

Going to School

Kuan Hua



THIS is a story with pictures telling of a youngster in a North China mountain village. Named Iron Boy, this eight-year-old was barred from school by poverty during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-45). His mother had saved up a hundred eggs for his school tuition, but all were seized by the landlord's lackey. Then Iron Boy's grandfather, a hunter, sold furs and got money for the school fees, but still the despotic landlord threw the boy, and even the teacher who defended him, out of the school.

The village was later liberated by the Communist-led Eighth Route Army, and the people's power was set up there. The village poor overthrew the traitor landlord and themselves set up a school where Iron Boy and other children like him could study.

The story shows how cruelly the traitor landlord oppressed and exploited the peasants, and warmly praises Iron Boy for his bravery in struggling against this enemy.

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*Going to
School*

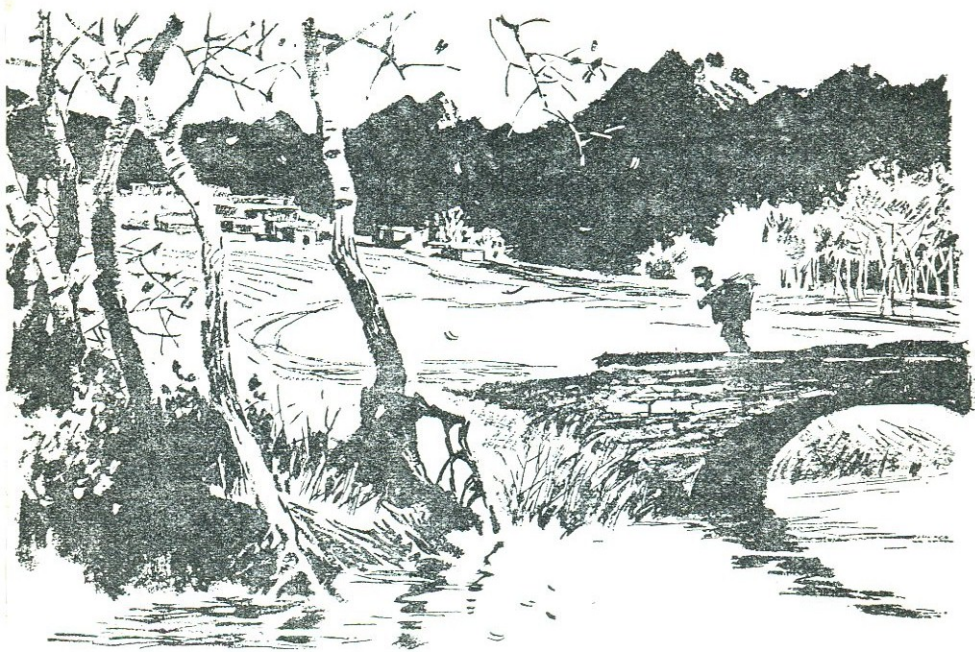
Kuan Hua

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BEFORE China was liberated, a lad by the name of Iron Boy lived in Lunghu Village on the banks of the Chiangchun River. He was eight, an age when children of all the better off families were already in school.

His father, Ku Pei-hsiung, sweated as a seasonal labourer for the village landlords and rich peasants.

His granddad, Ku Ta-peng, hunted in the mountains for a living and often had to brave bitter weather for many days on end. Even so the family went hungry more often than not. Where was there money for Iron Boy's schooling?

Still the boy had his heart set on going to school and constantly pleaded with his parents till one day his father was exasperated and gave him a cuff in the face. After that Iron Boy went about his usual chores, gathering firewood and wild greens from the fields with his mother.

One day when they were passing the village school, the sound of reading aloud fascinated him and he stopped to listen. Iron Boy gripped his mother's arm in his small, thin ones and held her there, pressing his face against her patched sleeve and blinking his eyes to fight back the tears. He didn't say anything for a long time.

The mother knew how much her son wanted to go to school and sighed a deep, sad sigh.

"I know you envy others going to school," said Iron Boy's mother, patting him on the head. "But hasn't our speckled hen started laying? I'll keep the eggs, and when there are a hundred I'll sell them and send you to school."



After that Iron Boy could think of nothing but the hen and the eggs it would lay. He climbed up on a big chest several times a day to count the eggs already in a paper box on the window-sill. In the daytime he caught grasshoppers to feed his precious hen, and when evening fell he never failed to shut it safely in its coop, placing bricks and then a big stone against the door so that no weasel could get at it.

His day was made when it laid an egg. But when it did not he went about with a long face, pouting the whole day and not even stroking its feathers.



One night Iron Boy laughed out loud in his sleep. When his mother asked him what he was laughing about he awoke and whispered in her ear as if disclosing a secret, "I've just counted the eggs. There are a hundred now. I'll be able to go to school tomorrow!"

