

張恨水：八十一夢

*Eighty-One Dreams: excerpts*

By Zhang Henshui

Translated by Simon Schuchat

**The Eighth Dream: There's a Way to Get Rich**

In eastern Sichuan, fine moonlight isn't easy to come upon.

That evening, the moon was more than half full, shining obliquely across the mountain peaks, which I was glad to see, as I silently walked up the stone steps of the mountain.

It was a cloudless night. A few scattered stars in the dark-blue sky made the moon's disc look more like a mirror than ever. The moonlight cast itself downwards, lightly dusting the mountainside. On the mountain, the few trees stood tall in the watery moonlight, casting bushy shadows. Further down the valley, a dark mass of ridges and peaks blocked the moonlight. In fact, there were several houses in the valley, but even their outlines were not apparent in the moonlight, only glimmers of lamplight in the darkness of the mountain indicated their almost poetic presence.

I recalled that in the moonlight on boats sailing down the lower reaches of the Yangtze, the sky and water were of one colour, pale and hazy, with the occasional lights of fishing-boats bobbing on the surface. I thought how equally hazy human life is. Wherever there was a speck of light, there was also a family. We couldn't help feel lonely even with hundreds of people sailing with us on our night voyage. Each speck of light from every fishing-boat or fishing village shining in the clear, cold scene meant there were just a few people gathered under lamplight—the feeling was beyond my understanding. My thoughts, elusive as they were, wandered to Li Bai's 李白 line of poetry 'I lower my head and think of my old home', which, as I realized how long it had been

since I'd last seen the moon, evoked a sort of deep melancholy. I sat down on a rock beside the path, and plucked a stalk of grass growing in a crack in the rocks, twiddling it in my hands.

In the far distance I heard voices: two people speaking in Nanjing dialect as they came closer. When I lived in Nanjing, I thought that local accent sounded totally different from the Mandarin spoken in Beijing. But after coming to Sichuan, for some reason, I would get emotional whenever I heard Nanjing people talking, and always wanted to hear more. Because of this, I leaned in to listen further.

One said, 'You teach at a university, you're a professor, or a lecturer; either way, you make a few hundred *yuan* a month in salary. Why do you want to work as a truck driver for some company?'

The other said, 'Don't you understand? In today's capitalist society, no matter what you do, you've got to figure out whether you can make money or not. If you can make money as a waiter in a club, what's wrong with that? Over the last ten years, the Eighty-Eight Club in Shanghai, that was a famous club, right? There was a guy who worked there as a waiter, but he had a car, lived in a villa, and most people called him "sir".'

The first one asked, 'Can you really make a lot of money as a truck driver?'

The other replied, 'That depends on your skills. But no matter how dumb a fellow is, once he gets on board the money boat, some of it is bound to rub off!'

Gradually these two passed by me as they talked. Even as they went off into the distance, I could still hear the sweet refrain 'making money' echoing back and forth. I was thinking how I needed to get a new blue cloth overcoat made—I'd been planning to get one for three months already, but hadn't done it yet. That was why I needed to make some money. How come I couldn't find a way to make money? Was my social status any higher than some university professor? I toyed with the stalk of grass in my hand, pulverizing it, and loudly chanted that spoil-sport line of poetry, 'After cooking the crane and burning the zither<sup>1</sup>, I turn away from the green hill and lie in the moonlight.'

My nostalgia about the moonlight changed as I considered that, and I headed into my cottage to lie down in the moonlight. But as soon as I lay down on the bed, I heard someone shouting, 'Old Zhang, come quick, give me a hand!'

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<sup>1</sup> The expression 'cooking the crane and burning the zither' (*fenqin zhuhe* 焚琴煮鶴) indicates wasting resources, going to unnecessary and extravagant lengths.

