CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tsao

DARK and heavy the mountains stood in a circle around the little valley plain where he had his childhood home. Naked rose the crags which had been swept by ancient landslides, and one night in midsummer, when the lightning flickered on all sides and the hot rain rushed down the slopes, a new piece of the slaty limestone mountain slid down into the river with a clattering roar.

Ah, the river! For the most part it was dry, with a few trickles of water, a curving band of boulders, and gravel. But in the season of rains the water might come as a rolling wall, dashing down through the valley, roaring and rumbling when the great fragments of rock were set in motion. Tsao's father tried to eke out the product of his poor little farm plot by cultivating a part of the river bed. For a couple of years he succeeded in reaping a scanty harvest from the stony gravel. But one summer, when the great rain was more fierce and persistent than usual, the protecting walls were torn away, and the stream ploughed itself a new furrow through the cultivated land. The water rose still higher and, when the twilight fell, Tsao had to go with his father and mother and the other children up into the little safety-hole at the foot of the mountain. Next day the water had subsided, the house was still standing in a bed of gravel, but the beasts were

gone, except for a few wild and frightened goats which turned up among the mountains during the next few days.

Another summer, when the second harvest was nearly ripe, the grasshoppers came like a heavy rain of great dark drops. For two days the devastation lasted, after which these creatures of destruction passed on down the valley in a shimmering cloud, but a winter of hunger grinned from the stripped fields at the poor farmfolk.

One winter night, when the whistling dust storm had extinguished moon and stars and had shrouded everything in its filthy murk, a roving band of brigands, for lack of better prey, descended on the little place.

Tsao thought he should die of fear as he crouched in a corner and stared at the inconceivable doings: his father beating his head on the ground and offering all he had if only his life was spared, and his mother biting and striking the strangers, till they finally made her be quiet and could do as they chose.

Yes, there were dark memories in Tsao's childhood. Yet there were many sunny mornings when he could go up with father to the mountains to gather brushwood or tend the sheep and goats all by himself and be away till late in the evening. He would then splash in the rills of the river bed, peeping at the schools of little fishes and the funny crabs. Sometimes he would hear the shrill call of the pheasants and catch sight of these magnificent birds in the

thickets of the valley slope, and sometimes his glance would follow a hart, which with its lithe strength would clear the crags in a few long leaps and be gone.

Often he would meet shepherd boys from other farmsteads farther down the river. They laughed together at the duels of the rams till they nearly choked, or they would catch dragon flies, grasshoppers and the nimble lizards, or they would survey with wonder the travelers who passed along the stream bed with tinkling bells, brightly caparisoned beasts, rich packs of merchandise and shining guns.

Thus the boy grew up in the sunny freedom of his poverty. And just as wild lilacs, yellow roses, pink spirea, and the showy wistaria vines bloom in these lonely valleys, the mysterious and lavish hand of nature transformed him into a youth of uncommon beauty. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his cinnamon-colored skin was firm and smooth, and the braids fell in flowing profusion over his brown back. His mouth was small with strong white teeth, the nose perhaps a little too boldly upturned, and between his delicately cut eyelids his glance was frank and pleasant.

As a boy he was betrothed to one of the little girls in a family farther down the river. He rarely saw her and had hardly ever spoken to her. But at the spring festival, when he went with his father to make the offering at the little mound of earth which was his grandfather's grave, he thought of the fact that he would be responsible for the offering when

his father was dead, and he pictured to himself a new little Tsao, who would in due time make sacrifice at *his* grave mound. And he planned to take up the strife with the river, build new walls and clear new fields.

But the little almond-eyed, turn-up-nosed maiden was never to realize her silent girlish dreams of sleeping on the same *k'ang* with the handsome boy.

Tsao was already a well-grown youth when the event took place which accidentally directed his life into a quite new course. One of his small brothers was sheep boy now, and Tsao went to work with his father. One day in harvest time, when they were bringing down great loads of wheat from the small plots on the opposite bank of the river, a mule caravan came up through the valley. Tsao saw at once that it was a postal convoy, easily recognizable by the marks on the big sacks which lay lashed on the pack saddles.

"You've a strong boy there," said the leader to Tsao's father. "I'm short a man; let him come with me."

Tsao's father perceived that this was a good opportunity for his son, and in a few minutes the matter was arranged, and Tsao, just as he was, had taken the road to a new destiny. His mother cried her courageous tears and his father looked anxiously up the valley every day, till finally a week later the postal convoy came back on its southern trip with Tsao in good condition, his mind enriched with many new impressions.