"What are you saying, silly boy?" the boy's mother corrected him. "There were only forty-nine when we counted them last night."

Then, when she heard him sob, she drew him close to her and said, "Cheer up! The day will



surely come when we'll sell the eggs and you'll go to school!"

AT last there were really one hundred eggs! Iron

Boy lined a basket with a big handful of straw to prepare the eggs for market. He would go with his mother right after breakfast. The boy's heart was on fire as he gulped down his bowl of vegetable gruel, picked up the basket, now heavy with the eggs, and urged his mother to hurry.

Suddenly, Dong! Dong! came the ominous din of the gong of the village puppet "Peace Preservation Council." Kao Hai-chen, the steward of the council chief and township head Tai Jung-hou, was barking out orders in the street. Notorious for his crimes, he was dubbed Second King of Hell by the people.

"Fork over your grain and cash!" the lackey began yelling. "Don't you know it's collecting time! The Japanese Imperial Army orders. . . ."

Iron Boy's mother was washing dishes when she heard the order. A shiver ran down her spine like cold water dashed over her. Her face was pale as

she rushed into the inner room and shouted to Iron Boy, "Didn't you hear Second King of Hell? They've come for grain. Quick! Hide the eggs!" She swiftly took the basket from her son's hand and placed it inside the chest.

"What if he looks in the chest?" cried Iron Boy.

The mother felt there was indeed a great possibility of that and hastened to find another hiding place. She put the basket in a large jar behind the door, then decided the jar was not safe either, as it looked like a grain jar. After asking Iron Boy to close the fence gate she hurried with the basket to Grandad's east room where she hid it behind the old man's pile of tattered bedding.

Going into the central room, she saw Second King of Hell, gong in hand, already inside the yard. Like a wolf he padded, leaning forward, one grasping hand extended, fairly snarling. In shiny black satin gown, grey felt hat, black worsted woollen shoes and trouser legs bound in wide silk bands, he glowered as he burst in, a puppet soldier at his heels.

"How dare you shut the gate when we come grain collecting! D'ya think you can barricade the place and shut out Master Kao?" Then, turning to Iron Boy's mother, he let out a curse. "You told your boy to shut the gate when you should

have met us there with your grain. Are you going to be stubborn about the grain collection?"

"We don't even have grain to eat," replied Iron Boy's mother icily. "How can we have any to spare?" As she said this she held a bowl of the vegetable gruel under his nose, which only made him snort and glare harder at her.

"None of your nonsense!" he roared. "Why did you shut the gate in broad daylight if you haven't any grain?"

"I closed the gate so my hen wouldn't get out," shouted Iron Boy in reply. "What's wrong with that?"

The landlord's lackey glared at Iron Boy and was about to give him a trouncing when he hit on another idea. Rolling his eyes, he ordered the puppet soldier: "Well, if there's no grain, let's take the hen!"

At this, Iron Boy raced off to save his precious hen. But he could not stop the soldier, try as he might, and the hen flapped about the yard cackling like mad. What if he lost it! Without that hen how long could he stay in school?

The hen was cornered now and in danger of being caught! Iron Boy ran over and cried, "I'll catch it. The hen knows me!"



Out of breath and unable to catch the hen, the soldier was glad to stop scrambling for it.

"That's more like it," said he. "We'll pardon your crime of closing the gate on us if you catch the hen for us."

Iron Boy caught the hen easily, but threw it into the air before the puppet could lay his hands on it. The hen spread its wings and flew over the wall to a neighbour's yard, leaving the lackey fuming.

"Give it to us, you brat!" blustered he as Iron Boy grinned broadly.

Then Iron Boy noticed Second King of Hell making off with the basket of eggs, his mother running after him.

"Thief! Put those eggs down!" she demanded. "They're all we have towards the boy's schooling."

When she tried to take the basket from him he roared at her, glaring, and shoved her to the floor.

Iron Boy was furious. "Mother! My eggs!" he exclaimed, dashing after the pilferer to argue things out. But he was restrained by the puppet, who grabbed him by the arm. The boy tried to wriggle himself free but could not, and his eggs were being robbed from him right under his nose. Iron Boy sank his teeth into the puppet's hand,

which was on his rifle, causing the man to cry out in pain.

“Let go, you little devil, or I’ll shoot you!” The puppet gave the boy a blow on the head that made him reel and almost fall. Everything went dark before his eyes. His mother clasped him to her breast and the puppet took this chance to make his getaway.



SECOND King of Hell, Kao Hai-chen, continued his grain collecting in the village, going to every family with the puppet soldier while still cursing the Kus. "So, Ku Ta-peng thinks he's going to send his grandson to school. A toad greedy for swan meat — he's dreaming! How does he think they're going to pay for it!"