When I looked up, I saw my distant relative Deng Jincai<sup>2</sup>. I hadn't seen him for many years, and I thought I'd heard he had a position as section chief in the county government somewhere, and had passed away on the job. I couldn't understand how I could run into him in this mountain village, but the thought passed in a flash and I got up to shake his hand at the door. He wore a grass-green short jacket with four big pockets, trousers of the same colour, and pointy-toe leather shoes, polished to a high sheen. In his hands he had a felt pork-pie hat, with which he was fanning himself. A pair of small suitcases sat in front and behind him.

I said, 'Haven't seen you for ages! What's up?'

Deng took a piece of paper out of his pants pocket. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and smiled, 'I can't carry these two suitcases any more. Please ask your servant to help me take them home. I'll tip him three postage stamps for his tea money. In the market you can use stamps as money. These three stamps I have on me were change from a long-distance bus ticket.'

I figured that his house wasn't too far away, and smiled, 'I'm both master and servant here. I'll carry one for you, and you can take the other.'

Actually he was quite polite, hoisting the larger suitcase and leading the way. I lifted the other and followed, now understanding why he was sweating so much: the suitcase was like solid iron. I could barely carry it more than ten paces before I ran out of breath. Seeing how Deng carried the case on his shoulder, steadying it with both hands, I copied him and lifted it up.

Seeing that I wore a grey cloth gown, swaying as I walked, the hands carrying the case being pale and without any of the rough calluses of manual labour, he appeared a touch guilty. He turned around and laughed, 'In this great era, we've got to learn how to run with our legs, make things with our hands, and carry with our shoulders, to be prepared for anything. All those intellectuals, the people afraid of damaging their bodies, are not going to make it. You're doing the right thing by not avoiding physical labour.'

I thought, how could I not be doing the right thing, saving you three postage stamps. However, I was exhausted and covered with sweat, too out of breath to even answer.

When we reached Deng's house, he was the first to rush in, yelling, 'Come on, get the stuff inside!'

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<sup>2</sup> The name is a pun on 'awaiting the arrival of wealth'.

Then his wife appeared, all giggles, and took in the bags.

Where Mr Deng lived was also a ‘national disaster house’, with bamboo walls and a thatch roof, the outer room only about ten feet wide, with a white wooden table, and two bamboo stools. Looking again I saw that Mrs Deng’s blue cloth gown had many patches, both large and small. Their circumstances were probably quite difficult. Because of this, I was not eager to accept their hospitality, and I turned to leave.

Deng Jincai held me back, saying, ‘Leaving without even smoking a single cigarette! So you look down on your relatives?’

Those five words, ‘look down on your relatives’, sounded rather serious; I really had to take a seat. Although he had said he was inviting me to have a smoke, he didn’t offer me a cigarette. Instead, Mrs Deng brought out two coarse rice bowls filled with boiling water. This made me feel even more sympathy for them.

Deng moved a bamboo stool over to sit next to me, and smirked, ‘Guess what I have in those two suitcases?’

I replied, ‘They sure are pretty heavy. Of course, you probably won’t have any hardware in there. Maybe books?’

Deng Jincai replied with a smile, ‘After all you are no stranger, and also I may need your help, so I won’t try to deceive you—Western pharmaceuticals.’

I said, ‘Pharmaceuticals? Nowadays even a single bottle of Western medicine is worth a lot of money. Your two suitcases ...’

He held up a hand, and whispered, ‘Keep your voice down,’ then pointed left and right at both sides of the room, indicating he was worried his neighbours might overhear.

I chuckled, ‘Where did you get so much medicine?’

