for those fast trucks and bike-trailers."

"Hmm. Say what you will, it's the recession. I can't spend all my time worrying about the other fellow anymore. After all, you're in business to make money, and you can't make a go of it plodding along with an oxcart anymore the way you used to," the miller said, forcing a laugh.

"Ah, I guess so. The carting business is tough—" Abruptly losing heart, Yang T'ien-ting impulsively drained a cup of tea in one gulp.

The old man with the wrinkles tapped the long stem of his pipe over his shoulder as if he had suddenly thought of something. "It's not just oxcarts. Everything from the old Ch'ing dynasty—none of it's any good in this Japanese era. I used to take all my rice—you know that waterwheel on Pissin Creek—well, I'd ask them to do it. But then they brought in this hulling machine, and after that it was too slow at the other place to make it worthwhile, and if it was going to cost about the same anyhow, I decided on this place. Then it wasn't just me, it looks like everybody did the same. Hasn't every trace of the waterwheel over there disappeared now? Japanese things are nothing to sneeze at."

"They sure aren't!" The farmers listened enraptured. They gazed with their mouths hanging open at the old man. For farmers thought that all the conveniences of civilization came uniquely from Japan.

Yang T'ien-ting was offended, because he felt that he was being talked about. But now for the first time he realized that here were others like himself, and he remained standing, motionless, burning with curiosity.

It was broad daylight by now on the streets, which were bathed in sunshine. Buses ran past with their horns honking noisily as they picked up passengers.

A short man thirty years old, who was gazing at the scene from inside the mill, turned around to face the others there and said, "You know, listening to you fellows talk reminds me what a hard time I had with those damn motor vehicles myself. In the farming off-season I went partners with a neighbor carrying passengers in a sedan chair, and we picked up some money. But when those damn things started charging up and down the roads everywhere, they ruined the business completely. We made just enough to pay our taxes."

"Ha, ha, ha! Now there's a harebrained scheme break your back over!" The old man laughed loudly.

"Well, it got them by, didn't it?" remarked the miller as, oddly for him, he joined in the laughter.

"Yes sir, a perfectly harebrained scheme it was. So we gave it up right away and put our energy into vegetable farming. It's been three years more or less since then," muttered the thirty-year-old in an access of emotion as he counted on his fingers.

"Yes, there's no getting around it. Things from the old Ch'ing dynasty don't belong in the Japanese era. A person would be better off to get rid of them quickly and be a farmer or something." *Have you burned your fingers on that pesky oxcart enough to call it quits?* the miller was saying as he glanced at Yang T'ien-ting.

"I can't say how much better farming would be than this carting business. But farming...." *A bunch of clever talkers you are,* the thought interrupted him, *giving me unwanted advice!* And Yang T'ien-ting stalked out of the Wanfa Rice Mill in a huff.

But as he slapped the ox on the back and the cart started to move, it was also beginning to concern him where he was to go next. In town, no matter where he went anymore, nobody would employ him; Yang T'ien-ting had been only too well aware of that fact for some time. The town merchants had no feeling. Although he resented them in his heart, the urgent necessity to make a living made him all the more careful not to show it in his face. And so he was doing the rounds of his old customers in town like this at a time when no one would hire him, nonetheless counting on something turning up if only he could land an order at least once in ten tries by arguing the other party out of his resistance to employing him.

After bumping along the stony backroads of the town, he came out upon the paddy fields, where the pineapple cannery was located, standing on the bank of a river there. Yang T'ien-ting stopped

in front of the office, which was painted blue. A truck started up beside the cannery, honking its horn.

"Hey! Get away from there! No! No!" An important-looking man with spectacles had caught sight of him from inside the office and yelled like that first thing without warning, waving his hands about. Yang T'ien-ting just stood there, dumbfounded not least because the man was dressed in a suit and tie. To be so suddenly yelled at like that, he could not get his open mouth shut again.

"Get away! Get away! Go on!"

There was nothing for it but to pass on; he stopped in front of a sawmill, a rice dealer, a wholesaler, and other places of business. But not a single one would hire him; they declined with their thanks.

"I guess there's less and less chance of earning anything in town. Well, there's no way around it, I can't get any money now but what the farmers will give me," Yang T'ien-ting thought as he sat with his eyes closed, rocking from side to side in the oxcart.

2

"Hello, Yang T'ien-ting! Glad to see you."

"Ah, is that you, A-sheng? Where are you going?" Yang T'ien-ting raised his head from the cart and saw the village farmer Wang Sheng looking his way ten paces ahead of him. Wang Sheng strode over two or three paces and stood waiting with his angular face expressionless.

"Been busy lately?" Now close up, Wang Sheng sprang lightly aboard the cart as he spoke and squatted down beside Yang T'ien-ting.

"Naw, just the opposite."

"Why, I always thought with this rig—the way I see it you've got it real easy. As long as you keep this ox walking, the money comes in. Right? It's a mighty good business."

"Humph, where'd you get that idea? You don't know how easy you farmers have it." With his head down, Yang T'ien-ting fell to thinking.