When Grandad Ku returned from his hunting and heard what Kao had said, he was terribly angry. Still puffing with rage, he took two wolf skins to the market and sold them to pay for his grandson's school fees.

Home from the market, Grandad Ku said to the boy's mother, "You can send him to school now!" Then leaving the money on the *kang* bed, the old man went out again hunting.

Iron Boy's mother washed his face and hands. Then she mended his badly worn shirt and trousers and helped him put them on. "Obey your teacher and study hard," she said. "It's not easy for poor



people like us to go to school. We're very hard pressed as it is. Grandad had to go again to the

mountains to hunt before even catching his breath. Daddy works like an ox for the landlord and we hardly ever see him.”

Iron Boy understood all this. After his mother saw him off at the door, he smiled back at her, then ran off happily to school.

No sooner had Iron Boy entered the schoolyard than his friends asked, “Where are you going, Iron Boy?”

“To the classroom!” he replied in the highest of spirits. As he was explaining, he suddenly bumped into someone he soon realized was the traitor landlord Tai’s son. The boy was deliberately blocking Iron Boy’s way, his legs spread wide apart. Iron Boy tried going around this “young master,” but the boy stepped sidewise to block his way again. Iron Boy detoured once more, and once more the landlord’s son rushed up and blocked his way.

For some time the two stood eyeing each other — Tai challenging, Iron Boy breathless with rage. Then suddenly Iron Boy shouted, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Tai gave Iron Boy a hard push as he yelled back, “Go away! My father says the likes of you are not allowed here!”

But Iron Boy was not giving in. Taking a step forward, he asked, "Does the school belong to you?" Arms akimbo and throwing out his chest, Iron Boy stared hard at Tai. The boy didn't know what to say and only blinked his red, puffy eyes madly. Then he suddenly gave Iron Boy an ugly punch in the chest and darted off. But Iron Boy was quicker and grabbed him by the collar, tripped him with his foot and gave him a shove. The "young master" was down on the ground to the great amusement of the children looking on.

Tai scrambled to his feet and, without bothering to wipe the dirt from his face, took one step nearer to his opponent. "You dare to hit me, eh?" he bawled. "Think you can get away with it because your grandpa was a Yi Ho Tuan* bandit chief!"

"Yi Ho Tuan fought the imperialists. But your father is a Japanese imperialist stooge!" countered Iron Boy lustily. The two hunched over like billy-goats fixing for a fight, eye to eye, nose to nose, circling about. The children clapped their hands and cheered, most of them for Iron Boy, but a few for the landlord's son.

* A popular anti-imperialist armed force known in the West as the "Boxers," organized in North China at the end of the 19th century.



Tai tried copying Iron Boy's tactics to throw him, but missed and himself landed flat on the ground instead.

The pupils burst into another gale of laughter. Some clapped their hands and shouted, "Do it again! Do it again!"

Defeated twice, Tai felt quite disgraced and picked up a piece of tile lying nearby and hurled it at Iron

Boy. But Iron Boy dodged and it hit a girl squarely on the head, drawing blood. The girl screamed and an elder pupil ran to report to the teacher.

The teacher, Chai Yunsheng, was new at the school, having just graduated from a village teachers' training school. Pale, his hair shaggy, he wore





an old gown of blue cotton. Teacher Chai hurried to the schoolyard when he learned of the accident. While binding up the girl's gashed forehead, he asked what had happened and, on learning, gave Tai a good scolding.

But Teacher Chai had scarcely turned his back to leave when the culprit darted up and seized Iron Boy by the collar so that he had to separate them again. Still Tai rushed forward for yet another bout, shouting and swearing. Provoked, the teacher pushed him aside and took Iron Boy by the hand to lead him into the classroom, leaving his assailant to run off home snivelling.

Teacher Chai had just rung the bell for class to begin and the pupils were lining up to go into the classroom when a man strode into the schoolyard looking like thunder.

“Hang the bird that builds its nest over the head of Master Tai!” he bellowed. “My master gives him his rice bowl and he still dares to annoy the young master! Doesn’t bow in gratitude before his benefactor but has the cheek to turn on him instead!”

Iron Boy warned his teacher with a tug at his sleeve. “Second King of Hell’s coming! Look out, he’ll get after you.”

“I’m not afraid,” replied Teacher Chai. But the man, who was Kao Hai-chen, the landlord’s steward, spit at Iron Boy and shook his fist at him. “Pauper! You’ve got no money for the ‘Peace Preservation Council’ but you’ve got money to go to school. Get out! Master Tai forbids any stinking beggar to step inside this schoolyard.”

“Is it your school?” asked Iron Boy, taking a step towards the steward. “If it is, why don’t you move it into the Tai courtyard?”

The steward raised his fist to strike Iron Boy and Teacher Chai stepped in front of the boy to shield

him. Giving the man a stern look, the teacher demanded, "What did you come here for anyway?"