He said, ‘There’s always a way, if you just pay attention. At the time of the retreat from Hankou<sup>3</sup>, I had a few hundred *yuan*. I thought, no way I could rely on just these few hundred *yuan* to get through a lengthy War of Resistance. I had to find a way to invest these few hundred and make more money. My wife wanted to invest in gold, but its price was already too high and not likely to get much higher, so I came up with a plan. I just stuffed the money in my pockets and went out onto the street to look around and see what good deals I could find. However, it wasn’t much of a plan, since all the stores were closing,

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<sup>3</sup> Wuhan, of which Hankou is a part, the temporary Nationalist capital, fell to the Japanese in October 1938 after a lengthy siege.

and everything was going at a discount—there was no way you could buy everything. Without intending to, I found myself standing in front of a little Western pharmacy; I looked around, but everything in the glass display-cases was already gone, except for two net baskets on the floor. The owner had already left and there was just an elderly clerk, packing up the last remaining items. I casually asked him, “You’re getting out, but are you still selling any medicine?” He said right back, “Of course we are! We’ll sell for whatever money we can get. We’re going back to the countryside.”

I interjected laughingly, ‘You obviously got a great deal, buying those two baskets of medicine.’

Deng responded, ‘What do you mean, *I* got a great deal? Actually, it was a much-better deal for that old clerk. The owner of the pharmacy, when he took off, left the remaining stock with the clerk, pretty much abandoning it. Can you imagine, what a windfall it was for that old clerk, just selling all of it and running away? So I got him to show me the account book, which listed all the medicines in the two baskets, and bought everything at a 50 per cent discount. It took forever to double-check all the drugs. When I brought them home, my wife was even upset with me. Once we got to Yichang<sup>4</sup>, where the situation was a little more stable, I looked into drug prices, and found I could already make a 100 per cent mark-up. So, I gritted my teeth and brought them here.’

I said, ‘Of course you figured that here they’d be more in demand.’

He grinned, ‘Along the way I pretended to be sick to check the cost of medicine, and by the time we got to Chongqing, I knew that the price of the drugs had increased by three or four times over what I paid. I figured it all out the first day and decided to go the next day to sell some to a pharmacy. Something came up, however, and I didn’t get go until the third day. Then, when I asked the price I found that it had risen even more. The storekeeper saw my brief-case, and not knowing I was there to sell drugs said to me, “You want to buy medicine, better buy now, otherwise, tomorrow and the day after the price will be even higher.” When I heard that, I took the drugs back with me to the inn.’

I said, ‘You still have enough cash to tide you over?’

Deng hesitated, then laughed: ‘Fortunately I’ve got a lot of friends from home, so when our money was used up, I could borrow a few more bucks here and there from them. As long as I could hold out, the drugs went up in value

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<sup>4</sup> A city further up the Yangtze, between Chongqing and Wuhan.

every day they sat at home, so I really couldn't bear to sell them. If I can't borrow any more money, I just pretend to be a refugee and sell some clothing on the street, since the weather is getting warmer now.'

As he said this, his wife came in, face flushed, and said, 'Jincai, how can you talk such nonsense? Good thing Cousin Zhang isn't a stranger, otherwise he wouldn't think very well of us.'

Deng Jincai tilted back his head, looking quite smug. He smiled, 'You women, what do you know? I'm telling this to our cousin in order to demonstrate my ability to deal with hardship. You women are so short-sighted, clamouring to sell when the prices have merely gone up five times. Look, where we are now?'

The mention of high drug prices seemed to strike the right chord and she was all giggles.

I said, 'Obviously, you've told me all this because you think I might be able to help in some way. I'm still self-sufficient, so I won't take advantage of you. I'll help however I can.'

My cousin's wife was elated, all smiles, her eyebrows lifted in delight, and said magnanimously, 'Based on the list price, it's just six or seven hundred *yuan*, not all that much.'

Her words jolted me into realizing that an initial investment of seven hundred *yuan* multiplied twenty or thirty times over would be around twenty thousand. Whether or not she was telling the truth, it was hard to believe these two broken old suitcases could actually be worth that much money.

Seeing my hesitation, Deng explained with a smile, 'Not everything in these suitcases is expensive drugs. There are over two thousand quinine pills as well.'

I said, 'That's not bad at all. Right now quinine pills are pretty expensive too.'

