

# Let Us Go and See the Sea

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Mama had said that Hsin-lien-tzu *Hu-t'ung* was shaped like a soup spoon with our home down at the bottom near the spot where you usually sipped your soup. And Papa was glaring at me with a set face, scolding,

“You never listen! Don't make so much noise when you drink your soup, *slurp-slurp*, it's not lady-like. And when you ladle your soup, don't hit the bowl with your spoon, clinking it so noisily.”

I picked up my spoon very carefully and dipped it into the soup bowl ever so gently, but Papa got mad again,

“Children should wait until their elders have begun. You can't just dive into every new dish that is put on the table!” Then he turned to Mama,

“You can't just go on not teaching the children any manners ...”

I was in a hurry, as I wanted to finish my supper and go outside the gate to watch Fang Te-ch'eng and Liu P'ing play ball, so I slurped my soup noisily, let my spoon clatter against the bowl

and was the first to begin eating. I was already full but had to sit at the table, waiting to fill up Papa's second bowl of rice. Papa said that we shouldn't leave everything for the servants to do, that even as big as he is, if he were still on the old homestead, he would have to stand by after he had finished his meal to wait on Grandfather.

When I filled Papa's bowl, I took the opportunity to slip away from the table, sidling toward the desk that stood by the front window. I overheard Mama saying softly,

"Don't be so strict with the child; after all, how old is she? Ever since last year when that demented woman scared her so badly that she fell seriously ill, she has been too timid. Every time you scold her so loudly she just sits quietly without a single word. She wasn't that way before! Now we have moved here into a new place and as she starts going to school, she's forgetting the past; she has just begun to gain a little weight ..."

Oh, Mama! Why do you have to mention that strange affair again? You often talk about who is crazy, who is a fool, who is a cheat, who is a thief...I can't tell the difference. Just at that moment I lifted my head and saw the white clouds floating in the blue sky. I immediately thought of the twenty-sixth lesson in our reader "Let Us Go and See the Sea":

Let us go and see the sea!  
 Let us go and see the sea!  
 On the big blue sea  
 Are hoisted the white sails;  
 The golden-red sun

Rises up from the sea,  
Shining on the sea, shining on the sails.  
Let us go and see the sea!  
Let us go and see the sea!

I could not make out which was the sea or which was the sky. The golden-red sun, does it rise from the blue sea? Or does it rise from the blue sky? But I loved to read this lesson. I read it over and over as if I were lying on a cloud. I have already memorized this lesson. Mama praised me before Papa and Sung Ma, saying that I was studious and studied well. Last year's lessons: "Man, Hand, Foot, Knife, Ruler, Dog, Cow, Sheep; One Body Two Hands..." I would like to forget all of them!

Papa went to take his nap. Nobody was supposed to bother him, so there was not a single sound in the whole house. I heard a "thump! thump!" against the garden wall. That must be Fang Te-ch'eng's ball against the wall. I was thinking how I could go out to talk and play with them. In school, we girls didn't talk with the boys. We ignored them or glared at them, but now I wanted to play ball very much.

Good Mama, she came over to me,

"Go out and tell those two unruly children not to play ball at our door. Your papa is sleeping!"

That was good enough for me. I flew out the door, my pigtail catching on the nail on the doorframe again, pulling tight the roots of my hair. It was so painful! Why didn't they pull this nail out? Oh, yes, it was put there by Papa to hang

the shoe brush on. He brushed his shoes every time he went out or came home. He told me to do the same but I felt that I could clean my shoes better by stamping my feet.

Sung Ma was in the doorway feeding Little Sister her congee. She had mint leaves in her hairpin, and peelings of little red turnips stuck on her temples because she had a headache. When I opened the gate, Sung Ma asked, "Where're you gadding to?"

"Ma told me to go out." I said, self-righteously.

The round open space outside our gate was filled with sunlight and looked just like a spoonful of shimmering soup. I stood before Fang Te-ch'eng and self-importantly declared, "You're not supposed to kick the ball against our wall, my father is sleeping!"

Fang Te-ch'eng picked up his ball and stood looking at me stupidly.

Right across from our home was an empty house where there was nobody but an old caretaker who was deaf, and even he would often lock up the house and go to live at his daughter's home. I didn't know how Sung Ma knew, but she said this house was haunted. When Mama heard this, she said to Papa, "Why are there so many haunted houses in Peking?"

Between this haunted house and another house was an empty plot of land about the size of a room that was overgrown with grass. In front of this was a broken-down wall that even I could step over. The grass inside was taller than the wall. This vacant lot was said to be where the stables of the haunted house had originally been. But these had fallen