

白先勇：歲除

New Year's Eve

By Pai Hsien-yung

Translated by Diana Granat

On New Year's Eve a cold current suddenly invaded Taipei, and by twilight the sky was already dark. The lights in the houses were lit earlier than usual, as if to hurry away what was left of the old year and make ready to welcome the new.

In East Hsin-i Village at the end of Changchun Road, the chimneys of the bungalows in the military dependents' quarters gave forth puffs of smoke; the noise of spatulas and pans and popping oil, together with intermittent chattering and laughter, spilled into the streets. New Year's Eve was gradually approaching its high point—time for the family reunion dinner.

This evening in Major Liu's house, Number 5, East Hsin-i Village, the lights were burning especially bright. On the window sill of the living room were lit a pair of red candles, about a foot tall and as thick as a child's arm. Their flames shot up merrily, lighting up the modest living room.

"Brother Lai,¹ you've come so far to join us at New Year's, and why must you spend so much money—wine and chicken and those huge candles! It's a wonder how you managed to lug them all the way here!" Mrs. Liu came into the living room, holding in her hands a copper Mongolian hot-pot with burning charcoals crackling and jumping underneath, and smilingly addressed the guest seated at the place of honor at the round dinner table. Mrs. Liu was a middle-aged woman of about forty, wearing a new dress of black satin embossed with clusters of purple flowers, over which she had

¹*Ta-ko* (大哥), here used as a term of respect and friendship.

been tied on a blue cotton apron. Her hair was combed into a glossy bun, and except for the finely-pencilled eyebrows her face was without make-up. Her Szechuanese dialect rolled out from her mouth in crisp and distinct syllables.

"You're so right!" said the guest surnamed Lai, as he gave his thigh a slap. "These candles sure gave me a lot of trouble. Tainan Railroad Station was so crowded today you can hardly breathe. Lucky I'm tall, and I held the candles high above my head so nobody would break them. I only get to see you folks once a year, I said to myself I must spend New Year's Eve with you and together we'll see the old year out. We'll be sitting up all night tonight, and having the candles lighted up will bring joy to us all." So saying, he broke into hearty laughter. His inch-long hair, already frosted to the top, stood erect like a tough wire brush. His swarthy face was covered with a dense spread of dark spots, and when he laughed his wrinkle-filled face broke out in a series of ripples. He was unusually big-build—sitting he was a head taller than the people beside him, and he had huge palms with all ten fingers gnarled at the knuckles like the stumps of a tree. He was wearing a threadbare Sun Yat-sen jacket of Tibetan blue gabardine, and underneath it a grass-green sweater, showing cuffs already unravelled and seams coming apart. He spoke in a rough, loud voice with a thick Szechuan accent.

"Brother Lai, that's exactly what my wife had in mind. She's even found mah-jong partners for you," put in Major Liu.

Major Liu was still wearing his uniform, a tall,

thin man with sunken cheeks. The copper-colored skin on his face was taut, and glazed by the fierce sun and sea winds. His sideburns had also started to streak. When he spoke his accent was all Szechuanese, just like that of his guest.

"I knew Brother Lai loves to play a hand or two—that's why I kept this couple here." Mrs. Liu indicated a young man and a girl seated at the dinner table, as she set the cooker down in the center of the table. "It's not every day that Cousin Li-chu and Yu Hsin could come, too! Only this afternoon Li-chu was on duty at the Military Hospital, and Yu Hsin just came up today from Camp Feng-shen. The two of them probably had planned on a cosy date tonight all by themselves, but I forced them to stay so they could keep Brother Lai company when we play Going Round the Garden!"²

"Going Round the Garden—I'm an expert at that!" cried Lai Ming-sheng. "Nobody leaves the table until dawn! Miss Li-chu, if you want to talk sweet talk with your boyfriend you can do it across the table. Just pretend we're not here."

Li-chu blushed and laughed, and Yu Hsin, a little uncomfortable, managed an embarrassed smile. Li-chu was a petite girl with a rosy complexion and sparkling black eyes. Looking at her one would think she wasn't more than sixteen or seventeen, but she had been a nurse for two years at the Military Hospital. Yu Hsin was seated by her side, his body rigidly upright. He was in a freshly starched, stiffly creased light khaki American-style dress uniform. A polished gold cadet school badge was pinned to his collar, and he wore a black tie. His very youthful face, cleanly shaved, shone with a fresh radiance, and his newly cut and blown hair clung obediently to his head.