"Farmers work hard too, you know. By the way, is your cart free tomorrow?" asked Wang Sheng, thumping the frame.

"It sure is!" Struck all at once by a presentiment of good things to come, Yang T'ien-ting sat up. "You want to use it for something?"

Next morning Yang T'ien-ting got up at the first cockcrow and lit the candle in the lantern. Abruptly the pitch-black room had a nebulous light in it as if veiled in smoke. After getting a towel and tying it around his head, he took a quick look in the bed, where he saw A-mei and the children fast asleep with their arms flung wide. Yang T'ien-ting spoke hastily. "Be back soon."

The outside was black as if under a coating of coal tar. He went to the stable and, after feeding the ox a sheaf of dried grass, hitched it to the cart. Even though it was summer, a cold wind made him tuck his head under, and his bare feet kept getting wet. Every time the cart lurched as it rumbled on, the yellow light of the candle jerked spasmodically and all but went out. Scream-scream, the tightly packed gravel of the thoroughfare ground under the wheels with a screeching that echoed all the more dolefully in the dark.

When he reached the place they had agreed on, he saw that Wang Sheng had not yet arrived. This morning he was engaged to carry a load of bamboo baskets to farmers' market at Ming-ku. He stopped the cart and sat gazing at the sky.

There was no moon, and it was jet-black except for a handful of stars like the last stragglers of a retreat, twinkling wanly. From farm houses near the road came only the din of cockcrows answering each other; they struck the ear with a force that would punch through paper. "I guess the only one out for work this early would be somebody like me," Yang T'ien-ting thought. "When everyone else is sound asleep comfortably in their beds, I sit here and wait for a job." Then suddenly he fell into a somber mood. "Yet the wife calls me lazy and shiftless. Ah, I dunno," Yang T'ien-ting sighed. "What kind of a woman really is my wife? And besides, what kind of a world is it where a man can work so hard and no money comes in? Has God gone blind?" All at once, resenting a god that would not recognize him, a hard-working man, he was overcome with sorrow and chafing.

"He-ey! Is that you?"

A deep voice rang eerily out of the darkness. Abruptly Yang T'ien-ting's mood dissipated and he answered aloud that he had been waiting a long time. He stood up and raised the lantern high.

"I wonder what time it is."

It was Wang Sheng. He let a load of bamboo baskets he was shouldering fall with a thud next to the oxcart and hurriedly set to work untying the ropes. A girl and two boys, apparently of his family, were there with loads too. The girl wore a field hat and was working busily with her hands in the dim light of a lantern. The boys also worked, with their heads lowered.

"About two, I think. Just after the first cockcrow," Yang T'ien-ting replied as he hurried to load up the baskets. He felt a joy welling up in his throat of someone who has just made a find under his very nose, and he exerted himself with renewed spirit. The relief he felt in his heart—of a drowning man saved at the last moment—had him exclaiming his gratitude to Wang Sheng: "Thank you! Thank you!"

"Hey, you know, it's only poor people who help poor people after all." As he recalled how the people in town not only refused to hire him but went after him as they would a stray dog, Yang T'ien-ting barely kept his voice from trembling in his feeling of friendliness, and from time to time turned to look at the forty-year-old Wang Sheng.

"Come on, now! There's nothing to..." Wang Sheng started with a tone of denial, but soon seemed to sense what lay behind Yang T'ien-ting's words. "Look, at first I thought of carrying them there with my family, but that was never going to work because it was too far and all. A bike-trailer would have been the best, but nobody would rent me one. You see? And so I asked you."

It took less than ten minutes to load the baskets on the homely oxcart. After giving some instructions to his children and sending them home, Wang Sheng walked beside the oxcart.

"I wonder how long it will take now to reach the farmers' market," Wang Sheng asked constantly since they started walking, worried about the time it was taking.

"Well, it's roughly a little over three hours. We'll get there a little after five. Don't worry." From time to time Yang T'ien-ting looked back at his companion.

From side roads onto the dark thoroughfare two or three objects rumbled with lanterns swaying. Yang T'ien-ting soon suspected they were fellow oxcart drivers, because they usually started out this early in the morning in a body.

"Hello." As soon as each had a clear idea what the other one was, the other party called first, "You're out early, aren't you. Heading to Ming-ku?"

"Yeah, the farmers' market. It's been a while, hasn't it."

The creaking intensified as three or four oxcarts drew out in a line. Wang Sheng was struck with a feeling as if he were walking in some festive procession. The carter walking at the head of the line was discussing something in an undertone that sounded like an old man's voice.

Giving the ox a flick of the whip, Yang T'ien-ting said, "How's it going? Is business good?"

"Business! Ha, ha." A forty-year-old man right ahead turned around laughing. "You can tell by looking at me walking here at this time of night. If business was good, I'd be asleep at this hour."

Yes, of course. Me too, thought Yang T'ien-ting, desolate at heart.