The steward returned with a malicious glance. "What do you think I came here for? I'm out for blood! You mistreated my young master, didn't you?"

Iron Boy could stand it no longer. Springing out from behind his teacher he shouted, "Mistreated? It was your 'young master' who hit the girl with the tile!"

The teacher restrained Iron Boy, at the same time questioning the steward, "Tell us! Who is it you're cursing out anyway?"

"You know who I'm cursing out!" bellowed the steward, looking daggers at the school teacher as though to express his hatred for the poor of the whole world. "You helped this whelp of the Ku family to mistreat my young master, didn't you?"

Teacher Chai's anger burst all bounds. His eyes flashing fire, he shouted, "Mind you, this is a school! Teaching a pupil how to behave is a teacher's duty whether he's a 'young master' or not! And you. What kind of person are you anyway? Brazen enough to malign the teacher and disrupt our school." Teacher Chai pointed to the door with trembling fingers and ordered the steward out.



“So —” the steward’s voice broke off. He rolled up his sleeves, blinked his eyes and gave a “humph!” “This should put you in your place!” And he aimed a blow at the teacher’s face,

Teacher Chai seized the landlord's steward by the arm and gave him a good shove, a thing the bootlicker never expected. For though the villagers hated him heartily, no one had so far dared lay a finger on him. Swearing and ranting, he made another lunge for the teacher. Before he could reach him, however, Iron Boy scooped up a handful of sand and threw it into the attacker's bulging eyes and open mouth, stopping him in his tracks. Dabbing at his eyes and mouth, he stumbled off, spitting and raving, "This is outrageous! Simply outrageous! You'd better watch out!"

Teacher Chai was fired from his job and ordered to leave the village that very day. Tai the landlord further ordered that no one was allowed to see him off, nor was he permitted the use of a cart to carry his belongings. Undaunted, Teacher Chai strapped his bed-roll to his back and set out.

He hadn't gone far, however, when he heard his name called from behind. Iron Boy was running towards him in his only, thin shirt and patched pants though it was already mid-autumn and quite cold. The boy threw his arms around his teacher and looked up into his eyes sadly, tears coursing down his pinched cheeks. "Some day, can I go to school, teacher?" he sobbed.

“After the Eighth Route Army liberates the village, all children like you will go to school,” the teacher replied, stroking the boy’s head. Then he walked away through the fields.

Iron Boy stood for some time gazing at the retreating figure, frosty grass beneath his feet and grey clouds above, till his teacher gradually vanished in the distance.

Faintly, from afar, came the boom of big guns. “When will the Eighth Route Army come and free us?” said Iron Boy to himself.

4

IT was a wet, misty autumn. Every night a thick layer of frost covered the roofs, walls, fences, the bare limbs of trees and green winter wheat fields. At sunrise and sunset crimson and gold clouds stretched from the horizon, tinging the banks of the Chiangchun River.

As the booming of the guns went on throughout the autumn, children clapped their hands and sang:

*The sky is red,
The earth's red too.
Red flags, red horses, red-tasselled spears,
The Eighth Routers are coming to wipe out the
invaders!*

In people's homes, in the streets and on the river banks excited people, their faces radiant and their eyes shining with hope, were exchanging the heart-warming news: "The Eighth Routers will soon be here!"

One night the advance detachment of an Eighth Route Army unit arrived in Lunghu Village. Iron Boy's father and grandfather and other grown-ups



collected grain and fuel and helped arrange lodging for the people's troops.

Villagers were busy working the bellows to boil water and chopping vegetables for the dumplings they would make for the army men. The whole village was a hive of activity.

Iron Boy helped his mother sweep the floor and dust the table and benches. Then he took their rarely-used kerosene lamp from the window-sill, blew his breath into the chimney and polished it till it shone. When the lamp was lit the room became quite bright.

Iron Boy also set up the bean mill for his mother. Earlier in the day, on hearing that the Eighth Route Army was coming, she had put a measure of soya beans to soak and was going to grind them now to make fresh beancurd with sauce for the people's own army men.

Sitting on a low stool, the mother turned the mill with one hand while feeding in the beans with the other. Bending forward and back with each turn, she was bothered by a wisp of hair that kept falling into her eyes. She shook it once more into place with a jerk of her head, then called out, "Iron Boy, feed the beans into the mill for me!"

But Iron Boy had no time for that. Hearing the sound of running feet and people's voices on the

street, he shouted, "The Eighth Routers have come!" and rushed out.

A smile crept over his mother's face as she said to herself, "See how happy he is! When the Eighth Route Army comes he'll be able to go to school!"

After a while Iron Boy came running back with a paper lantern on which were pasted in red the words "Welcome the Eighth Route Army!" Holding it high for his mother to see, he asked with a broad smile, "Have we got any candles? Aunt Ma-nao gave me this lantern."

