

朱西甯：冶金者

The Men Who Smelt Gold

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ACROSS THE brickyard, rouged with a year-long accumulation of brick dust, a shadow fell two or three times as long as the smoke-stack itself. The dull brown, tinged with purple, stretched over row on staggered row of unfired bricks two feet high, undulating like the parapet symbol used by cartographers to indicate city-walls.

The Betel Kid stood at the rear of the open truck, his huge hands in their rough cotton workman's gloves resting on his hips, his eyes turned away from the long shadow of the smoke-stack, helplessly regarding the sun which was already slanting westward.

"Break it up, break it up, will ya, Goddam" For what seemed to be the hundredth time, the Betel Kid opened his big mouth, blood-red from chewing betel nut, and roared without effect.

There, rolling on the ground just below the truck's tail-board, two guys were wrestling, covered with dirty brick-red dust.

Once again Ah Lo had the upper hand; he sat astride the belly of the guy named Jia, one hand clutching the man's throat and the other gripping tightly his skinny goat's nose. "Spit it out, spit it out for me, you mother fucker. So you still won't spit it out . . . ?" He kept increasing the pressure on Jia.

Ah Lo was taller and had a longer reach than the other, so Jia was at a disadvantage; while Ah Lo could pin him down, he could not get his arms around Ah Lo.

"All right, you guys, break it up for my sake, will ya? I'll treat you both" The Betel Kid got rid of a mouthful of crimson spit and tried a soft approach.

Eager to finish loading the brick truck, he had not noticed how the fight started. He had thought the two were squabbling over some food and were wrestling half in fun, one of them trying to hook his fingers into the other's mouth. But then he saw blood oozing out of Jia's mouth and the fight turned serious, the faces of both men becoming ugly and neither pulling any punches. Ah Lo's jersey, the one with the Western medicine ad "Sercon"¹ printed on it, was torn straight down the middle, the two sides flapping like a Chinese blouse, and now there was no stopping the two. ". . . . I'll see if you have the guts to swallow it. That is, if you're not afraid to die of gold poisoning" All along Ah Lo had been doing the shouting and cursing. The Jia fellow kept his mouth shut tight; there'd not been a peep from him.

Finally, the Betel Kid figured out what the two were fighting about. First it looked like just another case of welching in a game of "four-color cards",² though it was not clear who had done the welching. But Ah Lo was a giant of a man, and the Kid thought he'd be above welching on a measly gambling debt; and even if the other had cheated him the debt could hardly have been worth a fight to the death like this. "Goddam it, ya punk," the Betel Kid started cursing at him. "Ah Lo, you sonavabitch! Don't be so small!"

He spat at him through his betel-red mouth, like some no-good bum reviling people by "spewing blood" on them.

He could curse all he wanted, but when it came to gold he knew that he for one was not likely to be lucky enough to ever touch any again, after just that once, when he was getting himself a

¹ Patent medicines of pseudo-Western origin usually adopt brand-names that sound like transliterations of English words, at the same time carrying some felicitous meaning in Chinese. In this case, "Sercon" is *ssu-erh-k'ang*, or "give you health."

² A popular game among the common folk in Taiwan, played somewhat like mah-jongg or rummy. The cards come in four colors — red, black, blue, and yellow — and are named after the pieces in Chinese chess.

wife and had to scrape up enough for a betrothal gift.

Five layers of brick had already been loaded on the truck; one more layer and they would be off. And these two guys had to pick just this time to tangle. It was enough to make you mad. "All right, all right, how about if I take both of you down to the Circle tonight. Would ya do me a favor and get on with the loading? I'll tell ya what, we'll go over to Pao-an Street,³ and the treat'll be on me!—Goddam it, it's not as though it was the first time I picked up the tab"

The Betel Kid stood there on the truck platform, talking for nobody's benefit but his own. He could promise anything, whether or not he intended to make good, but they paid no attention to him. He was again driven to shouting: "If ya don't stop, watch out, I'll go get the boss" But even as he shouted, he realized that he was wasting his breath as long as he didn't match his words with action. He started to leave the truck and walk onto the gangplank. But he had hardly got one foot on it, when he backed up again. He thought to himself, all this cursing and threatening and soft-soaping—like his yelling and egging them on a while ago when the two first started at each other—was so much hot air, a waste of breath. If he really wanted to get the attention of these two punks why not just conk each of them with a brick, right on the noggin. Thrown from the truck's height, this would stop the argument better than any amount of talk.

Jia was pinned flat on his back. His arms were too short to grab any vital part of Ah Lo's body so all he could do was pound his fists against Ah Lo's ribs. And they were beating a fierce tattoo on Ah Lo, those fists, and that's no joke either. Jia's face was dirty and red, but it was hard to say whether the color came from the brick dust, his bleeding mouth or Ah Lo's grip on his throat. What was really wild was that the plastic helmet Ah Lo was wearing sat on his head all through the fight without being shaken loose; one couldn't

imagine how it was fastened so securely.

Hard to guess, also, how much gold was worth that much of a life-and-death struggle, but since the object was small enough to be held in the mouth it sure couldn't be a gold bracelet.

"Go ahead and fight," the Betel Kid began to yell again. "Fight, if you have the guts. I'll back the truck up and flatten you two jerks like pancakes."

But Old Doggie hadn't come back yet.

That sonavabitch Old Doggie. No sooner had the truck been backed into place than he disappeared behind the brick kiln looking for the women workers. That guy was drawn to broads like a fly is to blood. Not ashamed of it either, even jokes about it, calling his wife a fly-swatter. "I'll go find him," the Betel Kid muttered to himself.

He had barely stepped on to the gangplank, when he looked again at the two below. Shit, something serious could come out of this. Don't know where he got it from, but Jia now had hold of a broken piece of brick and was hammering with it on Ah Lo's rib-cage, like knocking it against a mud wall. He might very well go a step further and hit at Ah Lo's head with it. But Ah Lo continued to sit on top of Jia, pitting his fleshy trunk against the hard brickbat. He was paying back as good as he received, his hands, like giant pincers, closing over Jia's neck in an iron grip until the guy's face turned blue and his eyeballs started rolling upwards.