"Let's not talk about that anymore. We know exactly how each of us is doing." The forty-year-old then quickened his step and began to sing in a loud hoarse voice:

All at once Ch'en San knew what he would do
To win the heart of pretty Miss Wu Niang....

His singing reverberated against the surrounding darkness. Somebody joined in with a nasal voice.

Yang T'ien-ting was in no condition to act like that. It surprised him to discover belatedly that his worries over making a living had rendered him so emotionally unfit to enjoy himself that he could not sing, and he was starting to feel envious of the men who were singing so resonantly.

The oxcars were proceeding down the center of the thoroughfare. All of a sudden the forty-year-old man stopped singing and pulled out a rod at the side of his cart. He broke from the line and drew up by the roadside. There, dimly illuminated by the lantern, stood a stone signpost. With a shout of "You son of a bitch!" he set to work battering the post down. But all it did was clang under the rod; no matter how hard he beat it, the stone never budged. "Damn it! Bastard!" he muttered bitterly.

"Here, lemme help." Another man sprang up beside him and came back immediately with a big rock he had found. They lifted it together and hurled it at the post with all their strength. When they did it again two or three times, the post fell over easily. "Take that, you bastard!" After flinging it into a paddy, they returned laughing loudly.

They would often pass those stone posts during the day, and each time they would feel a surge of rebelliousness boil up inside them. They always thought of knocking the things down; all they wanted was an opportunity. The posts carried the notice:

OXCARTS

KEEP TO SHOULDERS

The roadbed, leveled over with gravel, was reserved for the passage of motor vehicles.

"I pay taxes too, you know. The roads belong to everybody. Who says we can't go where motor vehicles go?" However, the one

who voiced those thoughts did not have the courage in broad daylight to drive where he was driving now; the more so for fear of the law, because he knew that if he was found carelessly driving in the center of the road, that in itself would mean a whack on the head in addition to a fine.

But then, even as the roadbeds gradually improved, the roadsides had become more difficult for oxcars to use. The yellow ground was rutted by the hard cart wheels and presented a dreadful maze of rugged furrows. As a result, instead of the carts going forward, the wheels sank in the deep ruts and put the drivers to no end of labor. Nevertheless, no repairs were ever made, and the roadsides turned into an increasingly acute ordeal of ridges and hollows.

"Are we supposed to use a road like this?" And early in the morning, when no one was abroad, they did not use such roads. They traversed the level roadbed, acting as if they owned it and making ruts as much as they pleased.

"Boy, would I like to see the sour pussies on those damn motorists! I'd say they're no match for a carter at this hour. Hah!" The forty-year-old whom Yang T'ien-ting had talked to before came up beside him and laughed resonantly.

"Yeah, those damn motorists, they really are a nasty bunch," agreed Yang T'ien-ting.

However uneducated they were, they knew that the reason why they had been pushed more and more into the depths of recession in the last few years was because of the pressure put on them by the damn motorists. "Damn machines! Sons of bitches! They're our worst enemies." Japanese things—hostility flared up in them from the bottom of their hearts.

Mingled with the creaking, the singing started up again, reverberating against the darkness. Everybody sang as he pleased. With the cocks crowing frequently here and there and dogs starting to bark from time to time, one got the feeling that dawn was at hand.

A human figure sprang out of a sugar cane field bordering the road. It happened right next to Wang Sheng, surprising him slightly so that he opened his eyes wide. But he recognized the man immediately as the driver of the lead oxcart. He had a sheaf of cane tops under his arm. He then trotted along briskly and could be seen in the faint lantern light stripping off the tender leaves and feeding them to the ox.

Wang Sheng whispered to Yang T'ien-ting walking beside him, "Hey, is it all right to cut cane tops like that? Wouldn't he be in for it if he got caught?"

"What do you mean? It's not like he was throwing them away," Yang T'ien-ting said, jerking his words out. "He's just feeding the ox. Besides, at this hour it's our world. Even if he cut them all down, who would be the wiser?" Once again it crossed Yang T'ien-ting's mind that he was the only one out working so early.

It was nearly 8:00 o'clock by the time he had finished work and left the farmers' market at Ming-ku. It was bright and clear, and the sun was baking the streets. "Ah, that saves my skin. Forty *sen*. Enough to buy rice for four or five days." Yang T'ien-ting did the calculations in his mind. Unaccountably he suffered no fatigue from lack of sleep; rather his mind was alive with the pure joy of having gotten some money and the anticipation of spending it.

"I guess the old woman can't give me a scolding for this!" He began to have a different feeling toward his wife, oddly light-hearted. He smiled again and again in the confidence that this time for sure he would fully convince his wife of how wrong she had been about him.

On the outskirts was a row of filthy buildings covered with dust. Boards and sheet-metal roofs were falling off, and chickens, turkeys, and geese milled noisily around the road, leaving their droppings behind. Here motor vehicles seldom approached. It was called Taiwan Town, and the officials had long since given up on it as an unhygienic Taiwanese slum.

Yang T'ien-ting was proceeding under the chinaberry trees along the road, smartening up the ox with flicks of the whip as he walked, when abruptly he came to a halt and said, "Why, hello!" For an instant his eyes flashed intense surprise. "What are you . . . ?"