Deng said, 'Of course they are worth more than usual, but holding on to them like this and not selling has put me and my wife to much hardship. We have no cash. We lived like two refugees on the street for several months. Lately I've noticed that the situation seems to be getting better, so I sold some of the medicine to settle into these broken-down digs. Just now I was taking the drugs to show someone, but he said he was afraid to buy them all. He was worried the price is about to fall. You're in the news business, so you're much better informed than me. Do you think the War of Resistance will go on much longer?'

I felt that they were just too greedy, so I decided to scare them a little: 'You know, cousin, I was just about to tell you some very happy news when we met,

but I had to wait until you'd finished telling me this interesting story. Yesterday I heard from a very reliable source that within a few days the Japanese will suffer a total collapse, and the war will be over within two months.'

My cousin's wife blanched: 'It can't be that quick!'

I said, 'We're Chinese, of course we want China to quickly triumph. Even if it isn't that quick, we ought to plan on the assumption that it will be.'

Deng said, 'Of course! In which case, I should hurry and sell off the drugs right away.'

I smirked and said nothing. Just then, I saw a sallow-skinned fellow with unkempt short hair, sitting across the way on the pavement, sunning himself. A pair of beeswax-yellow skinny legs stuck out of his thin trousers, and he wore a tattered padded jacket with quite a few black clumps of cotton wadding sticking out. He was making groaning noises through his nose.

My cousin's wife said, 'Disgusting, that nasty Old Wang. Every day he comes to our door and groans.'

The person snorted, 'Ahh—look, we all come from the same province. It doesn't bother you if I sun myself here, not to mention that I also worked for two months in your house.'

On hearing the person speaking in full northern Anhui dialect, I stepped outside and asked, 'What county are you from? How did you end up like this?'

He recognized my accent was the same as his, then smiled, revealing a few off-white teeth, and nodded, 'Sir, I was originally a good working man, carrying water for some of the resettled families from the lower Yangtze region, earning a hundred or more *yuan* a month. At first I lived in Mr Deng's kitchen, carrying water for him for two months. He never paid me anything, and I didn't pay him any rent. I never expected that I'd catch this recurring chill, and now for the past month I no longer have any strength.'

I said, 'Can't you just buy a couple of quinine pills?'

He shook his head, 'Can't afford them! One *yuan* can only buy a few pills, and you need a lot more each day.'

I thought of the two thousand or more quinine pills in Deng Jincai's suitcases. This Old Wang was a compatriot a thousand miles from home. He should at least give him a few pills, not to mention that the guy worked for him for two months. It was a disgrace to have relatives like this! As I thought this I couldn't stand it any more, and turned around to leave.

I had hardly gone a few steps when that Old Wang called to me from behind, and hobbled up to me.

I stopped and asked him, 'What can I do for you?'

He looked crest-fallen and frowned: 'Really, I shouldn't be asking you, sir, but you seem to be kind and honourable, so maybe ...'

I said, 'Go ahead, I'll do whatever is in my power to do.'

Old Wang said, 'I have a cousin who works on the highway. I was thinking of looking for him. He often goes to Kunming and Rangoon, where they have plenty of the Western drugs that I need to take.'

I said, 'I understand. How much money do you need for the trip?'

Old Wang said, 'I can only go slowly on foot, and it will take more than a day. So I'll need money for food and lodging for two days.'

I really am not that gallant a person, but neither am I miser. I handed him two *yuan*-bills, thinking however that it really wouldn't be much help for his sickness. It was barely enough for four quinine pills. Nevertheless, instead of taking the bills right away, he dropped to his knees on the stone path, and propping himself up with ten fingers on the ground, kow-towed to me in gratitude.

I fumbled for the right words. This was embarrassing.

He stood up. Two trails of tears flowed down his sallow face. He said, 'Sir, these days, two *yuan* isn't much, but we are total strangers and yet you are willing to help me. I know lots of people here. Every day I beg them for help, but not only do they not give me any money, they look annoyed as soon as they see me.'