"Break it up! Break it up!" The Betel Kid waved his fists in the air, while a shock went through his body as though he and not Ah Lo was receiving the blows. He must pull the two guys apart or one of them would be killed.

Then a different thought struck the Kid—and all of a sudden his head was full of gold, gold gold

HIS GLANCE hurriedly swept the wide expanse of the brickyard. Not a man in sight; the only sign of life was the vehicles on the near side of the highway flying by one after another, as though hurrying to flee the scorching sun in the West, wheels rolling along the road's smooth tar surface with a steady hum.

The Betel Kid picked up a brick, took aim,

³The Circle, or *Yuan Huan*, is an area in the city of Taipei dominated by a circular structure housing small restaurants and food stalls, where the people throng for after-work or midnight snacks. Pao-an Street is a low-class red-light district.



There, rolling on the ground just below the truck's tailboard, two guys were wrestling.

and as though he was trying to kill a lizard, let fly at the plastic helmet Ah Lo was wearing.

In that brief, agitated moment the Betel Kid heard himself say, Nice hit, nice hit, it takes a sharp eye and quick hands to pull these two rotten eggs apart.

But it didn't have the result he expected. Ah Lo didn't fall over at the blow, only his helmet was knocked askew. The Betel Kid frantically picked up two more bricks. By the time Ah Lo did fall over alongside Jia, the bricks had already left his hand and landed on Jia's bare forehead. There was nothing at all to soften the blow and, dammit, who would have expected his aim to be so good.

Still not a soul was to be seen in the brickyard. A bit rattled, the Betel Kid leapt off the truck's tailboard, not bothering to use the gang-plank.

The two lay close together on the ground almost like a man and woman going to bed together in one of those little movies, one of them curling on the side and hugging the other, his face bashfully hidden under the helmet. There was a hole in the helmet, but the torn piece was still

attached to it so the helmet could be taped up as good as new.

Jia was stretched out with his face up and his mouth open, like a fool's, revealing a row of four shiny gold teeth.

The Betel Kid pulled off one of his rough cotton gloves and shoved it in a side-pocket, crooked two of his fingers and dug them into the foolish open mouth. There was blood streaming down Jia's forehead and out his nostrils. The Kid started to get panicky, but his fingers kept struggling with Jia's tongue, a great big thing blocking the mouth. It took a lot of doing to push the tongue aside so he could start poking around. Everywhere he poked there was something hard, how could a man have so many teeth, for God's sake. Finally, wedged between the gums and the cheek, he found a ring, a lucky thing it had not been swallowed.

"Help, somebody's getting killed"

The Betel Kid stood up and started yelling, almost tripping over Ah Lo's body. The stumble jarred his mind clear, and he realized it wasn't the time yet to call for help.

For right there in his palm rested the ring, shiny from the saliva that clung to it, while a tiny air bubble burst. It was a new ring, fresh from the jewelry shop—someone had probably stolen it from his wife to settle a gambling debt, the no-good rat.

The Betel Kid shoved the ring into a pocket of his khaki pants but immediately pulled it out again, remembering that this pocket had a hole in it. One time he had two paper matchbooks in that pocket. Though the weather was hot and dry he didn't know how the matches caught fire, but there had been a loud noise and he had to beat frantically against his pants before the fire was put out. Of course it burned a great big hole in his pants pocket, and since he wasn't wearing any underpants a large patch of skin and hair on his thigh was singed as well.

He stashed away the ring in a different pocket, and without knowing why he hurriedly started to drag the two bodies, trying to pull them somewhat away from the truck as though this would clear him of any connection with them. As he was struggling with Ah Lo's body, he knocked the gangplank from the rear of the truck, making a big racket and scaring himself stiff. In his excitement he backed into a pile of bricks, some of which fell on one of his heels hurting him badly. These must have been the bricks that Ah Lo was carrying up the gangplank when the quarrel first started and that he had put down in order to fight. The Betel Kid hopped around, nursing his hurt foot; he could see that he was making a mess of things.

The two guys must have been knocked out cold since their bodies were still limp, but they couldn't have been killed so easily. Ah Lo was heavy like a banyan tree felled by a typhoon. The Kid took Ah Lo's long legs under his arms, one on each side, and started dragging him, leaning backwards to get more leverage. But although the banyan tree had fallen it still seemed to have tough roots deep in the soil; he pulled and tugged for what seemed an eternity but only succeeded in spinning the body this way and that, without moving it very far from where it had fallen. "Frig it, I give up" He freed his hands, felt the ring through his pants, and pulled his gloves back on vehemently as though Ah Lo's lack of coopera-

tion had angered him. He jumped back onto the truck, cupped his hands to his mouth and hollered as loudly as he could toward the mammoth double-tiered tile kiln that looked like a government middle-school building. The hollering brought on a coughing spell and he momentarily lost his voice.

He looked down from the truck and saw that the immediate area was strewn with debris as a result of his exertions. From the way things looked, he thought it would be impossible for anyone to tell what had really happened. It'll be simple to explain: the two had fought each other tooth and nail and made all this mess, he said aloud to himself.

FROM BEHIND the big tile kiln people started running.

"Someone's got killed, someone's got killed" hollered the Betel Kid, his arms flapping up and down.

But it suddenly occurred to him that if the two were going at each other how come they were both knocked out cold? It didn't make sense. With this thought, he became excited again.

"Who would have thought, ai, ai, really, who would have thought" He was breathing hard, and could not help trembling from a guilty conscience no matter how he tried. "That's it Isn't it? The two of them"

"Did the gangplank fall down?" the foreman from the kiln asked looking up at the Kid and at the same time grabbing hold of Jia's wrist to feel his pulse.

"Ai, ai, the gangplank slipped," the Betel Kid seized at the proffered straw. "That's just the way it was, Ah Lo was carrying this load of brick, see? got as far as here, just one more step, ai, ai, then he fell over, bricks and all"

"And Ah Tu was standing right below, and got knocked down, is that it?"

The Betel Kid nearly fell over himself nodding assent. "That's it, all right, that's it" Now he knew this Jia fellow is called Ah Tu.

"Never mind the questions," someone was yelling. "Get them to a hospital quick."