"I want to stay up all night too," interrupted Major Liu's ten-year-old son, Liu Ying, who was also sitting at the table.

"After dinner you should be off to bed! Staying up all night indeed!" hollered Mrs. Liu at the boy.

"Uncle Lai promised to take me out on the street at midnight to shoot off firecrackers," Liu Ying looked toward Lai Ming-sheng and protested anxiously.

²A friendly game of mah-jong with limited stakes. When a player loses all his chips he is allowed to continue without playing with money.

"Good boy!" laughed Lai Ming-sheng, reaching out with his huge palm and giving Liu Ying a pat on the glossily-shaven head. "Your Uncle Lai shoots a mean firecracker. In a little while I'll show you—bang goes the lightning cracker in my bare hands!"

"My dear sister,"³ Lai Ming-sheng said, turning towards Mrs. Liu, "Don't underestimate the little fellow. He might turn out to be a general one day!"

"A general?" Mrs. Liu snorted. "In this world you're doing all right if you don't starve. I couldn't care less whether or not he'll become a high official."

"What do you want to be when you grow up, boy?" Lai Ming-sheng asked Liu Ying.

"Commander-in-chief of the army," Liu Ying lifted his face up and answered in all seriousness.

Everyone at the table burst out laughing and even Mrs. Liu couldn't help but laugh. Lai Ming-sheng, his face all wrinkled up with laughter, pulled Liu Ying into his bosom.

"Sounds pretty ambitious! Good of you, my boy! When your Uncle Lai was your age, he set his sights even higher."

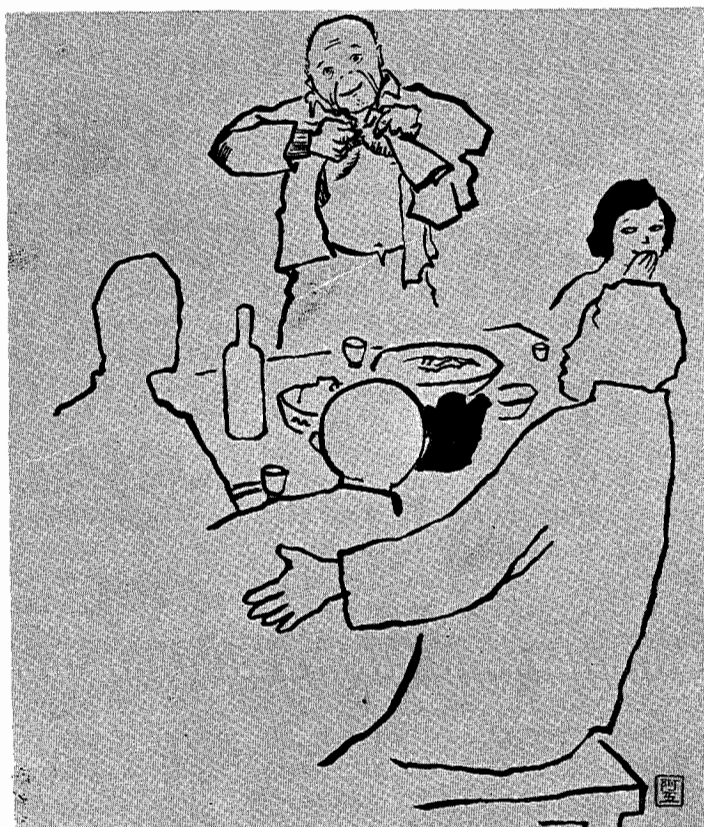
Mrs. Liu went in again and brought out several plates of food for the hot-pot—a plate of tripe, one of kidney, two plates of sliced mutton, and five or six dishes of various Szechuanese pickled vegetables in red pepper sauce. Mrs. Liu specially placed in front of Lai Ming-sheng a dish of fried peanuts to eat with his wine, and then began to pour wine for everyone.

"Brother Lai also brought these bottles of Quemoy *kao-liang*,"⁴ Mrs. Liu announced to everyone. "Why did you have to bring a whole dozen? Two bottles would have been enough to add to the holiday cheer. We don't have that many drinking men here."

"I didn't go buy them specially," Lai Ming-sheng said, indicating the bottles of Quemoy *kao-liang* on the side table. "They were brought to me as a gift by an old subordinate—an assistant platoon leader on Quemoy—when he returned to Tainan on leave. He still remembered me as his former

³*Ti-mei* (弟妹), a form of address for the wife of a young and dear friend.