I said, 'So where do your three squares a day come from?'

He sighed, 'What square meals? Every day I beg for food. If I don't get anything I go hungry. Back home I was a handy man, good with any kind of work. Why did I even come to Sichuan?'

I said, 'I see. You probably haven't eaten today. So, let me give you a little more help.' So saying, I added another fifty-cent note, and smiled, 'Go buy two pounds of sweet potatoes for yourself.' Then, once I'd handed him the money, I left. It was not a big deal to me, so of course I didn't take it to heart, nor did I bother to think about what Old Wang would do with the two *yuan* fifty cents.

Two months passed. Then one day, I took the long-distance bus from town to the countryside. The driver, before boarding the bus, mumbled to the people waiting, 'They said they'd let me do a couple of Kunming runs, but they still make me drive this short trip.'



I thought to myself, he was too stressed, so I was afraid that there'd be some trouble on the way. Sure enough, after we had gone about ten kilometres, the bus broke down. According to the driver, there was no way to repair the broken part, so would the passengers please get off. I was always able to walk, and it was only seven or eight kilometres to my home, so without much fuss I got off the bus.

The spot where the bus had stopped was at the foot of a hill, at the top of which was a Western-style building, with a ten-foot-long vertical sign by the gate, indicating that this was a transportation company's warehouse. There were a few people standing by the building's railing, smiling at the passengers getting off the bus. They seemed to understand exactly what sort of farce was happening. As a journalist, I was naturally quite aware of such irony, so I hung my head and hurried away.

However, out of that crowd of merry onlookers, someone called, 'Hey, you, the gentleman in that blue cloth gown, wait a minute!'

I looked around at the other passengers, but there was no one else wearing a blue cloth gown. It had to be me who was being addressed, so I stopped.

The guy ran up to me. When I looked at him, I saw a dark, chubby face, wearing a blue serge Western suit, a colourful woollen shirt, and a crooked green silk tie around his neck. Furthermore, his shoulders were hunched slightly: clearly this was the first time he'd worn a Western-style suit. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't recall where or when we had met, so I just stared at him.

He smiled, 'Sir, don't you remember me? I once borrowed two *yuan* from you for travelling expenses.'

I emitted an 'oh' and remembered. This was the 'starving man in the shade of the mulberry tree'<sup>5</sup>, that Old Wang who had been sick and had to beg for his food. I looked him over from head to toe and laughed, 'Congratulations, you've done very well! I haven't seen you for two months and now you look fully recovered.'

Old Wang said, 'Trees grow from their roots. If it hadn't been for you helping me that time with that two *yuan* fifty cents, how could I have made it here? Originally I did want to go to your home to thank you, but as you can see

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<sup>5</sup> Classical tag referring to an anecdote in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 [Zuo commentary], Xuan 2, where an assassin is able to escape thanks to unexpected assistance from an otherwise unknown man he once assisted. A loose English equivalent might be, 'Cast your bread upon the waters.'

I wasn't thinking clearly. Not only did I have no idea where you live, I didn't even know your name.'

I smiled, 'It was nothing. No need to mention it.'

Old Wang said, 'I'd like to pay you back, but that would be offensive to someone like you. But I have to do something. We've got a car here going into town, so I will accompany you, as your host. Either this afternoon or tomorrow morning, we can catch a ride back.'

I was absolutely unwilling to receive such hospitality in return for two *yuan* of charity, so I naturally declined. However, Old Wang was utterly sincere, and he dragged me into the warehouse office, treating me to tea and cigarettes. He asked for my name and address, as though he were planning on some other way to repay me. He also had a room of his own, so he closed the door so we could talk privately.