All of a sudden a large crowd had gathered, the women workers clucking with fright, the men

vying with each other suggesting what to do.

A look around the brickyard showed that in addition to the truck there was only a dirty black iron ox.⁴ The Betel Kid felt much relieved now; touching yet again what was in his pants pocket, he felt a great urgency to get away from this troubled spot. He pulled the truck-driver from the clustered bystanders and whispered into his ear: "Don't let them use the truck no matter what. You know, if we miss the delivery, it'll be charged against you, Old Doggie."

The truck-driver blinked his eyes, looking first at his truck, then at the crowd of people.

"Go on, start the truck!" the Betel Kid pushed and prodded Old Doggie.

"Can't very well just run out. After all, these fellows were helping us load."

"Dammit, you got a truck-load of bricks. Think you can drive to the hospital with them two guys and all them bricks?"

The truck-driver licked his lips, pulled a towel from his rear pocket and started mopping his jaw as though it helped him think.

"Goddam, you're chicken!"

⁴ Nickname for a small farm tractor.

"Goddam ya'self."

But the truck-driver's mopping did produce an idea, and he raced over to the highway to stop a passing car. His years as a driver had taught him what kind of car to stop, and how to signal—his thumb up and motioning sideways.

THERE WAS no time to waste putting on the rest of the full six loads of bricks. The Betel Kid clambered into the cab beside the driver. Just as the truck was pulling away he heard shouts about Ah Lo coming to.

For the moment the Betel Kid couldn't decide what this would mean for him, good or bad.

The truck was hot as a furnace from standing in the sun, but when they swung onto the road and got going there was a draft and it cooled off some.

"You think we would be liable in any way, supposin' someone was killed?"

"Didn't know until today," the Betel Kid shouted over the loud rattle of the engine, "you Old Doggie, that you're such a chicken, Goddam"

Probability No. 1

THE LITTLE plastic tags were lined up there so close together they looked like fish scales. The Betel Kid craned his neck counting until it hurt; finally he located the name of Yin Ah Lo, in Room 332. The clerk at the desk told him Room 332 was on the third floor.

When he reached the top of the stairs he saw three sick-rooms in a row. The one in the middle, directly facing the landing, was No. 332.

The Betel Kid paused outside the door-way and quickly composed the expression on his face. He looked at the sick beds one by one. There were eight of them altogether, two of which were vacant, the white sheets on them spread out neatly. The other six were occupied, five of the patients lying flat on their backs. The sixth was sitting up turned halfway, eating something from a bowl on a small bedside table. It was a man with

a heavy beard, his long neck stretching out through the collarless hospital gown like that of a greedy donkey.

The scene left the Betel Kid puzzled, his red-stained mouth open. He had looked at all six faces, but didn't recognize Ah Lo's among them. He backed up a step or two and mistrustfully looked again at the room number. There was no mistake. He remembered the boss at the brick factory telling him clearly that Ah Lo was registered in this hospital. The man had even unloaded some sob stuff on him, hoping to get something from the contracting firm he worked for to help pay the medical expenses. What, he had said, did a big firm like that care about two or three thousand dollars when every job it contracted for ran to hundreds of thousands, even a million dollars? On the other hand, money wasn't easy for him to

come by. With bricks selling for forty-three cents apiece, this unfortunate accident would cost him at least three thousand bricks. But what was the use of telling all this to him, the Betel Kid? "Look, why don't you go talk to my boss direct" That was the only thing he could say to fend the guy off, but of course it was the truth, too. Before coming over to pay a visit, he had got it straight in his mind that Ah Lo would be in the hospital for two more days but that everything was all right with him. The name had been written clear enough on that piece of fish scale. And he remembered the room number all the way up those staircases, repeating to himself: 332, 332 couldn't be any mistake. Maybe Ah Lo'd been discharged already, for he couldn't be eligible for the "Room of Eternal Rest", could he?—if anybody had been hit hard it was the other fellow, Jia Ah Tu. Those two new bricks, right smack on the forehead. Hell, the guy was still out cold when they were pulling away in the truck. Of the two, Ah Lo was much tougher. Besides, he had on his plastic helmet and it must have cushioned the blow somewhat. But as it turned out, the Jia fellow was just fixed up with some kind of medicine and sent home. More than half his face was purple, they said, from the stuff they smeared on him.

Perhaps he had got the room number wrong, after all. The Betel Kid began to doubt his own memory but couldn't quite see himself chasing all the way downstairs to have another look at the fish scales and then climbing back up again.

"WHY DON'T you come in, Betel Kid?" The long-necked one called to him in a very familiar voice.

He almost didn't dare acknowledge the greeting. It was only a couple of days, how come all this growth of beard. "Goddam, you don't look the same"

Everything about Ah Lo looked different. It was not only the long neck, the beard, and the bandage around his head making him look like a Japanese, but he was now hunching his back and shoulders and looking completely washed out.

"I owe it all to you, I really owe it all to you" Ah Lo patted his bedstead inviting the Betel Kid to sit down. There was something sticky in the corner of his mouth, left over from his just-finished meal like a bit of yellow pus.

"What do you mean you owe me? You don't owe me a damned thing." The Betel Kid uttered these words and added a casual deprecating noise, pretending he didn't know or care what the guy was talking about. But inwardly he suddenly felt uncomfortable.

"How do you feel?" asked the Betel Kid. "You feel all right now?"

"Aw, this is nothin'. If it weren't for your help, coverin' up for me, I'd be in court right now."

Ah Lo shook his head weakly from side to side. The Betel Kid didn't know what he meant by shaking his head like that, whether he was disgusted with somebody or regretting something. And what did that last bit about being in court mean, the Betel Kid couldn't make head or tail of it, either.

"Anybody from your factory been here to see you?"

"Sure, the boss and them other fellas, also Ah Tu."

"The guy named Jia?"

"Yeah, the mother fucker. He didn't really come to visit me. You seen it with your own eyes, first he knocks me cold with a brick, and now he has the nerve to accuse me of taking the gold ring out of his mouth—"

"Oh, so that's what you two were fighting about—a ring?"

To cover up any expression on his face that might give him away, he leaned over to see what the white enamel bowl on the night table contained.