All the way up through Shansi to the capital, Taiyuanfu, he had gone day by day. Dead tired, he had come at evening to the small inns, yet he had to be up long before daybreak to fodder the beasts.

They had left many smaller cities behind them ere the convoy reached its goal, the capital, Taiyuanfu. Here Tsao saw many new things: fire-wagons, which could carry heavier loads than ten mules and with which people traveled five times faster than a horse could run; lightning lamps, which shone inside a little globe as clear as water and gave a light as bright as the sun without any smoke; foreign people, who had red hair, green eyes and funny clothes; and soldiers, who had nothing else to do but march in long rows with jolly high steps in an enclosed plot.

When the postal convoy was on its way south again with new loads, it chanced one day that a wagon came rolling speedily along the road, without the shining iron track of the fire-wagon but letting off smoke at the back in little ill-smelling puffs. The mules shied and dashed up against the walls of the ravine road. There was a soldier with a pistol in his belt on each step of the wagon, and the dust whirled up after it in a thick cloud.

The other muleteers told Tsao that the distinguished traveler in the wagon was Ta-shui, Yen Ta Jen, Yen Hsi Shan, the overlord of Shansi. Tsao did not understand all the titles they gave to this high potentate, but he listened with wonder to all they related about his remarkable qualities. The bandits that had ravaged here and there in Shansi when Yen Ta

Jen took control were now so completely rooted out that the Shansi folk asserted with pride there was not a single "tufei" in all the province. Opium, *ta-yen*, which was grown and smoked in other provinces, might not be found in Shansi on penalty of the severest punishment. Parents might no longer bind the little girls' feet, which were to grow as freely as those of the boys, and the *pien-tze* (pigtail) might not be worn on penalty of being cut off at the nearest police station. Much was said back and forth about Yen Ta Jen, but the prevailing opinion was that he was a good governor.

Back and forth, northward to Taiyuanfu and southward to the boundary station on the Hoang-ho, went the postal convoys of which Tsao was a member. He learned the cries by which the baggage animals were guided, he grew accustomed to tend the sores of the saddle-galled mules in the evening, and he sang as well as any one the songs which resound over the country roads. The rough pleasantries and racy abuse came easily to his tongue, and he had strong arms to strike when invectives no more sufficed. Once between two journeys he had even been in the prison at a *yamen* for insulting a policeman.

A high official on his way from Taiyuanfu to Sian in Shensi borrowed a number of baggage animals from the postal service, and Tsao found himself among the men who were sent with these animals. As soon as he had crossed the Yellow River at Tung-kuan, he found he had come to a land with other

customs. The men nearly all had pigtails, the girls had small feet. Tungkuan was full of places where men smoked opium, and along the road to Sian were fields which now in the early summer were full of blooming poppies. Bandits were said to be in the mountains on both sides of Tungkuan, both in Shensi and in Honan, and the soldiers were often no better than *tufeis*. The beasts with which Tsao came out of Shansi never returned there; they were taken by the troops and used for military transportation eastward to Kuanyintang in Honan. Tsao himself was here taken as a recruit and sent to the great military camp at Loyang to be drilled. He was soon marched further east to the capital of the province, Kaifeng, where he became a unit in the army of Governor Chao Ti. He learned accurate marching and the simple manual exercises. He liked sentry duty, for then he had his thoughts to himself, but at other times he went with the groups of soldiers along the city streets. After the rare and irregular pay days he went with his comrades to small shanties in back streets, where one might lie on a *k'ang* and smoke an opium pipe, while some little girl in trousers with a smooth fringe of hair on her forehead would sing or offer her favors for a small return. As a consequence of these pleasures Tsao had in his time to lie some months in a military hospital before he could once more stand in line. Meanwhile he often thought of his home among the slate mountains and wondered how he should ever be able to get back there.

When he came out of the hospital, he went to a

scribe, who was sitting in his little stand offering his services to any one unable to write, and with his help had a letter despatched to the schoolmaster back in his home village. He asked this man to speak to his father and say that Tsao wished to come home again and work in the fields as soon as he could get free of military service and secure enough money for the journey. There was never any answer from home, and Tsao wondered whether the scribe had cheated him and never sent the letter, though he had been well paid.