He sat facing me, looking down at his suit, clearly a little embarrassed, and blushed, 'Sir, you see the way I'm dressed, it isn't really suitable, is it? I never expected I'd see this day either. The day I took your two *yuan*, I came and joined up with my cousin and in less than ten days I was over my sickness. He had to go to Haiphong to deliver cargo, and needed someone he could trust to help, so he took me. Several people who wanted to make the trip but couldn't lent me a few hundred *yuan* on the q.t. to do some trading and suggested what goods to buy. I took their advice, sold the goods when I came back, and not only did I double their money, I made some cash for myself. I'll be going again soon, so if you need anything, just let me know and I'll get it for you.'

I laughed, 'There's no need for that. But, tell me, what sort of goods did you get? And how much did you make? I just want to know, to understand better how things work.'

He listened, scratching his bald head, a little hesitant.

I said, 'If you feel it's not appropriate, no need to say anything.'

He laughed, 'Nothing inappropriate about it. I invest for profit. It's all more or less just commerce, except we make a bit more money.'

I laughed, 'Even you admit you made quite a bit, so it must be an impressive amount.'

Old Wang laughed, 'I probably made just under three thousand *yuan*.'

I was quite surprised to hear this. Imagine that! A beggar could make a trip to Haiphong and make three thousand *yuan*!

He saw how startled I was, and laughed, 'You shouldn't think this is so extraordinary. The guys who really do big business, it's not unheard for them to make hundreds of thousands of *yuan* each trip.'

I laughed, 'I'm not surprised that you were able to make money. What I'm amazed by is that in Chongqing it's that easy to make so much money.'

He replied, 'My cousin said, even though we're just trading goods to make money, we have to have some conscience. We can always make money from ordinary people, but why do that at a time like this? So what we bring in now are cosmetics, fabric for suits, and imported canned food, all for people with money.'

I said, 'So these things that you bring in, they're all luxury items ...'

He didn't let me finish speaking, since he already knew what I was going to say, and nodded in agreement smilingly: 'I only bring in cosmetics, easy to carry. For example, lipsticks, the size of a finger; I can buy French lipsticks in Haiphong, very fine quality. Fifty lipsticks can easily fit around my waist.' He let out a laugh as he said this.

I had the cigarette he'd given me between my fingers, which I lifted to my mouth, raised my head, and inhaled, looking blankly at the blue sky outside the window.

He laughed, 'Mr Zhang, what are you thinking? You don't believe me?'

I laughed, 'Not only don't I think you've made it up, I'm wondering whether you told me everything. What I'm thinking is that you said how you aren't taking money from ordinary people, you only make money from the rich, but you haven't thought about where the rich get their money. You can make tens of *yuan* from the rich from a single ordinary tube of lipstick, and it won't bother them one bit. But wool comes from the back of a sheep. Every *yuan* they spend—where do you think they got it? Now, for every hundred *yuan* they spend, don't you think it comes from the same place?'

Old Wang forced a smile, then tilted his head and considered what I had said, as though he didn't entirely understand what I meant.

On such issues, I was pretty good at sounding like a student activist using 'Master Sheng's explanatory method'<sup>6</sup>. I was just about to expound in detail when I heard someone outside the door shouting, 'I'm done, I'm done; eight rounds of mah-jong! I've already lost more than two thousand *yuan*.'

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<sup>6</sup> Refers to a famous monk, Daosheng 道生 (d.434), whose reasoning was so clear and persuasive that he could get a stone to agree.

I looked out the window and saw a guy in a blue sweater and workman's pants. Old Wang got up and said, 'Game's over, Third Brother Zhang? Shall we go?' Zhang Third nodded, 'Let's go take a bath at the hotel in town.'

Old Wang said, 'Okay, I'll go with you. Third Brother Zhang! Let me introduce you to the gentleman I've told you about. He's also named Zhang.'

Zhang Third came in and shook hands with me: 'Not bad, everyone should be more like you.'