⁴高粱, a very strong liquor distilled from millet. The best *kao-liang* on Taiwan is made on the island of Quemoy.



"My young friend, I've spent a lifetime in battle and have never once been decorated. But this little mark here is rarer than a 'Blue Sky and White Sun' medal." —illustrated by Ah Wu

chief, bless him, but I had forgotten all about him."

"Brother Lai, you are also *my* former superior. Let me drink a toast to you first!" Major Liu stood up and, holding a brimming cup of *kao-liang*, went over to Lai Ming-sheng, and raising the wine cup with both hands offered a toast to him.

"Worthy brother," Lai Ming-sheng stood up suddenly and, pressing Major Liu down on the chair, said in a hoarse voice, "Surely I will drink this cup with you, but it all depends on how we drink. If we're talking about our friendship and brotherhood, it would not be too much if you toast me ten cups tonight. But if you drink to me as your former senior officer, then I won't touch a drop! In the first place I've already retired. In the second place you're an officer now. A major, you can say it's an important rank or not, commands several hundred men—and me, I'm only a kitchen purveyor at the Veterans Hospital. In the

army what do they call it? *Huo-fu t'ou!*"⁵

As Lai Ming-sheng talked he started laughing out loud, then little Liu Ying let out a yelp and laughed with him. Lai Ming-sheng gave the boy a pat on his shiny head and said, "What are you laughing at, kid? Don't you look down on *huo-fu t'ou*. Your Uncle Lai was *huo-fu t'ou* and from there he made his way up to be an officer! So I tell you, Brother, a proper major that you are, if you go around calling a cook 'my former superior', what will people think? It doesn't sound right!"

All this time Major Liu, who was held in the chair by Lai Ming-sheng, was waving his hand in protest. Then Mrs. Liu took a cup of wine over to

⁵ 伙頭伏. Originally designating chief army cook, the term is also applied to the person in charge of the military kitchen, usually in a deprecatory sense.

Lai Ming-sheng and said smiling, "Dear Brother Lai, you're wrong. Not only were you two buddies who have been through thick and thin, but when you were already an officer, he was nothing."

"Me? When Brother Lai was company commander in Szechuan, I was just an orderly in his company," added Major Liu at once.

"See, Brother Lai, will you still deny you were his superior? Not only should he offer you a toast, but I too want to drink to you. Here!"

As Mrs. Liu spoke she downed half the cup. Everyone at the table stood up and, calling Lai Ming-sheng "senior officer" in unison, offered him a toast. Flustered, Lai Ming-sheng made some effort to decline, then smilingly, with a tilt of his head, drank up his cup of Quemoy *kao-liang*. Then he sat down, smacked his lips and poached himself a bunch of tripe in the hot-pot and swallowed it as a chaser. Mrs. Liu began refilling the cups for everyone.

"What, our young friend, you haven't finished your cup yet?" Just as Mrs. Liu was going to pour Yu Hsin some more, Lai Ming-sheng noticed that the young cadet's cup was still half full and exclaimed, pointing a finger at Yu Hsin as if insulted. Yu Hsin stood up hurriedly and explained, his face full of chagrin, "Sir, I really can't drink—"

"What's that?" Lai Ming-sheng broke in. "With ladies it's forgivable, but how can a military man leave his cup unfinished? Young friend, when I was your age I gulped down *san-hua* and *mao-t'ai*⁶ by the bowl. I would get so drunk I'd fall off a horse the night before, but he next day I would fight as bravely as ever in battle. How can you be a soldier if you can't even drink? Drink up, drink up!"

Yu Hsin had to raise his cup and finish what remained. In a moment his youthful face flushed to his eyelids, whereupon Lai Ming-sheng snatched the bottle from Mrs. Liu's hands and started pouring lavishly into the young cadet's cup. Yu Hsin, smiling sheepishly, dared not make any remark. Li-chu, seated next to him, looked at Lai Ming-sheng and said, smiling imploringly, "Mr. Lai, he really can't drink. A few days ago he drank a little rice wine and got rashes all over."

"Now, Miss Li-chu, don't you coddle him. How

can a few cups of *kao-liang* hurt a sturdy lad? Tell you the truth, I'm ever so pleased to see the two of you tonight. Such a fine, handsome couple—I must drink a double with you!"