There was much talk about the various generals who were now the masters of China. It was said that Wu in Loyang was the bravest, that he knew every man in his army, that he went about dressed as a common soldier, and that his mere presence made his troops go unhesitatingly against an opposing force of thrice their strength. It was said that Feng, who had come as dictator to Sian, was also a strong man, but that he had embraced the faith of the foreigners, the teachings of Jesus, and many Chinese did not trust him. Far up in the north in Fengtien was another great general named Chang, who had great rich lands under him, great quantities of money, and many soldiers with fine new weapons.

Chao's troops, it was said, were as good as Wu's or Feng's or Chang's. But their guns were old, and Chao never came out to watch their manoeuvres.

The air had been full of rumors, till at last far up in the north war broke out between Wu and Chang.

It was said that Chao was a good friend of Chang's and that Wu and Feng would soon have to flee. Wu had gone north with a great quantity of railroad trains full of soldiers. Feng and his troops had come out of Sian and taken position at Chengchow, where the Kaifeng road crossed the railroad line from Peking to Hankow. Kaifeng was full of rumors, and the merchants buried their most precious wares, chiefly out of fear of the governor's own troops, it was said. But Chao stayed in his *yamen* and smoked opium, while the messengers came and went, telegrams rained in on the irresolute governor, and the whole city buzzed with gossip.

Most of Chao's troops lay near Chengchow to keep an eye on Feng, and one day the two armies broke loose at each other. They fought for two days with varying success, on the third Chao's men were in wild flight and Feng was on the march for Kaifeng.

The brigade to which Tsao belonged had been kept at Kaifeng as a bodyguard for the governor, and when he fled, the soldiers hastened to appropriate whatever of value was left in the *yamen* and to plunder a merchant or so on the way.

It was no longer an army but a disorganized mob of armed men who surrounded the fleeing governor, and it gradually became evident even to an ignorant soldier that the whole train were being hunted like lawless robbers by Feng's troops, who kept popping up from various quarters during the pursuit. Chao's own province was now treated as hostile territory by the beaten and fleeing soldiers. Peasants were robbed,

and the smoke of burning villages hung dark on the horizon behind the fugitives. The little group with whom Tsao went got off safe to a corner between the provinces of Honan, Anhui, Kiangsu and Shantung. Here they were taken into the following of the famous bandit chief, Sun Mei Yao, who operated in the mountain region between the four provinces and took full advantage of the governors' inability to unite on joint action for the suppression of the brigands.

Drifting with the stream, Tsao had now become a bandit, just as without his wish he had previously become a soldier. The robbers had their caves and fastnesses up in the mountains, whither they carried their booty and the rich men and women whom they had captured down in the villages in order to extort ransom from their families. Expeditions of soldiers were almost constantly on the hunt for the freebooters, who were compelled to shift ground night after night with their prisoners. It was a restless and weary life, and in winter it was biting cold in the earth huts and rocky caves up in the mountains.

When spring came, the pressure of the provincial troops increased. The robber band, which had previously operated in scattered order here and there in the mountains, was forced to unite at Paotzekou, an almost inaccessible mountain fastness with only one approach, which could be defended by a handful of resolute men. The troops hardly dared attempt to storm this robber fortress, but the situation was still

precarious, for the bandits crowded up on the mountain top had food for only a few days, and their nightly forays to the plain for provisions became constantly more dangerous. The brigands still had friends down in the villages and had an understanding with some of the besieging troops, but their position was well-nigh desperate.

It was then that Sun Mei Yao devised his masterstroke, which earned him a place among the great bandits of all time. About twenty-three kilometers from Paotzekou runs the great Tientsin-Pukow Railroad, which makes the connection between Peking and Shanghai and is one of the finest roads in China. Twice a week in each direction passes the so-called Blue Express, an elegant and completely modern through express.

How long Sun was preparing before he struck, only a little group of his trusted followers knew. At all events, it is worth noting that there were no Japanese on the unlucky train, also that it was very easy for the brigands to bring the swift express to a standstill. It was later surmised that Sun had friends not only among the surrounding soldiers and on the train, but that warnings of his intentions went out much further.

One dark April night Sun led a large band of his boys down from the fort on paths where no soldiers were visible. A couple of hundred robbers got down without hindrance to the railroad in a fairly short time. The north-bound Blue Express was stopped and all the passengers, among them twenty-six

foreigners, mostly Americans, were ordered to leave the train. A foreigner was shot down in the first confusion, and many passengers were forced at the pistol point to leave the train in their night clothes and without shoes. A hasty return was then made to the mountain. The half-dressed and wholly terrified travelers were forced to go between guards more than sixteen miles in the dark night over broken and stony paths. Some sank beside the road in sheer exhaustion but were forced by bayonet pricks and cudgel blows to continue.