I thought he sounded a bit crude, but not improper. I modestly thanked him. He then pulled out a finely made tobacco case and offered me a cigarette. I could see the English print on the tobacco paper. It was Three Castles. I thought, besides top-level bank staff, hardly any officials of the second level or lower smoked Three Castles. So his income had to be at least more than the regular salary of a second-level official.

He saw me deep in thought, or else he understood what I was thinking, and beamed, 'These days, if you have money and don't spend it, you're a fool. Come on, we're going into town. I have some friends at the hotel in town who've booked long-term rooms. We can take a bath there. Old Wang will treat you to dinner, and I'll take you to a drum-song performance.'

I smiled, 'Actually I was heading home from town to take care of some business, so how can I go back to town?'

Zhang Third said, 'I hope you are not looking down on us working folk?'

This was a little heavy-handed, and it left me no choice but to follow them out and ride back to town in their truck.

As it turned out, they did have a big room in the best hotel in town, where two people were already seated. One wore a newly made bronze-coloured camels-hair long gown. The other wore a chequered wool Western suit, legs up on the sofa, half reclining, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, looking very relaxed.

Zhang Third introduced me. The long gown was a Mister Jin from Jiangsu, the suit was a Mister Qian from Hubei<sup>7</sup>. Mr Qian mistook me for one of their crowd, so after making room for me to sit, he asked what line of business I was in.

I laughed, 'I deal in old paper.'

He took it at face value, and nodded, 'That's not bad. I've got a friend, he brought a boatload of paper up from Yichang, but because there was too much

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<sup>7</sup> *Jin* 金 is literally gold and *qian* 錢 means money. Both places are downriver from Sichuan, i.e., they have accompanied the K.M.T. to Chongqing.

of it, he couldn't send it up on a ship, so he chartered a big wooden barge. The boat spent three months on the Yangtze. At first he was very anxious for it to arrive, then, later, he was worried it would arrive too soon.'

I asked, 'How come?'

Mr Qian said, 'You see, with the price of paper going up every day, he might as well leave it on the boat longer. When it docks, he has to transfer it to a warehouse, and with so many people leaving town for the countryside, it's hard to find a warehouse, and even when you do, you have to pay for storage each day. When he shipped the goods from Yichang, the price for newsprint alone was only twenty *yuan* per ream. Now, without even considering the black market, anywhere it's at least two hundred. It's huge—he really has it made.' He ended up with what the old folks back home like to say: 'There's really nothing like it!'

I said, 'Was he able to sell all his goods?'

Mr Qian said, 'He sells a little whenever he needs some spending money. All the people hoarding goods do the same thing. No one lets it go all at once.'

I chuckled, 'Mr Qian, since you know all this so well, of course you aren't just standing on the sidelines watching other people get rich. You surely must have your own way to make money.'

Mr Qian grinned, 'I kind of got into this by accident. When I was leaving Shashi<sup>8</sup>, I knew a lot of shopowners who needed quick cash. Since I was heading for Sichuan, I put up some money and bought out their remaining inventory.'

I asked, 'What sort of inventory?'

Mr Qian took out a cigarette from the tin of Three Castles on the coffee table, methodically tapping it on the table, ignoring the question. My question must have been a bit out of line, and he was unwilling to talk any more. Just then Zhang Third, in pyjamas, came in from the bathroom, and I took this opportunity to change the subject. 'That was a quick bath!' I said with a smile.

He looked at Mr Qian and laughed, 'The water is hot, go take your bath now!'

Mr Qian stood up, undid his buttons, and moved leisurely toward the bathroom.

Just then, the waiter hurried in with a note. Mr Jin took it and looked it over, his expression changing. Mr Qian, who was already half-way to the bathroom, seemed a bit startled, and spun around to read the note too. Then he said, 'I see. Let's go check it out right away.'

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<sup>8</sup> Shashi, then the second largest city in Hubei province, fell to the Japanese in June 1940.