"Steamed eggs brought by my old lady. Damn nuisance, these women-folk."

"Goddam, you ought to be thankful some woman is caring for you." He wasn't really interested in this crap, wanting only to know what had really happened. In fact that was what he came for. "Was that what you were forcing Jia to spit out—a ring?"

"Fuck his mother, the black-hearted one, he wanted to have it all. We been together all these years and now imagine him treatin' me like that."

"Gambling winnings?" The Betel Kid furtively felt his pants pocket: the ring pressed against his palm, although separated by two layers

of cloth, the small round circle impressed itself distinctly on his hand.

"Sorry, I don't have any cigarets for you." Ah Lo's eyes mistook the Betel Kid's hand searching in his pants pocket. "Gamblin' nothin'! We chipped in and bought it together."

"Then this Jia fellow really oughtn't to have acted like that."

"That's why I call him black-hearted."

"Aint that the truth! Poison, that's what a man's heart can be." The Betel Kid gritted his teeth in feigned indignation. "From the outside you can never tell what's in a guy's heart. My old granny used to say that Heaven changes from time to time, but a man's heart changes overnight. And that's the truth."

"More than just overnight, a man can change a hundred and eight times in a day and night. Ah Tu had the nerve to come here twice. Tryin' to scare me with words—said if I didn't cough up the old ring he would accuse me of trying to murder him for it."

"What right did he have to say that, Goddam it!"

"Maybe I was a bit heavyhanded," Ah Lo admitted, pointing to his own jawl, "I choked him so hard it left bruises on his throat."

"But you didn't choke him to death, did you? So what the hell is he accusing you of?"

"Trying to murder him, that's what."

"Let him sue. It's not that simple. He's only trying to scare you."

"I'm not afraid," Ah Lo seemed to become somewhat better spirited. "Good thing the boss came to see me. From the way he talked—well, I gotta thank you for making him think that—the boss blamed me for bein' careless, really got me so confused I don't know which end is up. He kept blamin' me and tellin' me to be more careful from now on. So what was I to say? I didn't know what he was drivin' at. When the boss saw me actin' kinda funny he was afraid my brain had been damaged and I'd lost my memory. The doctor also tried to make me talk—"

"You didn't lose your memory, did you?" The Betel Kid became a little nervous.

"Of course not—that would be terrible!" After a brief pause, Ah Lo continued: "At first I wanted to tell them Ah Tu knocked me out with a

brick—you saw it with your own eyes, didn't you? He kept hittin' me right here with his brick and I was just thinkin' he might hit so hard I'd suffer some internal injuries when . . . there wasn't even time to holler, there was this big wallop on my head and I blacked out, don't know what happened next—"

"You didn't tell the doctor this?"

"I wanted to; I remembered it all." Ah Lo licked this mouth, but still didn't quite clean away that bit of custard stuck to one corner of his mouth. "But I was scared to."

"What were you scared about?"

"Don't they say they give you an electric shock if you lose your memory?"

"Dammit, I'm askin' if you told the doctor anything, about how you were knocked out."

"Well, I couldn't tell him that. First place, I'd just about wrung the guy's neck. Second, Jia hadn't been around to see me yet and I didn't know whether he was dead or alive."

"How could that have happened?" The Betel Kid felt relieved; he eyed Ah Lo in the manner of an old lady regarding her grandchildren, with a mixture of fondness and exasperation.

"What d'you mean?"

"How could he have died when he knocked you out first?"

"He could have, too; when a man's about to kick off—"

"Then what *did* you tell your boss? And the doctor?"

"Well, they were tryin' to draw me out, and I tried to draw them out. Then, little by little, I got the story straight. The boss believed what you'd told him."

Ah Lo seemed even higher in spirits, proud he had out-witted the others; he drew the white enamel bowl nearer, scraped the bottom of any remaining custard, smacking his lips with great relish.

"Fuck his mother! Don't think I'm just a great big dumb cluck." This time he succeeded in licking his mouth clean.

After a while Ah Lo suddenly remembered to seek the Kid's advice. "What d'you say I should do about that gold ring? Let him keep it, just like that?" He pressed a dirty, half-wet towel to his nose to wipe off the perspiration. "Do me a favor,

Betel Kid, give me some idea I don't want to let that Jia fellow off too easy."

"Forget about it, Ah Lo."

"Forget about it? Just like that, you say."

"Is this it? Take a look."

The Betel Kid stood up and fished the ring from his pants pocket. He flashed it in front of Ah Lo's nose, waiting to hand it to him.



"Is this it? Take a look."

Probability No. 2

THE TIME was midnight. In the brickyard that served also as a place for making coke, three furnaces were going full blast in an empty plot of ground near the highway. Passing vehicles could feel a draft of hot air through their open windows.

From far away people could see the flames from the three furnaces lighting up the sky. The fire made the not-so-round moon look pallid and colder by contrast; it burned so fiercely that it seemed like the flames that licked the bottom of the red-hot oil pots in the eighteenth purgatory.

It was the first time that the Betel Kid visited the brick factory at this hour. In his hands he was carrying two strings of paper-silver and two million dollars in crisp new notes of \$10,000 denomination issued by the State Bank of the Netherworld.

The doors of the darkened office building were shut tight. Further on was the three-room

row house where the foreman of the brickyard and his family lived, now also pitch dark like the front office. The flames from the coke-making furnaces threw light on the cast-iron grillwork outside the windows in front of the house, revealing a bunch of dried-up herbs left over from the Dragon Boat Festival⁵ and a few sprigs of banyan leaves. He walked still further and saw a row of squat dormitories where the workers lived; some of the men, to escape from the stuffy heat, were sleeping outdoors on the ground, the sheets over their bodies making them look like corpses in a mortuary, the illusion dispelled only by the snores that could be heard coming softly from under the sheets.

In the rear were two solitary huts. One of them, he knew, was used to store brick-molds,

⁵ Aromatic herbs are hung on doorposts on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month to ward off evil spirits.

wheel-barrows and other equipment such as spades and pitchforks. The other hut housed the motor for mixing cement, with a belt which ran through a hole at the foot of the wall and was stretched tight over the pulley at the bottom of the cement trough. No need to ask, Jia's body must have been placed in the hut with the brick-molds—a carpet of dull yellow light rolled out from its open doorway.