"Hah! It's been a while. Well, well." The man who stood in front of him laughing as he waved his hands was Old Lin, an oxcart driver just like him. He had been much jailed for gambling, and Yang T'ien-ting had heard that he had been sent to prison for burglary. Thus the unexpected appearance of the man right in front of him made his surprise all the greater.

"I thought you were in the pen," said Yang T'ien-ting, shouting again.

"Oops!" Old Lin gave him a sharp look. He put his index finger over his lips in order to check Yang T'ien-ting's rashness, and then, looking all around him, he said in a low voice, "That's right. So you know too? I was there a while."

"A while?"

"Um, six months. I didn't commit murder, you know."

The two of them started walking away from the town toward the paddies. From a brickworks along a railroad track leaden black smoke clouded the air and made passers-by turn away their faces.

"Only six months? For stealing?" muttered Yang T'ien-ting as if in surprise, cocking his head. "Only six months! I thought two or three years."

"Hah— Well. By the way, you're still as serious as ever, eh?"

"Serious? This is what I am." Yang T'ien-ting made motions with his hands as if eating. Then he remembered: "I guess you went out too, eh?"

"Nope. I went out of business. Sold the ox. It just seems stupid. It's stupid to work these days. It's smarter to have a good time, let me tell you." Old Lin peered into Yang T'ien-ting's face and spoke each word distinctly.

"What are you saying?" Yang T'ien-ting looked with big round eyes.

"That's right. It's stupid to work. Look at this Japanese era. All the work where you can make a lot of money, they've taken it all away. Right? I say it's stupid for us to work." After flinging out those words, Old Lin leaped aboard the cart.

"But don't you have to fill your stomach?"

"Um. Even if I worked, I couldn't fill it. No sir." Old Lin muttered. "Rather than sweat and slave to earn forty or fifty *sen*, well, I'm better off hanging around and having a good time. I roll 'em once like this, you see, and get ten or twenty *yen*."

"Roll 'em?" Swallowing involuntarily, Yang T'ien-ting looked hard at his companion's mouth.

"Sure. And look, if you lose, you go out on a job one night and you're all right if you get away with something that's worth money—you're in the money again. If you're caught, it's a year or so. It's fine if you're supported all that time."

"Supported?" Yang T'ien-ting frowned.

"Um. They support you in the pen. Take me, for instance. When I can't make ends meet, I go there on purpose to get supported. There's really nothing to be afraid of. The guards are my friends now."

"Really? I always thought it was a very frightening place." Yang T'ien-ting blinked as if impressed by what he had heard.

Her hair disheveled, A-mei strode rapidly on. She had red circles around tear-swollen eyes, and her cheeks were wet. The younger child, frightened, was curled up small in his mother's arms.

"Anybody who heard will know."

Yang T'ien-ting walked behind her with bloodshot eyes. At a distance, now in view now out of sight, Mu-ch'un followed his parents, alternately looking from one to the other. On coming home from work, husband and wife had scuffled over money again, and since it went on for a long time, when at last Yang T'ien-ting lost patience, he had exploded all the more angrily.

"For the life of me, I can't understand why you're so unreasonable!"

Against the muscular man, the woman was as weak as tofu. After the outright pain she suffered at his hands, woman that she was, A-mei flushed deep red and screamed words that hit the man in his sore spot.

"Get out of here! The house is mine. Shiftless bastard, get out!"

Yang T'ien-ting had come to live with A-mei. A-mei owned the house.

"Hello." Some farmers called to them dubiously as they watched them from a paddy field.

"What's the matter? Not again?"

Yang T'ien-ting pretended he had not heard; he went head down without so much as glancing in the farmers' direction. A-mei gave nothing away either. The quarrels of this couple were so notorious in the village that everybody knew about them far and wide. Yang T'ien-ting, unsurprisingly, was disgusted at the situation and tried to avoid people he met.

The couple kept squabbling interminably. The little country road, only a meter across, wound sinuously through the paddies and ended at the house of the district supervisor. The couple entered that house.

The district supervisor had a fine house. A red tiled roof shone in the evening sun, and white plastered walls could be seen through the leaves of garden trees. At the doorway glowed two electric lights. The foremost landlord of the village, the supervisor had been performing his duties for nigh on ten years, by official preferment it was no exaggeration to say.

A well-nourished plump dog dashed out and barked vociferously. A-ch'eng gave a yell and huddled tightly against his mother. After listening to everything in detail that the couple had to say, the supervisor let a smile play on his wrinkled face of nearly sixty years, and said, "Ah. Um. Yes, I see. But you know, quarrels between husband and wife are made up again when people calm down. No need to worry. Once you go home, you'll forget all about it. Think about it."

"Nossir." Yang T'ien-ting continued energetically: "This woman doesn't even think I'm her husband. It doesn't make any difference how bad you tell her business is, she won't hear it. With her it's gambling or kept women. Does anybody else have a wife like this! She just told me to get out."