Lai Ming-sheng poured himself two cups of *kao-liang*, held them in his hands and went over to Yu Hsin and Li-chu, whereupon Li-chu hurried to her feet.

"Young friend, I shall presume on my age to talk some straight talk with you. A soldier's duty is of course to serve the country, but marriage is also an important matter which must not be neglected. Look at Mr. and Mrs. Liu here—don't they make people envious?"

"That's enough, Brother Lai," called Mrs. Liu, laughing and shouting across the table. "It's not enough that you tease the two kids, you have to make fun of us old ones too?"

"You're pretty lucky, young friend. You wouldn't find another like Miss Li-chu here even if you search all over Taipei with a lantern. So you should try to be like Major Liu and love your wife in the days to come. If you should take advantage of her, I'll be the first to bring you to account."

Li-chu had long before turned completely red with embarrassment and lowered her head. Lai Ming-sheng then raised the two cups and, having invoked a blessing for Yu Hsin and Li-chu, gulped them down one after the other.

"Take it easy now, Brother Lai, this is Quemoy *kao-liang*!" Mrs. Liu called from the other side of the table, but Lai Ming-sheng came behind her in a few strides and, waving his long arms, his swarthy face already flushed, he put his head close to her ear and said, "Sister, my worthy brother is certainly fortunate to have a wife like you—he must have done good deeds in his previous life to deserve you. Although I've been a singleton all my life, I've seen a lot of husbands and wives. My dear sister, it's not easy to find a couple like you. Believe me, it's not easy."

Mrs. Liu laughed till she had to bend over the table, then she turned around and said to him, "Brother Lai, just treat me to a good meal and I promise I'll get you a wife. The lady who runs the cigarette stand at our street corner—she's good-looking, and she's looking for a husband. Would you be interested?"

"My hearty thanks to you, Sister," said Lai Ming-sheng, chortling in his throat as he faced Mrs.

⁶ 三花 and 茅臺, both potent grain spirits.

Liu and bowed, "but I'd rather defer this share of my good fortune till the next life. I won't keep this a secret from you: last year I did itch with a bit of this worldly desire, and look where it's got me! You see when I retired last year I got more than thirty thousand dollars in separation pay. For rich people that kind of money doesn't mean a damn, but in my whole life I had never held so much cash in my hands. At first I thought of going into some small business, but then a guy from my home town came along and wanted to play match-maker. He said he knew of some mountain woman⁷, a widow in Hualien, who was looking for a husband. So I went to see for myself and she was actually a young woman in her twenties, not bad-looking either. Her family asked for twenty-five thousand and not a penny less. So in a twinkling I offered up all my retirement pay plus gold rings and bracelets to doll up the girl from head to toe. How was I to know that those native bitches don't have any damn conscience? Three days after we were married, she ran away without leaving so much as a ghost's shadow. And she sure cleaned me out, too—even managed to take the worn-out cotton bedding with her."

As Lai Ming-sheng babbled on, he drained his cup of *kao-liang* without having to be encouraged, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Suddenly he leaped behind Yu Hsin. With both hands resting on Yu Hsin's shoulders, he took a good look at the young man and said, "If I could be like him still, that country bitch—she wouldn't want to leave me even if I drove her out!" Everyone laughed at this and Lai Ming-sheng continued, addressing himself to Yu Hsin, "Young friend, I'm not boasting, but in those days when I had my strap leather belt on, I bet I looked even smarter than you."

"In those days you sure were awfully dashing!" Major Liu at once echoed, laughing.

"That's right," put in Mrs. Liu, also laughing. "Otherwise, how would he have been able to cut his major's boots and gotten away with it?"

"What's this about cutting somebody's boots, cousin?" Li-chu turned her head and softly asked Mrs. Liu.

⁷ 山地女人, a woman of the mountain tribes in Taiwan, often referred to in English as "aborigines".

"This I don't know how to tell you," Mrs. Liu replied laughing, then covered her mouth and kept waving her hand. "You ask our Brother Lai."

Lai Ming-sheng didn't wait for Li-chu to put the question, but edged close to her with his smiling face all wrinkled up and said, "Miss Li-chu, tonight the wine makes me bold. You want to hear about 'cutting the boots'? All right, I'll tell you how that year I cut my major's boots. My worthy brother, do you still remember Pockmarked Li, Li Chun-fa?"

"Why not?" replied Major Liu. "I took plenty of shit from that petty warlord, Li Chun-fa."