WHEN THEY had returned that day for another load of brick they heard that the coffin and everything were ready and it only awaited the coroner's approval before the body could be placed in it. That slow-witted Old Doggie had insisted on their going to view the dead man. The Betel Kid had not wanted to, for after all there was work to be done loading the truck. "What's there to see, a stinking corpse" He had wanted to wait until the body had been put into the coffin before coming back to burn the sacrificial money. Certainly, it would be better to have a wooden partition between him and the corpse.

When he thought about the humid summer heat he instinctively put his hand to his nose. He stayed close to one side of the door tentatively poking his head in to find out if anyone was there to watch over the dead body.

The red-lacquered coffin against the wall gave him a start, but in the center of the room a table was set for the sacrifices and the spirit tablet. Behind the tablet hung a dirty gray canvas curtain. Not a soul was in the room.

THE BETEL KID was wondering whether Jia's body was laid out behind the canvas curtain still waiting for the coroner's examination, when he suddenly became aware that something stirred behind the curtain. His head tingled.

In front of the curtain was a pair of white candles and an incense-burner containing a few sticks of thin incense, all looking new. The rough earthenware jar for burning sacrificial money was full of ashes from which a wispy smoke was curling upwards. His eyes must be playing tricks on him, the Kid comforted himself. What he couldn't understand was, since the body had not been put in the coffin yet, why wasn't there someone to watch over the dead. What if a cat or a

mouse should come around and frighten the poor stiff into walking, wouldn't that be something?

The Betel Kid tried to swallow, his throat dry as parchment. He lifted a foot and was about to withdraw when this time, he would have sworn his eyes weren't playing any tricks on him. Over the top of the canvas curtain he saw something white, but it bobbed up for only a brief moment and then went down again. Then he thought to look down at the bottom of the canvas partition which was some six inches above the ground.

In that space he saw a pair of big feet, which seemed rooted to the ground. A sixty-watt bulb was hanging above and behind the curtain, and by the fragments of light shone on the ground he could tell that the feet were shod in Japanese-style canvas-topped sneakers with the big toe separated from the others. He guessed to whom the feet belonged, but he couldn't tell what it was that the man was up to.

The Betel Kid tiptoed forward like a stork until he was close to the man's back. The curtain separating them reached only as high as the Betel Kid's lower jaw. He approached it in a crouch, then slowly straightened himself, as in a T'ai Chi boxing movement, until his eyes were level with the top of the canvas curtain.

A screwdriver had been forced into the dead man's mouth. The hand that held the screwdriver was moving this way and that, so forcefully that it trembled. In the other hand was an all-purpose knife⁶, waiting to be used. From one of its many compartments a small can-opener stuck out, like a finger giving directions or pointing accusingly at somebody.

It reminded him of the scene on the previous afternoon: dead or alive, this Jia fellow had his mouth shut and was not about to give anything up.

Although the man had his back toward the Betel Kid and had a bandage around his head, there was no doubt that it was Ah Lo. The screwdriver, forced too hard, slipped with a scratchy noise and Jia's head rolled back.

As soon as he heard the noise, the Betel Kid ducked and held his breath, assuming a half-squatting position.

Behind the curtain, Ah Lo also seemed to have paused in mid-action.

⁶ The kind used by boy-scouts.

There was a soft-drink ad printed on the canvas and the bottle-cap, as large as the steering wheel of a truck, was right in front of the Betel Kid's nose, pressing so close to his eyes that in a few minutes he was seeing double.

Pretty soon more chipping and scraping noises came from behind the curtain, intermingled with Ah Lo's wheezy breathing resulting from a stuffed-up nose. In his half-squatting position the Betel Kid felt he would have creaked painfully like a door with rusty hinges, had he either stood up or squatted down completely.

Oddly, the smell of the canvas close to his nostrils, like that of sweaty clothes in damp rainy weather, reassured him, as though his strenuous half-squatting posture was completely natural and didn't cause him the least discomfort. With Ah Lo digging into the dead man's mouth for the gold ring, he needn't worry about being suspected of pocketing it.

His tight-fitting pants, made of some synthetic fabric, stretched tightly against his legs so that he didn't have to feel with his hands to know that the ring was there, a small hard object pressed against his thigh.

When he had slowly raised his eyes again level with the top of the curtain he saw that the can-opener was being used to pry the row of gold teeth loose. He thought he smelt a peculiar odor that had not been there before, something like the reddish mold on a yeasty cake or like a rotten papaya, but when he tried to smell it again there seemed to be nothing but the smell of the canvas curtain. Maybe it was just his imagination.

The Betel Kid turned around for another look at the unused coffin against the wall. Everything had been taken out of the room; all the brick-molds and the various pieces of equipment had been removed and the sound of Ah Lo scraping away at the dead man's gold teeth all but reverberated in the empty room. He looked at Jia once again. The face was partly shielded by Ah Lo's hands, the "flat-top" hair faintly blood-stained at the roots; the body was still clothed in the dirty overalls red with brick-dust; and the two bare feet, already misshapen, seemed like those of a toe dancer.

He had heard that Jia had died even before they could get him into a car. How could a couple of bricks have killed the guy, the Betel Kid had

kept reassuring himself. Surely Jia had been choked to death in Ah Lo's pincer-like hands. Since he had started spying from outside the curtain, he had been hoping to confirm this with a good look at Jia's neck. But Ah Lo had always been in the way or his big hands had thrown a shadow which obscured Jia's neck, so that only now did he manage to see it clearly. Sure enough, there were some dark purple bruises right below the jaw, like the welts raised on people's skin for the relief of heat-stroke.⁷ This would not be missed by the coroner when he examined the corpse.

He knew that if he should call out at this moment it would frighten Ah Lo so much he'd jump through the ceiling. So he held back and continued his watch until Ah Lo succeeded in prying off the four gold crowns from the dead man's teeth. The bridge flew off in an arc, falling on the dead man's chest or close to it. Ah Lo picked it up and examined it closely in the light, finally putting it to his nose to smell. Only then did the Betel Kid let loose with a jeering laugh.