"Son of a bitch. You talk big! So that's all true, is it, what you say, and there's nothing to be done about it? Here I am, going through all this hardship— Just get out." A-mei shouted back at him immediately, sobbing convulsively.

"This matter is quite clear. What T'ien-ting says is true. At the present time we are in a recession. Besides, with an oxcart, well— The supervisor used a tone of voice suggesting that he understood everything, and looked down at the husband and wife. "I suppose life is very difficult. Which means that husband and wife. . . ." At that point the supervisor discoursed mightily on the need for harmony and cooperation between husband and wife.

"All I hear is recession, recession. Is it possible that you can work and not get any money? But whose business is it when we're short of rice to eat? The man doesn't care about his family. Son of a bitch." A-mei screamed, flailing her arms.

"You bitch! If—" With his manhood roused, he forgot where he was.

"Ah. Well. There, there. Yes, of course. There is some reason in your way of thinking. Sure, even in a recession, if you make a serious effort you'll have no trouble. To sum it up, that's the principle that sets the dividing line between getting rich and becoming a beggar. What do you think, T'ien-ting?" The supervisor directed a searching look at Yang T'ien-ting.

"If it's serious effort, I've already done more than my share. If you say that makes me unserious, then I don't know what serious is. Ah, I just don't know anymore!" Yang T'ien-ting groaned. "Besides that, now I'm told to get out. Is *that* supposed to be marriage!"

"You're the one. You don't have the character for marriage."

The supervisor was thinking: he spoke, expecting to settle the problem then and there of how he could get them to go home. "Well now, what about this? If you can't bring in any money, quit the oxcart business and both of you hire out as farmers. Then the husband won't be able to gamble or keep a woman, and the wife will know exactly how serious the husband is. Also the farmer's life is highly secure."

Yang T'ien-ting's eyes suddenly brightened. "Oh yes, I've been hoping for that. From what I see, there's no knowing how good the farmers have it." But then, losing heart for an instant, he continued: "But I'm so poor now I can't even do farming. You need a deposit to go into sharecropping, don't you?"

"Naturally. You don't stand a chance of sharecropping without a deposit!" laughed the supervisor.

Yang T'ien-ting heaved a long deep sigh. Then, as if suddenly reminded, he humbled himself before the supervisor and begged, "Please, Uncle, would you just let me go shares with you? Waive the deposit?"

On hearing this, the supervisor hemmed and hawed and put an expression on his face that said the request was preposterous. "Tsk. Don't talk nonsense. Such a thing is impossible. A waiver? Everything that goes on in the world runs on money."

The supervisor was not going to let them say anything more. He stood up from his chair and said with an abrupt change of tone, "You ought to go home now and think it over. You'll have it made up by the time you get home."

"No. I want this man out. The house belongs to me." A-mei persisted with childish stubbornness.

He had had enough. With an expression of anger that said as much, the supervisor glared at A-mei. "All right, stay here! 'Uncle' is not uncle to just you two, you know. I'm going to call the law, so you go ahead and talk to the law when they come. You can have as much jail rice as you want!"

Terrified, the couple returned to their thatched hovel. Yang T'ien-ting struck a match to light the lantern and, drawing up the chair in the corner, sat down on it; from his seat he quietly said to his wife lying on the bed, "Well, should I cook some rice?"

The children huddled small and meek in response to the mood they sensed in their parents. They were getting desperately hungry, but watched in silence. A-mei did not reply.

Her husband stiffened in surprise. But no, he would not quarrel anymore. Although Yang T'ien-ting felt a shock of disgust at this attitude his wife had taken, he controlled himself—it was the way

they were making a living, he told himself—and addressed her anew in a spirit of compromise. "I thought of something. This oxcart business doesn't work at all in the Japanese era. I've quarreled quite a lot with you, and it's all for that reason. So I'm thinking of taking up farming like the supervisor said. That would be better..."

A-mei did not move a muscle. Nevertheless, Yang T'ien-ting continued, watching her steadily. "I'll put away money! Until I get the deposit, you see. Then I'll sell off the cart and start farming. Right. Starting now. I'll save up plenty of money." A strange excitement and resolve heated up in his breast. He felt as if a fresh ray of hope, never experienced before, had gleamed forth.

"Humph." Only then did A-mei turn over and face him. Yang T'ien-ting sat bewildered as if he had been taken unawares. "Save up money? You mean save up your bones!"

Speaking gently to his abusive wife, Yang T'ien-ting asked, "Why?"

"Save when we don't even have enough money to keep us in food? Tell me, where are you going to get it from?"

"Well—" Yang T'ien-ting could see her point, but spoke out with a particular meaning in mind. "From 'there.' You think about it. It'll be for a while, but we should bear up and do it by means that will bring in money. Me in my way and you in yours."

"Means? You're always talking like a fool. If that brings in money, we shouldn't be suffering hardship. Why the whining? What are you getting at?" A-mei flounced over facing the wall.