"That son of a bitch sure was a petty warlord!" Lai Ming-sheng loosened his collar button, rolled up his sleeves, and raised his wine cup and drank with Major Liu. Beads of sweat rose from his forehead, and his cheeks burnt to a fiery red. Turning to Li-chu and Yu Hsin, he said, "In the twenty-seventh year of the Republic⁸ I was captain of a cavalry company in Chengtu. I was with our fifth battalion and we were camped outside the city. Our major had a concubine who of all things loved horseback riding. Our major ordered me to let her ride my horse and had me follow her about every day like a servant boy, as if to make sure she didn't break her ass! One day Pockmarked Li went to town. His mistress-lady called a couple of women to her place to play mah-jong and she wanted me to make up a foursome. While we were in the middle of the game, I suddenly felt a heavy weight on my boots, as if something was pressing down on them. When I reached down my hand under the table, I felt this foot in an embroidered shoe sitting dead on top of my boots. As I looked up, our major's mistress-lady, who was sitting all smiles on my upper hand, played me a "White Dragon"⁹ and said to me, "Here's a nice, juicy piece for you!" After the game, an orderly came to summon me into the inner chamber, where the lady had chicken soup steamed with red dates all ready and waiting for me. It was that night that I

⁸ i.e. 1938.

⁹ 白板, literally "white piece", one of the mah-jong cards, or "tiles", that has a smooth, ivory-white surface, without any design on it whatever; known in Western parlance of the game as "White Dragon".

cut our major's boots."

At this point Lai Ming-sheng stopped dead for a moment, then all at once he jerked up and banged his fist on the table, snarling, "That bitch! What a fine juicy piece she turned out to be!"

His banging made the coals in the cooker jump. Everyone gave a start at first, then burst into roaring laughter. Giggling, Mrs. Liu fished a big ladle of kidney out of the hot-pot and put it into Lai Ming-sheng's dish.

"Did you know, worthy Brother," Lai Ming-sheng said, turning toward Major Liu, "That time Li Chun-fa thought I was going to die for sure. Do you remember later he had me transferred to Shantung? At that time there was such glorious fighting over there in Shantung. Li Chun-fa was suspicious. That son of a bitch, he wanted to send me to Taierchuang¹⁰ to get killed!"

"Sir, did you take part in the battle of Taierhchuang too?" Yu Hsin blurted out excitedly. Without answering, Lai Ming-sheng seized a handful of peanuts and conveyed them into his mouth, chewing with noisy effect. After a moment he turned his head toward Yu Hsin, gave a laugh through his nostrils and said, "Tai—erh—chuang—Young man, the name is not to be mentioned lightly!"

"Last week in our lectures on the War of Resistance against Japan the instructor happened to talk about The Battle of at Taierhchuang," Yu Hsin hurriedly explained.

"Who is your instructor?"

"Niu Chung-kai. He's a fifth year graduate of Whampoa."

"I know him. Short, fat fellow. Speaks with a Hunan accent. So he is lecturing on Taierhchuang?"

"He just got to the battle in which the Japanese Isogai division attacked Tsaotse," answered Yu Hsin.

"Ah—" Lai Ming-sheng nodded his head. Suddenly, pulling back his arms, stretching and pulling and puffing, he opened up his Tibetan blue khaki jacket, lifted his sweater and undershirt, and revealed his large chest. On the right side of the chest there was the vivid print of a blood-red, shiny round scar, the size of a rice bowl. The whole

breast had been hewn away and caved into a crater. Mrs. Liu turned her head away laughing, while Li-chu hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand and bent over with laughter. Pointing at the round scar, Lai Ming-sheng, with every vein on his head standing out and eyes reddened, said, "My young friend, I've spent a lifetime in battle and have never once been decorated. But this little mark here is rarer than a 'Blue Sky and White Sun' medal. With this on me, I'm qualified to give you a lecture on Taierhchuang. But those who haven't got it—what do they know to talk about? You go ask Niu Chung-kai for me: how many of our regiment commanders and battalion commanders were lost in that battle? And who were those people? And how did General Huang Ming-chang die? Will he know?"