THE SOUND jolted Ah Lo with such force that his world seemed to turn a somersault, and half-dead with fright he dropped the gold crowns.

"Goddam it, really! They say so long a man's alive his debts follow him around, but this man is dead—and you still—"

"How about you? You're also here to to"

"Yeah, I'm here, one step too late," the Betel Kid retorted and flashed his string of paper money at Ah Lo before setting it down on the sacrificial table. "You got here first and dug up the gold ring, right?"

"Fuck you, how do you know?"

"Never mind how the Kid knows, Goddam it. I caught you with the goods, so half of it belongs to me." His hand reached over the top of the curtain, palm upwards, waiting.

"I swear to you—"

"You didn't neglect the gold teeth, so how could you have missed the gold ring?"

This reminded Ah Lo of what had happened and he hurriedly got down on his knees to look for the bridge of four gold crowns.

⁷A homespun treatment for relieving nausea or sunstroke, in which the rim of a coin or a bowl is used to scrape the victim's chest or back to cause purplish bruises.

NOW JIA'S dead body was stretched out before them, completely uncovered. Funny, how a dead man is always well-behaved; just like his body is always laid out neatly on a high table. When the guy was alive he was Jia or "the Jia fellow" to him; he never knew him well enough to call him by his given name. Granted, some evenings when the empty truck went by the Circle, they would jump off together for a couple of cups of red sugared wine or for shark's fin soup or fried oysters or something⁸; after the wine maybe they would chase over to Pao-an Street for some monkey business; but all the same they hardly knew each other.

Now the thin line of *yin* and *yang* separated the dead from the living, or rather such a line bound them closer together. Sure, Jia's death was nothing to him, but still, standing before the corpse, one could not help feeling somewhat lost, emptier. Just like Old Granny had said, it's heart-warming to go to a wedding and heart-chilling to go to a funeral.

The Jia fellow's mouth was half-open, his jaw probably jarred loose from its socket from Ah Lo's forcible entry. In the dark shadows he couldn't see too clearly; the gum above the top front teeth looked messy, whether as a result of the working over by the all-purpose knife or from its own natural decay he didn't know. Sometimes when a man is sound asleep his jaw would drop like that, only a living person wouldn't have black and blue lips like that, nor be completely without sound or breath

The Betel Kid didn't dare look any more; he walked around to the front of the spirit tablet to burn his paper-silver and his banknotes for the dead.

For the first time, written on the tablet, the Betel Kid saw the characters for Jia's full name. In front of the tablet four kinds of fresh fruit had been placed as sacrificial offerings: pineapple, banana, yellow musk melon and white plums—all looking kind of dirty as if the dead man had touched and defiled them. He lit a pack of five or six banknotes at the candle flame and tossed them

⁸ Food and drink for the *hoi-polloi*, obtainable at the Circle eateries. What passes under the name of "shark's fin" or "oysters", etc. bears little or no resemblance to the delicacies served on the tables of the rich.

into the incinerator jar. Then he fed the fire with pack after pack of paper money. All the while he was mumbling, perhaps to the deceased, perhaps to himself: "Ai, you Jia Chen-Tu, come and help yourself to some spending money. I can't say we were friends, Jia Chen-Tu, you and I, but I know you'll need spending money, you've got to take care of them little devils at King Yenlo's Palace⁹ With that fake gold ring of yours, you really can't say I took any advantage of you other people even chipped the gold crowns off your teeth, Jia Chen-Tu, you gotta say I treated you decent" Heated by the fire until he perspired, the Betel Kid fixed his eyes on the flames as they lapped up the netherworld banknotes one after another. It reminded him of the sweet-and-sour flavor of the red berry wafers as they melt in one's mouth, and he thought he saw Jia, his black-and-blue lips pursed, licking at the packets of paper money.

"ISN'T IT strange, I can't find it." Ah Lo came out from behind the canvas curtain, spreading out his empty hands.

The Betel Kid, his face reflecting the illusive dancing and flitting flames, turned to Ah Lo the whites of his eyes while his hands continued feeding the fire with paper money.

"Don't try to fool me, I don't give a damn about the stinkin' gold teeth," he said, coldly, after eyeing Ah Lo a long time.

"Who's tryin' to? Shit, if it weren't for your help I'd be in jail right now."

"At least you know."

"Me, Yin Ah Lo, I know this much. A friend is a friend, an enemy is an enemy—"

"Goddam it, where's the gold ring?" After the paper money had been burned, the Betel Kid dusted off his hands and rose to his feet.

"You little devil!"

"Didn't I say? You still tryin' to cheat me."

"He must have swallowed it. He died from swallowing gold—nobody can blame me."

The Betel Kid made no response but put his hand into his pants pocket and felt around.

"Me, I take care of my enemies." Ah Lo touched the bandage on his head gingerly. "Look what he done to me, and swallowed my gold too."

⁹ King Yenlo, Chinese for *Yama Raja*, or King of Hades.

you think I'd let him go? If he really swallowed it I'd just as soon cut him open and —"

"How about this?" The Betel Kid had the ring in the palm of his hand and thrust it under Ah Lo's nose. "It's plain as daylight you choked him to death, Goddam it. Swallowed gold indeed!"

Ah Lo's eyes instantly turned gold, shiny like gold, and he reached out and took the ring from the Kid's palm.

"What do you say, Ah Lo? Where else would you find a friend like me, the Betel Kid?"

"I'll go half and half, fuck you, me Yin Ah Lo, I'm not like them guys like Jia—all they want is money and the hell with friends." While making this statement, Ah Lo turned around and looked at Jia's body.