His face had gone a bit pale as he looked at Mr Jin. The two men took their hats from the stand, and hurried out.

They had, however, instead of taking it with them, left the note delivered by the waiter on the edge of the table. Old Wang, who was sitting right by the table, picked it up and handed it to Zhang Third: 'Take a look, what's in it that made those two run off in such a hurry?'

Zhang Third took the note, holding it with both hands to read, then shook his head: 'Handwriting is too unclear, seems to say they lost a couple of things at home—Mr Zhang, can you give it a try?'

He handed the note to me. Frankly, I was not eager to peek at someone else's private messages, but since Zhang Third had already given the note to me, and since it was about something they'd lost, it probably wasn't much of a secret anyway. So, I took the note and read the message:

To XX Hotel Room Three, Mr Qian: Price of yarn already fallen by two hundred  *yuan*, and falling further. Please advise what action to take. Respond asap.  
From Zhibai.

I thought it was funny Zhang Third had misread the words for 'fall' and thought they meant something had been lost.

Zhang Third said, 'So, what's it say?'

I told him, since I felt that, as one of their crowd, he shouldn't be kept in the dark.

Zhang Third took off the sandals from his feet, slapped them on the floor, and frowned thoughtfully: 'Yesterday I told him to sell a few more bales, but he wouldn't. Now he's losing tens of thousands.'

I asked, 'So these two are in the cotton yarn business?'

Zhang Third said, 'Mr Qian is in cotton, Mr Jin's in silk. We have a sort of business relationship. Mr Qian's yarn is all stored in a village in the countryside; every time he sells a bale, we have to bring one in from the countryside. It's not easy.'

I said, 'With the price of yarn what it is now, it must have reached its peak. Not selling would be a mistake.'

Zhang Third said, 'But everybody is still hoarding!'

I asked, 'How much inventory does he have?'

Zhang Third scratched his head, then smiled, 'That's hard to say. In terms of his original capital, it's not that much, no more than twenty thousand *yuan*. But now, it's a crazy amount. If they were still selling aviation lottery tickets, it'd be like he's won two jackpots.'

As he said this, he smoothed his hair some more, and smirked: 'I shouldn't say any more. The fact is, people in business these days are all making big money.'

I shook my head slowly, 'They surely can't all be.'

Old Wang said, 'All right, just forget it. No point in going on about things that don't concern us. Let's get changed and go out to eat.'

Zhang Third pondered this, while sticking his hand in the cigarette tin. Finding it empty, he fished a hundred-*yuan* bill out of the pocket of his coat hanging on the rack. He rang the bell on the table, and the waiter came in. He gave him the money and said, 'Buy a tin of cigarettes, and go to the Nanjing restaurant across the way and reserve us a table. Tell them it's Zhang in Room Three here. They'll know.' The waiter bowed, took the money, and left.

Seeing this, I was startled. Back when I was in Beiping, I'd seen high government officials throw money around just like this. I wondered whether they were doing this to make me feel special, so I said, 'Third Brother Zhang, don't do anything fancy, whatever is easy will be fine.'

Zhang Third said to me, 'No matter, never mind. We can't not have any cigarettes, after all.'

Just then the waiter came in to say that there was a phone call.

Zhang Third slipped on his sandals and went to take the call, and after about twenty minutes we heard him returning, shouting, 'Old Wang, tomorrow we have to go to Haiphong. Tonight's dinner is on me, I'm hosting, I insist.'

Just at that moment two sandals flew in through the door, and Zhang Third followed, tripping and falling into the room head first. Old Wang rushed to catch him, but he'd already got up, and clapping his hands he said, 'We've just got this one night left in Chongqing, it doesn't matter what we spend; in a month, our pockets will be full again.' As he said this, he stomped his bare feet on the floor, rocking his shoulders rhythmically, singing to the beat of some dance music.

I finally understood, about that Nanjing University professor who became a trucker. People don't just change their profession for no good reason.