Yang T'ien-ting stared at her for a while, but eventually rose limply to his feet and approached the bed. He felt diffident as he said to his wife, "it's only for a while. Mind you, it's all right for a while. It's all right to do it. I won't mind if it brings in money."

4

Always the summer days were hot, as if capped by a glowing iron plate.

"Look over there, that woman. What's she up to? It's A-mei." Without realizing it the community had started to spread rumors about the carter's family.

"That one, yeah—she's somebody now. Doing it."

"Yeah? Well—" People would look at each other and snicker.

"Of course. It brings in money, doesn't it? Does Yang T'ien-know, I wonder."

"Well, he hasn't been around lately. He's gone somewhere, they say. But as long as he's got ears to hear, I'd say he does." The speaker let a touch of aversion cross his scandalized brow. Four or five people were gathered in a knot straining their ears.

"Hey, how old do you suppose she is?" A young fellow broke in impetuously.

"Don't be a fool!" someone exclaimed.

"Who, you going? She's thirty years old, you know. Don't overdo it." This time there was a roar of laughter as if it was too funny to resist.

But A-mei would walk primly through the community, exchanging conversation with acquaintances, and never showed the slightest sign of anything being amiss. For her, money to keep body and soul together was more important than rumors. "Sons of bitches. They're the bastards who started the rumors." Sometimes she would get angry when she recollected one by one the men of the community she knew by sight who happened to show up in the town brothel. However, when she reminded herself that it was to earn money, to make a living, it ceased to matter for her, and she would think all she needed to do was pretend she did not hear them.

"Mommy—" the children would shout and cling to A-mei when she set foot in the door late at night, and afterwards kept watching their mother all the time sulkily. The children had noticed that their mother had begun to come home from town recently later in the night than ever. It made the children feel deserted and unhappy.

"Are you hungry? You must be sleepy." As she looked at the children's faces, unexpectedly her eyes began to water. Even after the lantern was extinguished and mother and children lay together in the pitch-dark bed, A-mei had her eyes opened wide. The sights of the back streets rose vividly in her mind.

Even though she was a woman of thirty, she lost her confidence the more disastrously because it was the first time, and fidgeted awkwardly. Whenever a man whom she did not know by sight clasped her brutally around the waist with all his strength, she all but burst into tears. However, when money was pressed into her hand, she thought, "Thank heaven!" and felt easier. And when she was on her way home after giving some money to the old woman who ran the house standing guard at the door, she was also stricken with a sense of remorse. Feeling as if she had done something terribly wrong, at the

same time she was overcome with an urge to lay the blame on her husband.

It had only been since the last few days that everything felt so dismal and dark. A-mei spoke sadly to her husband, who came home every two or three days. "We've got to do something. It's just horrible here. How can you, a man, be so shiftless?" She would turn stiffly away and end up in tears.

"Ah, it's money. If we only had money. Son of a bitch, it's money," yelled Yang T'ien-ting, shaking his sun-darkened head. "I went to haul a load of yams, see? But it's no good. The mountain road is steep, the ox is fagged out, the money comes to thirty *sen* or so. When you subtract what I ate there, it's not worthwhile." Husband and wife hung their heads.

"I can understand. I pity the children."

"The children are all alone until late at night. We've got to do something."

"Ah," Yang T'ien-ting sighed and lowered his gaze as if apologizing to his wife. "What about your money?" The money that the wife made by peddling her body was the lifeblood of the family.

"What are you saying? It isn't enough to cover what I owe the rice dealer. When the pineapple cannery shuts down in a few days, what am I going to do?"

"There's nothing we can do." Yang T'ien-ting had no idea what to do from then on in order to meet a situation in which they were as grievously oppressed no matter what they did, and simply looked blank.

It was four or five days after that that this family suffered a fatal wound such that it would never be able to rise again.

Puffs of white cloud looked like flecks of spittle cast against the blue sky. The heat had a will of its own, clinging to the skin in a sticky film. The mountains, pressing in as if to embrace one with both arms spread wide, showed red patches here and there on their flanks, which dazzled the eye even to blindness in the glare of the sun. Groves of bamboo, forests of acacias, fields of sugar cane—all lay in deep silence and reflected the fire-red sun in vigorous hues.

From the foot of the mountains ran a forest of trees all the way down the slope, until it met a stony river bordering paddies on the other side, where black drongos circled in the air and butterflies and dragonflies flitted close to the surface. In terraced fields, where a farmer's misstep could pitch him over the side, freshly planted rice

seedlings stood motionless. And through the paddy fields stretched a white road paved with gravel.

Trucks and bike-trailers rattled over its surface. Grimacing farmers walked along it, in single file or in groups of two or three, chatting. Some wore field hats and some held old-style umbrellas overhead, while others went bare-headed, hands clasped behind them, indifferent to the dripping sweat.

"What's the price today?" asked one of them in back.

"If you mean soy waste manure, it's jumped the hell up again. More than ten *sen*!" replied one walking ahead. At that, everyone listened agog, straining their ears intently.