"When did we ever have a candle? Silly boy!" answered his mother while turning the mill. "And besides, why do you have to light a lantern in such bright moonlight?"

Iron Boy stamped his foot, a bit put out at having this cold water thrown on his enthusiasm. He rushed over to their next-door neighbour's and asked the granny there for a stub of candle. Back on the street with his lantern lighted, he met other children also carrying red or green paper lanterns. All ran together with the grown-ups to the edge of the village.

When Iron Boy's grandpa saw the children, he shouted warmly: "Hasn't the advance unit said that we must keep the arrival of the troops a secret? Why all the celebration?"





So Iron Boy and the others went home at once with their lanterns. His was hung from the beam of their house where its cheery light gave the room a festive look.

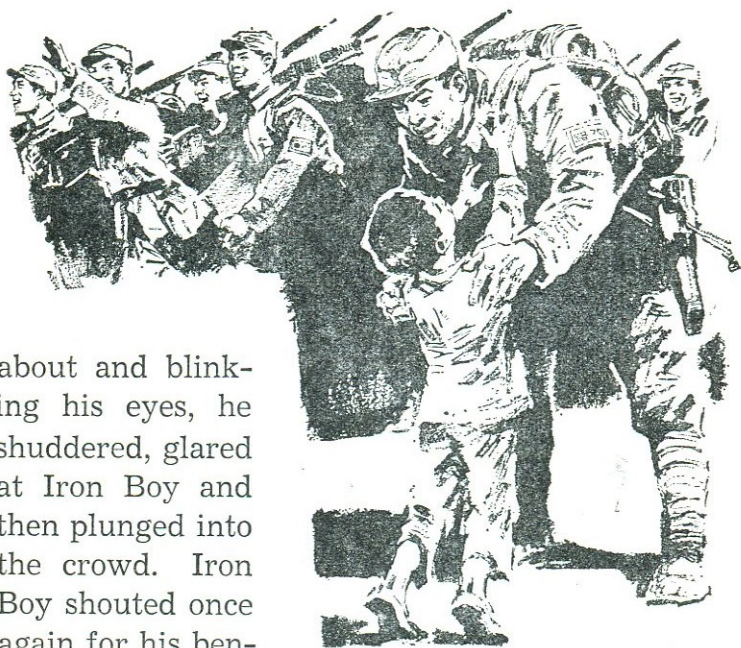
A big crowd had gathered at the edge of the village, where they stood straining their eyes in the direction of the Chiangchun River bridge over which their troops were expected.

Iron Boy pranced about through the crowd, looking up from time to time to ask, "Are they coming? Are they coming?"

An old man was rubbing his eyes to see better when someone bumped into him. "Who did that?" he cried. "Why are you shoving me?"

It was Iron Boy. "I can go to school now!" he cried out, grinning. "I can go to school now!"

It happened that the landlord Tai's young son was standing near enough to hear him. Peeping



about and blinking his eyes, he shuddered, glared at Iron Boy and then plunged into the crowd. Iron Boy shouted once again for his benefit: "I can go to school now!"

The moon had misted over, and the people gazed anxiously into the distance till their eyes smarted.

"We have waited for them so long," someone said. "If they were only here right now!"

Then suddenly a villager cried out, "Look! They're coming!"

Iron Boy opened a way for himself through the crowd with his head and was soon beside his grand-

father. Grasping his hand, the boy asked in a loud voice, "Where are they? I can't see them!"

Grandad hoisted Iron Boy onto his shoulders. Then he saw the bayonets glistening on the road between the reeds in the river and the trees on the other side, which looked like two dark islands in the dim moonlight. Jumping down from his grandfather's shoulders, Iron Boy ran with the villagers to meet the approaching army men.

Wisps of cloud floated high above, illuminated by the bluish moonlight so that they appeared bright and translucent. The people hurried forward to grasp the hands of the fighters, greeting them like their own family members.

Iron Boy strode along beside a fighter, clasping his hand tightly. "Have you brought any school books with you, Eighth Route uncle?" he asked.

The army man was puzzling over the question when another fighter shouted from behind, "Hello there, is it Iron Boy?" Iron Boy ran up to the fighter, who was in grey uniform with a leather belt, trouser legs secured from the knee down, and a pistol and leather pouch on his bandoleer. His bright dark eyes beneath his army cap were on Iron Boy, and he was smiling.



“Don’t you know me?” the man asked. It was Teacher Chai! Iron Boy rushed up and embraced his teacher, then tried to pull him out of the ranks. “Come home with me! Mother has prepared soft beancurd with sauce for you!”

“Don’t tug on me like that!” said Teacher Chai good-naturedly. “The Eighth Route Army is a disciplined army and one can’t fall out just whenever he feels like it!”