Tucking in his clothes any old way, Lai Ming-sheng gesticulated as he said to Yu Hsin, "When the Japs attacked Tsaotse, I was defending the place! The fire power those midgets had was really something! Hundreds of tanks, twenty thousand infantry—double our number. What could we put up against them? Our bodies! My friend, after one night of fighting I really don't know how many of our regiment still remained. General Huang Ming-chang was our regimental commander. At daybreak I was riding behind him on patrol. I just saw a flash explode, and next moment his head was gone, but his body still sat erect on his horse, hands grasping the reins, galloping. Hell, I didn't have the time to blink my eyes before I myself was blown off the horse. My horse was hit in the belly by a shell and I was all tangled up in its entrails. The Japs thought I was finished and our men thought so too. I lay in the pile of dead for two days and two nights without anyone paying any attention to me. Afterwards when our army won and came to collect the corpses, they dug me out. Ah! My friend," Lai Ming-sheng pointed at the right side of his chest, "It was that shot that blew off half my chest."

"That battle was really the glory of our national army!" said Yu Hsin.

"Glory?" Lai Ming-sheng gave a humph. "Young friend, for you people who have never gone to battle, 'glory' is an easy word to say. As for we soldiers of the Nationalist Army, it's all right not to mention other battles, but if you bring up *this* battle, my friend, *this* battle—"

¹⁰ 台兒莊, in southern Shantung Province, scene of a historic battle in April 1938, in the early stages of China's resistance against Japanese invasion.

At this point Lai Ming-sheng suddenly began to stammer. With one hand gesticulating, his face purple with heat and excitement, he seemed to be groping for some heroic words to describe Taierh-chuang, but couldn't come up with any on the spur of the moment. Suddenly from outside the sound of an explosion rent the air, and an intense white light flashed twice across the window. Liu Ying, who had been quiet for a long while, jumped up and ran to the door, shouting, "They're setting off the Kung-ming lanterns!"¹¹

Major Liu yelled at the boy and reached out to grab him, but he had already skipped out of the door, turning his head and calling, "Uncle Lai, shoot firecrackers with me later—you promised!"

"Little devil!" Mrs. Liu scolded him laughingly. "Let him go. You can't hold him. Brother Lai, quick! While it's hot, taste my dish of 'Ants up a Tree'!"¹²

Mrs. Liu put a big bowl of rice in front of Lai Ming-sheng. Lai Ming-sheng pushed it aside and pulled the dish of peanuts in front of him again, then poured a cup of Quemoy *kao-liang* and brought it to his mouth. He drank so hurriedly that half of the liquor was spilled, dripping all over him.

"Take it easy, Brother Lai, don't choke," Major Liu said laughingly as he hurriedly handed Lai Ming-sheng a towel.

"My dear brother," cried Lai Ming-sheng, hitting the table violently with his empty cup, and grabbing Major Liu's shoulders with both hands, "You think a drop of Taiwan's Quemoy *kao-liang* could make me drunk? Have you forgotten how many crocks of Kweichow *mao-t'ai* I used to drink on the mainland?"

"We know about your large capacity," Major Liu smiled appeasingly.

"Dear brother," Lai Ming-sheng tightly clutched Major Liu's shoulder strap with his hands, and his large head almost knocked against his host's face. "You may be a major, you may even wear stars,

but if not for our friendship I wouldn't have come today, even if you sent an eight-man sedan-chair for me!"

"What talk, Brother Lai!" Major Liu hastened to pacify him.

"You know, brother, everything I said is true. That little worm Wu Sheng-piao was once my second lieutenant. When I came to Taipei and walked past his door, I wouldn't even give him one look. He's big now—that's his luck, but licking somebody's ass to get ahead is just not for me. Otherwise, I wouldn't be a *huo-fu t'ou* now. Last week I only took a little burnt rice from our hospital kitchen to feed the pigs, and the officer-in-charge stared at me and gave me a lecture. So I rolled up my sleeves and pointed right at his face and said, 'Officer Yu, let me tell you something: in the sixteenth year of the Republic,¹³ during the Northern Expedition, I, Lai Ming-sheng, was there carrying pots for the revolutionary army to fight Sun Chuan-fang.¹⁴ As to kitchen rules, sir, I have no need for your advice.' You figure it out for me, dear brother," he counted on his fingers, his head swaying, "I'm the same age as the Republic itself. All these years, through thick and thin, what strange things haven't I experienced? Now what do I care any more? Frankly, the only grudge I still have is that these old bones of mine have not yet found their way home."