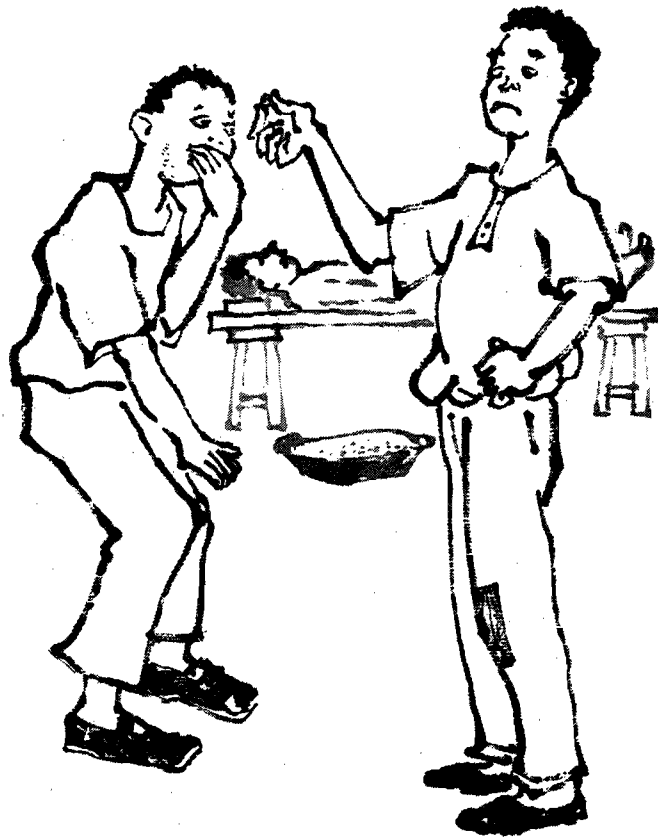
"Nuts. Half and half, he says. What if I kept

it all to myself? Who the hell would have known?"

The Betel Kid's blood-red mouth came up close to Ah Lo's big ear and whispered confidentially: "As friend to friend, I'm worried for you. This matter—" he pointed to a spot under his own chin, "could mean trouble, you know, when they come to examine the corpse"

"Don't worry about that, the police doctor's been here already, and the death certificate is all signed. They're just waitin' for his old lady to come up from the South before layin' him in." Ah Lo was so grateful it was embarrassing. He kept rubbing his hands together, with the gold ring in them, and was at a loss for words. He kept looking at the Betel Kid embarrassedly.

"You're a true friend, you are. I'll stand by you to my dyin' days." Ah Lo kept rubbing his enormous hands.



The Betel Kid had the ring in his hand and thrust it right under Ah Lo's nose.

Probability No. 3

IT LOOKED like rain, and the low pressure seemed to be pressing on people's foreheads.

Over the entire brickyard the clouds moved, and then the sun; you could see it, now the cloud shadows, now the sunshine, edging over from behind the kilns, slowly moving over row after row of unfired bricks, and then across the highway, toward the new-green rice fields, making straight for the distant blue hills, there forming checkered patterns of darkness and light.

Above the horizon, east by south, black clouds, perfectly flat at the bottom as though sliced with a knife, lowered over a mass of gray-white smog which stretched as far as the eye could see. The rain clouds were drawn up in formation, with intermittent lightning, as though rolling up their sleeves and spitting on their palms, ready to go to work, only waiting for the men and women of the brickyard to spring into action hurrying to cover the brick-piles with straw and plastic sheets, securing them with pieces of wood or with brick.

The truck had backed into position, but there were no spare hands to help with the loading, which was just to Old Doggie's liking. Underneath their helmets the women workers wore a towel to protect their necks from the sun, and their forearms and calves were all covered; still, Old Doggie, standing there on the side-lines with hands on hips, could tell at a glance—or perhaps by some process of smell or radar—which of them he preferred. He sauntered over with his arms swinging and took up with Ah What's-her-name—he couldn't even remember—and together, while engaging in some mild cursing and horseplay, they would open out a large sheet of plastic. Each would grab a corner and shake away, in a highly unnecessary exercise, as though they were changing covers on a padded quilt. But to Old Doggie it was all very useful, for he shook and shook until he brought forth still another string of chirps and giggles from Ah What's-her-name.

This was a familiar routine to the Betel Kid, and even if he saw it he paid no attention whatever.

With the low pressure, the smoke weighed

heavily in the air; it started sinking as soon as it was spewed out of the smoke-stacks, so that the entire brickyard smelt of cinders. But even from a distance the Betel Kid could tell which was Ah Lo and which the Jia fellow. Both had white bandages around their heads, Jia topping his with a light gray cap.

The Kid had brought with him a dozen towels, gifts from the boss of the contracting company meant as "comforts". The assumption seemed to be that the two victims were still bleeding and needed more towels to wipe off the blood.

They were thick, spongy towels, which made the Betel Kid envious. Had they not been stamped with the name of the contracting firm he would have sold them, bought a dozen cheaper towels to give as a sop to these two punks who deserved to have died, and made a few bucks on the deal.

"This half-dozen goes to Ah Lo." The Betel Kid hefted the batch of towels in his hand and started yelling for Ah Lo.

"Many thanks to your boss, really many, many thanks" Hugging his towels, Jia repeatedly made obeisance.

The Betel Kid, his displeasure showing on his face, regarded Jia from the corner of his eye. This guy has been handling bricks for so long he must have turned brick-headed. Not a word of thanks for the Kid, nor did he have sense enough to kick back a couple of towels. He had not intended to return the ring to Jia, but now he decided to have some fun with this brick-headed fellow.

"I've got something else you can thank me for—" he said, feeling around in his pants pocket. "Goddam, what happened to that thing you had in your mouth?"

"What? My mouth?"

The stupid egg opened his mouth as wide as he could, his big white-coated tongue blocking the way, in order to show it to the Betel Kid. "Do I have something in my mouth, you tell me."

The Betel Kid, helpless against such stupidity, turned his face aside, but he couldn't leave it at that. Baring his own mouthful of uneven, maroon-colored teeth, he drew close to Jia's skinny nose and roared in a rough voice:

"That thing Ah Lo was choking you for, to make you throw up, remember? Goddam!"

"The gold—gold ring, is that what you—?" Jia's eyes were as big as gold-bracelets themselves.

"Whose was it, after all—yours or Ah Lo's?"

"We two bought it in partnership."

"And you wanted to have it all for yourself, is that it?" The Betel Kid's eyes bulged like a cow's, but even as he said this he became ashamed, thinking: What right have I to butt in like this?