"Fertilizer is dear, rice is cheap—I'm having a real hard time of it." The man cocked his head to one side.

On the side under the chinaberries, one of them, who was walking along gazing at the paddy fields from the road, pointed to the paddies as if calling the attention of his fellows. "There's a lot of stones in the wet fields here. Looks like there's not enough water, I'd say!" A companion nodded yes and cast a sharp eye on the place in order to examine it more carefully. And the talk, proceeding as it did from each speaker's experience, would not end with the subject of wet fields. A blue bus overtook them, its engine pounding, and passed on, leaving a cloud of dust and smoke in its wake spreading white in an opaque fog. The farmers averted their faces and walked on, out of the way of the cloud.

Seated in his cart, Yang T'ien-ting looked through barely opened lids. The ox plodded ahead mindlessly. The hard wheels sank into a rut from time to time, jolting him so violently that it hurt his head, which was leaning on the side of the cart frame. Nevertheless, he dozed on carelessly, bathed in the hot sunshine with one knee drawn up.

For Yang T'ien-ting had exhausted himself thinking. The oppression that had forced him to the wall over money and making a living was a torment that beset his mind constantly. What was worse, he had even let his wife descend into bestiality to open a way out, but it just would not work, he had to admit; it must be his karma from a former existence. After being disappointed in town, he had set his eye on the mountain communities and had gone about hiring himself out to haul yams. However, there was not a bit of money lying around in the mountains either. The present actuality held nothing for him that could fulfill his hopes. He had been out about ten days before starting on the road home that day, and now had eighty-five *sen* in his pocket as his net earnings for that period.

Eighty-five *sen* in ten days. How could he live on that? Whenever he thought of his wife and children, a gloomy feeling came over him. The whole thing was more than he could understand. Livelihood, money, wife, son of a bitch, oxcart—as these things forever recurred in his head, he thought he would rather be a nihilist, anything was better than this, and he dozed in the cart.

Definitely Yang T'ien-ting felt a presence; someone had approached. He opened his eyes wearily, and at the same moment started in surprise. With a sudden shout "Damn!" he leaped off the cart onto his feet, but it was too late. There, right in front of him, stood the law big as life, glaring at him with a threatening expression.

"You there! Mother fucker!"

It happened in a flash. No sooner did the thick arm of the law move than Yang T'ien-ting took a slap along the side of his head. He trembled as he felt a hot flush rush to his face.

"Don't you know you're not supposed to ride in the cart?" roared the officer with a red face.

"Uh, I—" As he was mumbling, at a loss for what to say, his cheek resounded with another slap.

"This oxcart, is it yours?" The officer withdrew a notebook and a lead pencil from his pocket and, bending down, promptly found the license and began to write.

"Off—officer, just this once could you—?" With an expression close to tears, Yang T'ien-ting assumed the manner of a suppliant begging the officer for mercy. For he had long known perfectly well what penalty he would suffer later if the license number was taken.

"Mother-fucking Chink!" After putting away his notebook and pencil, the officer glanced down at Yang T'ien-ting, who remained in an attitude of prayer, and gave him a lusty tongue-lashing in a great bellowing voice. Then he mounted his bicycle and rode off.

"Oh, this is bad luck! What am I going to do now?" As Yang T'ien-ting watched what was happening to him the thought of the penalty had overwhelmed him, and he was choked with worry.

Penalty two *yer*! It was on the next evening that the bailiff brought the notice, issued by the Nu-k'u substation. "Nine a.m. tomorrow. Understand?" the bailiff pointed out emphatically as he left.

"Tomorrow?" Yang T'ien-ting looked back at the bailiff in blank consternation. Destitute as he was at the moment, he could not

possibly pay a fine of two *yen* by tomorrow. He groaned. He gave way to wild panic.

That night he caught his wife when she came home on foot through the dark, and brought up the subject first thing. After a tedious explanation justifying himself, he looked up at his wife beseechingly and said, "Look, it's like I just told you. If you could manage to give me enough to make two *yen*—" A sense of inferiority that he lately harbored toward his wife made him take that attitude toward her in everything.

A-mei, who had just changed clothes, still had a faraway look on her face, which all of a sudden gave way to a surge of anger.

"Ah, no use." Yang T'ien-ting, grasping the situation, reacted with despair.

"Me, what do I know! I have no money." A-mei, for all her fury, actually used an unexpectedly cool tone in her reply. Her expression struck Yang T'ien-ting rather as mockery. He had never felt so much hatred for his wife as felt at that moment.

"Please, don't say that. I've got the law on me, and they'll give me another terrible time if I don't get moving. Please, I need help." Yang T'ien-ting controlled himself with an effort and assumed an ingratiating tone of voice so as to get on his wife's good side.

"You want help? Are you saying that you have ever given me any money? I've got no money, and you ask for help. What's the good of your asking?" Shouted A-mei angrily as she regarded her husband with a serious look.

"That's not so. What have you been doing in town? I've only got till tomorrow. Come on, do you understand?" Yang T'ien-ting said impatiently. "I've only got till tomorrow, so stop quarreling and give it to me. Are you saying you don't care if I get roughed up by the law?"