"Brother Lai, you're just talking away and not tasting a bit of this 'Ants up a Tree' which I've worked so hard to fry. Even if you went to a Szechuanese restaurant, I doubt if they can cook this native dish the way I do." Mrs. Liu went over and planted herself between Lai Ming-sheng and Major Liu.

"Dear sister—" Lai Ming-sheng stretched his hand over the table to get at the half-empty bottle of Quemoy *kao-liang* again, but Mrs. Liu grabbed it and hugged it to her breast.

"Brother Lai, if you drink a couple more, you won't be able to stay awake and see the New Year in."

Suddenly Lai Ming-sheng struggled to his feet, gave his chest a couple of hard slaps, and declared

¹¹ 孔明燈, a kind of fireworks that shoot up into the sky, trailing a string of firecrackers behind them; named after Chu-ke Liang (諸葛亮) of Three Kingdoms fame.

¹² A Szechuan dish consisting of minced meat sauce served with hot-pepper oil over deep-fried bean threads (peastarch noodles).

¹³ i.e. 1927.

¹⁴ 孫傳芳, one of the "warlords" in the 1920's, military governor of Kiangsu Province.

in a hoarse voice, "Dear sister, you really think too little of me. Although I'm getting a little advanced in years, this frame of mine is still iron-built. Tell you the truth, I'm retired but I'm still in training. Every day as soon as they sound the bugle in the barracks next door, I get out of bed. I go through my routine—'Poisonous Snake Shoots out of the Hole', 'Praying Mantis Waving its Arms', big turns, small turns¹⁵—I wonder if those youngsters could match these tricks of mine!"

As Lai Ming-sheng spoke he left the table, struck a martial pose, and started boxing by brandishing his arms and legs. Beads of sweat washed down his bright red face like water, and everyone at the table rocked back and forth with laughter. Mrs. Liu, laughing, went over to him quickly and, taking hold of him by the arm, half-pushing and half-dragging, led him to the rear of the house to wash his face. Before leaving the living room, Lai Ming-sheng turned and said to Mrs. Liu, "Now do you see? When we fight our way back to Szechuan one day, your Brother Lai may not be good for much else, but he can still carry eight or ten rice pots for sure!"

The words made those at the table start laughing anew. When Lai Ming-sheng had gone inside, Mrs. Liu directed the group to clear the dinner table and place on top of it a square man-jong table-top. She took out the mah-jong set, assigned Yu Hsin and Li-chu the task of dividing up the chips, while she herself brought over the pair of red candles from the window sill and set them down on a side table next to the mah-jong table. The candles were already burnt down by more than half, leaving the tallow drippings on the candle stands. While Mrs. Liu was using a little knife to scrape off the clinging tallow, a sound of vomiting suddenly came

from the washroom. Major Liu quickly ran inside.

"He's drunk," Mrs. Liu shook her head and said to Yu Hsin and Li-chu with a sigh, letting the knife fall from her hand onto the side table. "I knew it, it's the same every time. He loves to drink and row but he can't really hold that much."

"Brother Lai looks so funny when he is high," said Li-chu chuckling, while she gave Yu Hsin a mischievous look. Yu Hsin also laughed.

"He's asleep," somewhat later Major Liu came out and said in a low voice. "He wants me to play a few hands for him, and he will take over later."

Mrs. Liu mused for a while. Then she let out a yawn and rubbed her temples with both hands and said, "I say, let's forget about it. If Brother Lai has gone to sleep, heaven knows what time he'll wake up. I've been busy all day and I'm tired. Li-chu and Yu Hsin, you two might as well go on out and have a good time. Sorry to have kept you around all night."

Li-chu stood up quickly. Yu Hsin helped her into her red coat, put on his own military cap and straightened his tie in front of the living room mirror. Then they said good-bye to Major Liu and his wife. As Li-chu and Yu Hsin stepped out into the lane, they saw the children from the military dependents' families in East Hsin-i Village all gathered together in the middle of the lane, twenty or thirty of them. They were in a circle, setting off firecrackers. Major Liu's boy, Liu Ying, was squatting on the ground lighting a big pinwheel. A splendid silvery boom of light suddenly burst into the air about six or seven feet high, basking each laughing young face in a silvery brightness. Amidst a roar of cheers, the children scrambled to light each one's own firecrackers, and streak after streak of light broke through the dark sky. The sound of firecrackers all around got thicker and thicker, as New Year's Eve drew to an end and another New Year descended on Taipei.

¹⁵Various moves in boxing.

(For Chinese Text see page 146)