Teacher Chai lifted Iron Boy onto his shoulders, from where he waved his hands and shouted, “The Eighth Route Army’s come! Poor people’s children can go to school now!”



5

AFTER Teacher Chai had been driven out of the village by the landlord, he joined the Eighth Route Army and became a company literacy class instructor. Then, when Lunghu Village was liberated, the leadership assigned him to work in the peasant movement group, as he had teaching experience in the village.

This group was working together with local cadres to bring down the village "Peace Preservation Council" and build a new political power. Iron Boy's grandfather was elected village head. Patriotic youth, women and children were organized into associations. The traitor Tai and his henchman Kao were denounced at a public meeting.

So the people were busy and had not yet gotten around to setting up the children's primary school. Iron Boy and his friends had many times asked Teacher Chai, "Didn't you say that we could go to school after the Eighth Route Army came?"

Teacher Chai would answer with a smile: "First things must come first. How can poor children go to school if the people's political power isn't firmly established in the village? Poor people can have their own school only when they have their own political power."

Grandad Ku, the village head, said with a flourish, "The Children's Corps is having drill. Go and join them. Then you can gather firewood. We'll consider setting up the school after we've discussed the problem of reducing rent and interest."

Teacher Chai pointed to Iron Boy's stomach as he reinforced the old man's words: "That's right! How can you go to school on an empty stomach?" Iron Boy agreed that it would be difficult and stopped teasing.

One morning when Iron Boy and a neighbour girl were gathering firewood near the bridge over the Chiangchun River, they saw a man leave the village. He was dressed in a brown felt skull-cap

and black quilted jacket with a gunny sack tied at the waist, and had something under his arm.

Iron Boy shaded his eyes with his hand, squinting to see who it was. "Isn't it Teacher Chai?" he exclaimed. "But why is he dressed like that?"

The girl didn't think it was Teacher Chai, for how could he leave when he was so busy getting the school started?

The man stopped on the road beyond wheat fields covered with snow and called out, "Iron Boy, is this the road to Eagle's Nest Peak?"

The man was Teacher Chai all right. Iron Boy put down his basket and shouted as he ran towards him, "Teacher Chai, what are you going there for? Will you come back again?"

"Of course!" Teacher Chai replied. Then Iron Boy told exactly how to get to Eagle's Nest Peak:

"Cross the bridge and you're on the road to Flying Horse Peak. Then walk west till you come to a large pine at the mountain pass. From there go north over several hills and you're there. Let me lead the way. I was there hunting with my grandfather last spring."

Heading for the bridge, Teacher Chai said to Iron Boy: "You gather firewood. I can find the way myself."



Iron Boy stood blinking for a while, then suddenly ran up to Teacher Chai, threw his arms around him and protested, "I won't let you go!" When, surprised, Teacher Chai asked why, Iron Boy clung to him and pouted. "You'll go back to the Army and forget all about the school."

Teacher Chai held up the sack he was carrying for the boy to see, and whispered to him. "I'm going to get textbooks for you. Classes begin tomorrow. When you're in school my job will be done."

His eyes sparkling with joy, Iron Boy cocked his head and asked, "Are you sure about the school?"

Teacher Chai reassured Iron Boy and then strode away. He crossed the bridge and, turning, saw Iron Boy whispering something to the neighbour girl. Soon the girl's merry laugh reached him over the snow-bound wilderness as he went on his way along the mountain path to Flying Horse Peak.

In the far distance guns boomed and machine-guns rattled, but all was quiet in the adjacent snow-clad woods.

A flock of tom-tits, their long tails jerking, flew over noisily and alighted in the trees, knocking the silvery snow-flakes from the branches so that they danced in the wind and reflected rainbow colours in the sunshine.



The tom-tits twittered and peeped about, their bright eyes like jet. Then suddenly they flew from the treetops and circled over the towering precipices as though frightened.

Alerted by this unusual behaviour of the birds, Teacher Chai stopped to see what had caused it. He knew that beyond the wood to the northeast was an enemy strongpoint, that on a hilltop three kilometres to the northwest they had a blockhouse; and between the strongpoint and the blockhouse was a long trench they had dug from east to west. Had enemy troops come out of their fortifications?

Teacher Chai hid behind a large rock and some rushes. Seven dispirited puppet soldiers armed with rifles were patrolling the trench, walking towards the blockhouse on the hill. So, it was these puppet soldiers going on sentry that had startled the tom-tits!

When the puppet soldiers were some distance away, Teacher Chai crossed the trench and went down into a ravine. Then, climbing the steep slope by holding onto bushes and vines, he reached the top of the hill. The enemy could not see him there for the dense underbrush. He had spread his gunny sack on a rock and sat down to catch his breath when suddenly there was a rustle behind him. He turned to look but saw nothing. Was it just the wind in the grass? But it was followed by a suppressed giggle. Strange! He looked all around, then went to the edge of the cliff to look below. Nothing! Puzzled, he went back and sat down on the rock.