"What do I know! What makes you think I care what happens to a man like you! Here the family is suffering like this and all you can do is drowse along merrily in your cart. It's just talk when you say you think about the family." As if struck by the hopelessness of it all, she sighed deeply with tears in her eyes. She felt regret at the realization that her husband had deceived her when he said he would make a serious effort.

"I was a fool to go through hell because I thought it was for the family and to be selling myself like this." The regret grew, until at last A-mei wept.

As soon as he perceived the meaning that his wife was putting into words, Yang T'ien-ting underwent a reversion of attitude. "Bitch!" he fumed. "Now I know. You have a taste more for the men

in town than for me." He turned a grim countenance on his wife and got roughly to his feet. "What is two *yen* until tomorrow! An easy business. I don't need your help now. If this is all—" With that Yang T'ien-ting ran outside and vanished in the pitch-black darkness.

The sun had not yet risen, but the night was already dispelled in the fore dawn. After walking continuously all night, his legs felt dead tired and had hardened like rods. His coarse red skin was soaked in dew. His head was heavy with a ringing that had gone on throughout the night.

"Bitch, bitch, you just wait!" Yang T'ien-ting muttered as he walked, impelled to dark thoughts from the depths of his heart. For that gave him the greatest satisfaction.

From both ends of a shoulder pole hung a burlap bag stuffed like a sausage. The bags were packed full of geese. The geese honked jarringly from time to time and struggled to find relief from the pressure that half suffocated them. Their cries shattered the hushed cold air with loud echoes. At each outcry Yang T'ien-ting was assailed by a heart-wrenching shock of fear and confusion. He had reached the verge of panic as he felt his face turn pale and shrink.

"This is no good. Get hold of yourself. Calm down." Trembling with excitement, he continued to rebuke and arouse himself as he strode steadily on. "Up you go!" Forcing himself to keep calm, he had shifted the pole from one shoulder to the other and was cutting through a cane field.

The mountains floating black in the sky gradually grew light. Bamboo, acacias, plantains, sugar cane—all began to etch themselves in sharp outlines on the flanks of the mountains. Clouds like extended curtains of smoke gradually disappeared from the sky. As the mountains passed into the overspreading light, the roofs of Hsi-yi town came into view, shining bright. And in the blink of an eye one could clearly see smoke rising here and there. Presently houses lining the road, like a handful of match boxes kicked about, could be described in the distance.

Keeping himself under control as he started to tremble, Yang T'ien-ting stepped onto the road with a detached air. He walked to the market as if he had a fixed destination. From the market came the clamor of a boisterous concourse. Men from the mountains, farmers from the countryside were railing and shouting. Pineapples, plums, bamboo shoots, vegetables, firewood—so many products formed rows, inundating the market all the way to its entrance.

Yang T'ien-ting entered the market looking right and left as he walked. He had not taken many steps before he heard a voice call out from behind: "Hey!" He turned around, startled.

"Uh!" Abruptly he threw down the shoulder pole with its load and broke into a run. As he ran he could hear booted footsteps and the clank of metal coming closer and closer behind him, until all of a sudden he was seized by his clothing.

"Off—officer—"

That was the last thing he uttered, shouted as if it were his dying word, before he lost his mental grasp on everything that followed.

[First published in *Bungaku hyōron* (Literary Review), vol. 2, no. 1, Tokyo, January 1935.]

Lü He-jo (1914-1951), born in T'an-tzu, T'ai-chung, has been acclaimed the most talented Taiwanese writer. He had his masterpiece "Gyūsha" (The Oxcart) published in 1935 in the major journal *Bungaku hyōron* (Literary Review) and achieved instant fame. Most of his works use modernistic techniques of characterization to depict the dilemma of family life and misfortunes of women in the colonial and feudalistic society. He is believed to have been involved in a political incident in 1951 and has been missing ever since.

A Chance Encounter

Lung Ying-tsung

Translated by Stuart Sargent

On New Year's Day of 1941, passengers formed several lines on the platform at Taipei Station and waited expectantly for the 9:30 a.m. express out of the city. They stood there in compliance with the instruction, "Passengers shall form a line in order of their arrival," and presented the appearance of an equitable and new Transportation Morality, in keeping with the New System. Before long, with the loud cry of a wounded beast, the sooty-faced train leaped in, shaking its grey mane wildly.

Instantly the herd of passengers came sluggishly to life, then a commotion arose as several men carrying satchels and things broke away from the line, ran over to the windows of the train, and threw their luggage in. Immediately the orderly herd of passengers erupted like a muddy river bursting its banks, and, in a whirling cacophony, drove against the train with the force of a cyclone.

With that, all morality and courtesy were jettisoned—along with the elderly, the women, and the children.

Brawny lads proudly seated themselves with satisfied smiles. They had the air of triumph about them. In front of them stood elderly ladies and women holding babies, their faces showing no expression.

The train was still breathing violently, but soon quieted and assumed an attitude of repose.