Tsao had behind him a fat little foreigner, who groaned and swore to the great delight of the brigand lads as they thronged around the foreigners, eager to get a glimpse of this great and astonishing quarry. But in front of Tsao went a tall foreign woman, barefooted and incompletely dressed, but silent and without complaint, carrying her little daughter on her arm. Tsao wondered at this woman's free and lofty manner of walking, so unlike the uncertain wobbling and tripping of the Chinese. But then he saw in the darkness that the foreign woman tottered and was about to fall. He supported her and took the child from her arms. The little girl was asleep but soon awoke, roused by the rank perspiration from Tsao's dirty body. Terrified at finding herself in a stranger's arms, she began to cry, but the mother turned to her.

"Nellie, Nellie, be quiet. He is a good man."

"Ne li, Ne li," said Tsao with his most friendly intonation.

The child cried herself to sleep on Tsao's arm, and fearing she might be cold, he unbuttoned his blouse and laid the child against his breast. The mother turned from time to time to look after the child and without hesitation laid the dirty and ragged flap of Tsao's blouse over the little one's shoulder.

Driven by many a blow, drooping with fatigue, their feet bleeding pitifully, the foreigners came at dawn to the top of Paotzekou Mountain and sank down in a swoon, which for some hours caused them to forget the terrible experiences that had come upon them so suddenly in the night.

There was little of the occidental composure and dignity in the pale and half-clad beings who later in the day were gathered in the courtyard of the fort for a first inspection, while the bandits sat around making their mocking comments. This first dreadful day was followed by many more, and the days became weeks, while the beards of the men grew and their ragged clothes were filled with vermin and dirt. The little band of unfortunates was composed of many weak and timid individuals, together with a few strong and heroic men and women who kept up their courage and arranged the life of the foreign colony as well as they could with what means the bandits afforded. Little Nellie played with a couple of Chinese children who had come among the captured Chinese, and Tsao, her helper of the first night, became her friend, getting her many tidbits. Both captives and robbers used to gather in a ring around the playing children to watch amid jest and laughter

how the little American girl tyrannized over her big *tufei*.

Tsao did not know much more than his little charge as to the negotiations of the messengers who came and went on the mountain. At last an enormously fat foreigner, An Lao Yeh,[1] came up the mountain. He talked Chinese as well as a native and soon got on friendly terms with Sun and his lieutenants.

One day when summer had come with its oppressive heat, the order was given that the women and children were to leave the mountain, and Tsao offered to carry little Nellie down to the place where the robbers were to release their captives. From that time it became a standing joke on Tsao that at the time of parting he gave an old umbrella to Nellie's mother so that she and the child should not suffer from the sunlight.

When at length all the prisoners were released, Sun attained his object. The Chinese authorities had been forced not only to pay a substantial ransom for the captives, but to receive Sun and his men into fitting positions in the army. Sun and some of his leading men became generals; others according to their deserts were officers of various ranks, while the general mass, among them Tsao, became privates.

So Tsao drifted on the stream of life like a little insignificant straw.

He slept in barracks and drilled or did sentry duty.

[1] Roy Anderson, an American brought up in China, who rendered great service in procuring the release of the foreigners.

His pay was rarely forthcoming and then often in paper money of little value.

Then began a new war between Wu and Chang. Tsao was among the ill-equipped troops gathered from many quarters who were placed under Wu's command, and up at Shan Hai Kuan on a narrow strip of shore between mountain and sea he had his baptism of fire. Tsao's regiment lay in trenches and sought to hold back the advance of Chang's well-equipped men, who with abundant artillery, trench mortars, machine guns and rifle fire were trying to break Wu's line of defense.

A shell fragment had torn Tsao's right side, but no one in the trenches had time to think of him. A handful of men held the position as twilight fell over the battlefield.

In the darkness the Fengtien troops attacked. One of their men, shot through the stomach, fell beside Tsao, and these two, enemies for a day but sons of the same great people, lay side by side, while the nocturnal battle receded as far as Wu's men had been driven back.

The Fengtien man let Tsao drink out of his canteen. Moaning, the two young soldiers looked at each other. As they lay there under the cold bright stars, they did not understand why fate had flung them together. Long before morning could bring them warmth and help they were both dead.