Again he heard the grass stir. The sound seemed to come from behind another big rock. Cautiously he went over. There was Iron Boy crouching in the rushes, his basket empty and both hands over his mouth, trying his best not to laugh out loud.



“What are you doing here?” Teacher Chai asked the boy anxiously.

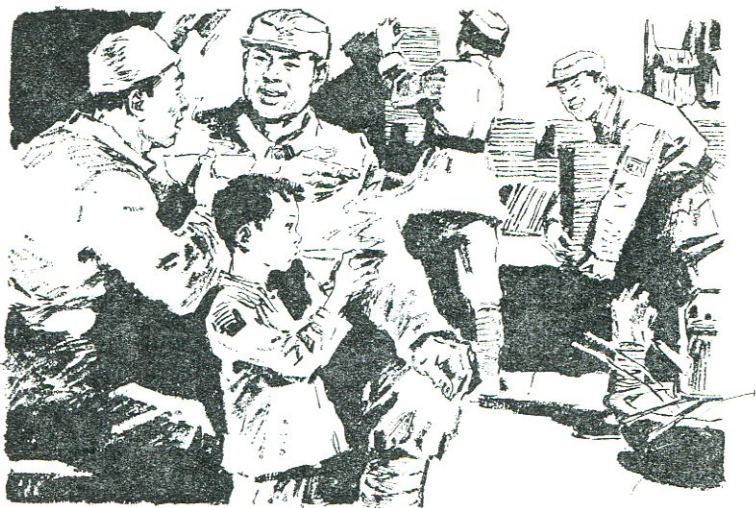
But Iron Boy only smiled and answered proudly, “I’ve come to help you carry the books.”

“Your mother will worry when you don’t turn up for lunch,” reminded Teacher Chai seriously. “Be a good boy and go home.”

But Iron Boy blinked his eyes mischievously as he replied that he had already asked the neighbour girl to tell his mother that he had gone on an errand with Teacher Chai.

The teacher looked back at the hills and the trench he had just crossed. Then he drew a deep breath and said to the boy, “So, since you’ve already come this far, I can’t send you back now by yourself. Come along with me!”

Iron Boy was overjoyed. Putting his basket over his shoulder, he led the way for Teacher Chai so that they arrived at Eagle’s Nest Peak by noon.



6

THE Eighth Route Army printshop was located on the northern face of Eagle's Nest Peak in a spacious well-hidden cave overgrown with reeds.

Iron Boy now bent low and followed his teacher into the cave by holding on to the back of his teacher's jacket. They soon passed through a gap in the rocks and, after plodding on for some dis-



tance, saw the glimmer of a light through another gap. They went in. "Oh!" exclaimed Iron Boy, for he suddenly found himself in a cave the size of three small rooms and well lighted with candles. Large, smooth slabs of stone served as table tops; smaller slabs as benches. The place was humming with activity. Several Eighth Route Army men were writing; some were cutting stencils by hand. One was bending over a hand-operated mimeograph, running an inked roller over the stencil, while others were cutting, folding and stapling the printed sheets. All warmly greeted Teacher Chai and Iron Boy.

There were so many interesting things around that Iron Boy hardly knew which way to look. The air was filled with the sweet smell of hay, a thick layer of which carpeted the cave floor. Army blankets, overcoats, knapsacks, pistols and hand grenades lay about. In the centre of the cave a big kettle boiled briskly over a fire. Bowls and chopsticks were placed beside the fire.

An Eighth Route Armyman handed Teacher Chai and Iron Boy each a bowl of steaming hot water which Iron Boy sipped slowly as he surveyed the people there. All the men and women fighters were in padded army uniform, a few wore spectacles. One of the latter was the mimeograph operator, a young woman with a leather belt at her waist. Her army cap was pushed back, revealing bobbed hair. Carefully running the inked roller over the frame, she was turning out copies sheet by sheet.

Iron Boy put down his bowl and went over to her. His hands clasped behind his back like a grown-up, he carefully examined the roller and exclaimed, "So you're just getting around to printing for us!"

The young army woman was amused and said with a chuckle, "Oh, yours were finished several days ago. See, they're all there!"

Iron Boy looked and, to his great delight, discovered a big pile of books neatly stacked beside the stone cave wall. He threw his arms around the books and shouted, "We've got our school books! We've got our school books!"

Teacher Chai, who was talking with one of the soldiers, turned and said to him, "Don't shout so!"

Iron Boy went back to the young woman and asked, happy beyond words, "Did you do all the printing work yourself?"