"What d'ya mean, have it all? He didn't put up any money, he only said he'd chip in for a share. Why should I let him"

"I don't believe Ah Lo could be so unreasonable."

"That's just it, unreasonable."

"You didn't buy it from a jeweler." The Betel Kid said this positively, but even as he mentioned the jeweler he felt another wave of shame come over him. "So the ring was hot. Goddam it, I should've known."

JIA WAS impressed with the Kid's sharpness and readily told his story. Seemed like he felt there was nothing to hide, maybe he never thought of hiding anything, or maybe he had been waiting for someone to unburden his sad story to, someone who would stick up for what he thought was justice.

The way he told it, one day when it was almost dark, an old codger who was walking on the highway came over to him and Ah Lo friendly-like, his face all smiles and apologetic. The two of them were spreading cinders on a side-road, and they thought the old fellow wanted some directions. With the buses running back and forth, almost no one footed it on the highway anymore. How cheap can you consider your legs be, walking twenty, thirty *li* and wasting half a day, when the bus fare is only two or three dollars.

"I see you're busy, gents" The old man, carrying a well-used back pack that gave no indication of what it contained, tried to strike up a conversation.

They paid no attention to him, nor responded in any way.

"Take a look, gents. Is this a real gold ring?"

The two of them glanced at him casually.

The old fellow had country bumpkin written all over his face and his goofy grin. Between his two fingers he was holding a small ring, yellow and shiny.

"Picked it up right over there at the corner."

Using the hand that held the ring, he pointed toward the Foo Co. brick kilns across the way. The two front teeth were missing from both his upper and lower jaws, so that the old man spoke with something of a whistle.

Ah Lo took the ring, looked it over carefully, then placed it in the palm of his hand to estimate how much it weighed; he twisted his mouth with uncertainty.

"Let me have a look." Jia took the ring and, making like an expert, placed it in his mouth and bit it lightly.

"Me, I can't tell the difference." The old fellow waited, looking from one to the other. "Might as well give it to you gents, I don't know nothing about gold."

Jia quickly returned it to the old man. "Take it away, take it away."

"What would I want this for. Just happened to pick it up. Maybe it's fake, who knows?" The old man was so dumb he looked pitiful, and what's more he knew he was dumb and felt somewhat apologetic about it. "I have no use for this, right? Gents, huh, huh" He chuckled in a toothless, loose-jawed way, making as though to leave and yet lingering on.

"But we can't just take it from you." Jia was tempted. He turned around and talked it over with Ah Lo, and they decided that each would put up ten dollars, so they gave the old man twenty bucks and sent him on his way.

"BUT THE twenty bucks was my money," Jia told the Kid. "I tried to get the ten from Ah Lo but he wouldn't give it to me. He said to sell it first, split the money fifty-fifty and then take ten dollars off his share. Tell me, is that fair?"

"I see, Ah Lo wouldn't put up the ten dollars, so you wanted to keep the whole thing."

"I put up all the money, so naturally it belonged to me. Why didn't he come through with his ten bucks? Am I to blame?"

"Now what d'you propose to do? See, I've got the ring right here in my hand" The Betel Kid waited until Ah Lo was near before

showing them the ring. And with his other hand, he turned over the half-dozen towels to Ah Lo, as if to distract his attention.

"Now do you believe me, now do you believe me?" Jia roared himself hoarse at Ah Lo. Then he hung on to the Betel Kid like a long-lost brother. "You see, Ah Lo thought he had me dead to rights, accusin' me of hidin' the ring and even cutting my *tatami*¹⁰ to pieces."

"Fuck you"

Jia, rubbing his skinny nose, pretended he didn't hear Ah Lo's cursing but concentrated on his new-found brother, his eyes riveted on the Betel Kid's fist which had the gold ring in it. "How 'bout this? *You* put up ten bucks, and I'll split with you fifty-fifty."

The proposition incensed the Betel Kid. "Me, put up ten bucks? You think I'm crazy? If I had wanted it for myself, I'd have sold it long ago. What the hell do you think I came back to talk to you for? Nobody seen I picked this up from under your neck. Goddam, get that through your thick skull!"

¹⁰ Japanese for "floor mat"; still used today in many Taiwan homes.

BECAUSE HE wanted this sonavabitch to get another beating he so richly deserved, because he needed to get back some self-esteem after having been told off in such humiliating terms by the salesclerks at the Jin Lee Jewelry Shop for trying to peddle a fake gold ring, and because of a number of other things such as the injustice that had been done him, the Betel Kid reached out and grabbed Jia's dirty hand, slapped the gold ring in his palm, then closed the fingers so that Jia would have a tight grip on it.

"What d'you say now, Goddam it? Am I your friend or not?"

The Betel Kid walked away with a red-mouthed grin, signalling Ah Lo with a quick, sidelong glance.

Wind-swept soot from the brick kilns swirled toward them close to the ground. Large raindrops, few at first, soon beat down with great force.

And over there the two guys went at each other again

It started with heated words, and then turned into a fist-fight

Probability No. 4

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CHU HSI-NING was born Chu Ch'ing-hai (朱青海) in 1927 in Linchü, Shantung. Before coming to Taiwan and a career in the army he had studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hangchow. When he was 19, he published his first story, a satire, and since then has dedicated himself to creative writing. He has to his credit six collections of short stories and two novels. His 1961 story "Molten Iron" (translated into English by Nancy Chang Ing), set in a village in North China in the last days of the Ch'ing Dynasty, is a powerful — and somewhat gruesome — tale of family feuds and social change, symbolized by the coming of the railway train. More recently his scene has shifted to Taiwan but his attention continues to focus on the earthy values of the farmers and the labourers. Now retired from the army, Mr. Chu serves as the editor of the *Hsin wen-i tsa-chih* (New Literature Magazine).

"The Men Who Smelt Gold", first published in the September 1969 issue of *Youth Literature*, was included in *The Best Short Stories* volume for that year and has aroused considerable critical interest. The story, with its three denouements, has reminded readers of the Japanese film *Rashomon*. Some critics say that, while *Rashomon* is a story told from four different self-serving viewpoints, the Chu story is an attempt to plumb the depths of character and motives by presenting three or more probable outcomes to an original incident of human greed.