The young woman smiled, put down her roller and started chatting with him. Iron Boy kept his eyes on the pile of books, licking his lips like a hungry kitten. She took a book from the stone slab table and handed it to him. Iron Boy held it up, grinning broadly. Then he turned to page one and begged her to read it to him.

"Let's go and eat," called out Teacher Chai. Iron Boy tucked the book inside his shirt and pressed it to his chest, pleasantly conscious of the smell of the new ink.

The meal was millet with salted turnip and fresh scallion, with a bowl of hot boiled water. By the time they had finished it, the comrades had packed the books into Teacher Chai's sack. Iron Boy insisted on carrying some of the books, so the woman



soldier took a few from the sack and placed them in his basket between thick layers of hay.

Balancing the weight of the remaining books in the sack, Teacher Chai flung it over his shoulder and started off, Iron Boy following close behind, his basket on his back.

Iron Boy couldn't resist reaching inside his shirt every now and then to make sure his book was still there. "What does the book say, teacher?" he would ask. "Won't you let me carry the sack for a while?"

Patting Iron Boy on the shoulder, Teacher Chai teased him: "Get on with you, my boy! You won't do badly if we don't end up with me carrying you on my back!"

Midway of the mountain trail they rested for a while before heading for the trench leading to the enemy blockhouse. Iron Boy, his eyes riveted on the blockhouse, missed his footing and slid and rolled down into a ditch where, crouched at the bottom, he burst into a ripple of laughter.

Teacher Chai went down to Iron Boy's rescue and was relieved to find him unhurt. Replacing the hay and books in the basket, he said firmly, "We're not out on a lark! Just run into the enemy and you'll clear out of here in a hurry!"



Suddenly there came the faint sound of footsteps on the gravel path. Teacher Chai snapped, "Hurry!" and climbed out of the ditch, pulling Iron Boy after him.

"Let's leave this place, quick," said the boy.

"Steady!" directed Teacher Chai, motioning, for he had spotted the puppet soldiers' flat-topped army caps and the tips of their rifles moving towards them from across the trench. "If we run, it's a dead giveaway. Don't get excited. Just walk on as usual."

Winking at Iron Boy, Teacher Chai took him by the hand and led him behind a side ridge. They crouched low there and cautiously raised their heads to peep through the bushes. Seven or eight puppet soldiers with rifles slung over their shoulders were standing on the slope of the ditch looking around. One of them said to another, "Funny! I swear I saw a man and a boy go down into the ditch. But I don't see them now."

"Must be peasants cutting firewood," explained another. "Let's go. It's time to change sentry."

"No," said the first. "The captain said we're to challenge everybody, even ordinary peasants. The boy could be an Eighth Route Army guide and the man a liaison officer."

"They can't be far away. Let's look for them," a third puppet soldier suggested, and started glancing around.

Teacher Chai and Iron Boy heard everything. They exchanged looks and then swiftly moved away under cover of the ridge, climbing two hills in quick succession. Exhausted and out of breath, Iron Boy threw himself down on a clump of grass and pleaded, "Let's rest a while. The enemy can't find us here."

Teacher Chai wiped the sweat from his face and was just about to relax when he was suddenly aware of puppet soldiers running towards them. Swinging the boy onto his back, he dashed off.

"Halt, or we'll shoot," yelled a puppet soldier.

A rifle shot rang out. But the direction was reversed, and it was aimed at the enemy. Two more shots followed.

Teacher Chai looked and saw a man with his rifle trained on the frightened puppets.

"The Eighth Route's on East Hill! Let's go get 'em!" shouted the puppets, and ran off in that direction while Teacher Chai and Iron Boy proceeded to Flying Horse Peak.

Village head Ku, who was Iron Boy's grandfather, was watching them from a rock on the hill,



his thick white beard blown by the breeze and his hunting gun slung over the shoulder. "So, it was you who fired those shots!" Chai exclaimed as he walked up to the old man.



"I was watching you all along," Grandad Ku replied, laughing heartily. "I didn't call out. They would have spotted me. I fired from East Hill on purpose to draw them there."

That evening, by the light of a kerosene lamp, Iron Boy started on the first lesson in his new textbook. "Mum," he asked, "can you read it?"

His mother looked at the words on the page but could not read even one. Iron Boy threw his arms around his mother's neck and asked her proudly, "Mum, wouldn't you like to go to school with us tomorrow morning?"

"We grown-ups have our own," she replied just as proudly. "The women's literacy class starts tomorrow evening."

Hurried footsteps interrupted the conversation. Iron Boy's father, who had joined the Youth Anti-Japanese National Salvation Vanguard Corps, was home for supper after a meeting.

"Daddy, can you read this book for me?" Iron Boy asked.

His father had never been to school but had picked up a few words from his younger comrades



in the Vanguard Corps. Bending over the book and fixing his eyes on one line, he read out haltingly but clearly: "The Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao are the liberators of the Chinese people!"



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