

辛其氏：尋人

Missing Person

By Xin Qi Shi

Translated By D. E. Pollard

LIU QIAN seeks news of his brother Liu Yi, born in Wuxi, Jiangsu, in June 1929, not heard of since going to Hong Kong in 1955, ever more deeply missed. Would he write at once to 60 Liao Lane, Suzhou. Or if any kind person knows his whereabouts would they likewise pass on any news. Alternatively telephone Mr Chen on Hong Kong 402368.

It was some weeks into the Chinese new year. A cold wind moaned, the sky was grey and heavy, the sun itself seemed to be veiled. Clad in a heavy quilted windcheater and swathed in a scarf, I struggled off the train in a press of noisy passengers, both hands full of baggage. From between the plain heavy pillars of the railway station I got a view of an old, unspoilt city: low houses laid out row after row, grey-black tiles laden with dust blown by the winter wind, and clumps of grass growing in the gaps between the tiles—a hint of life amid the bleakness.

A dirt road ran in front of the station. Billows of yellow dust rose in the wake of passing vehicles. As the setting sun shone wanly through the swirling dustcloud, the dim shapes of trees and eaves were superimposed on the filmy background. Waves of bicycles emerged from the evening shadows with shrill ringing of bells, to plunge again into the murky curtains of dust.

After the other passengers from the train had gone their different ways, I was left all alone at the station entrance, looking everywhere for an Overseas Chinese reception centre or a taxicab office, but as it transpired this place was not as well

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provided as other cities and provincial centres. Apart from a sense of the pulse of the night growing stronger, all I was aware of was people's curious, though friendly, stares; of taxis, or even any motorized transport, there was no sign whatever.

I had travelled long and far, taking in six provinces and fourteen cities. Riding south from the ice-bound northern landscape, all along the track were brownish withered grass and ugly bare branches poking up towards a saturnine sky. Dazzling to the eye were the thick white tongues that hung down in the high mountain ranges: probably one freezing cold night the cascading streams and waterfalls had suddenly caught their breath, stopped short in mid-torrent, as if the earth had dozed off and everything returned to stillness. Swept southward by the speeding train, I by and by glimpsed flowing waters, and plants that carried a hint of green casually stretching their limbs in places unobserved by men. Finally as night was drawing in I reached Suzhou City, feeling ragged with fatigue, and longing desperately for a warm lodging. But without even a map of Suzhou in my possession, I had no idea which direction I should take, and felt totally lost and helpless. My mistake had been to bank on Suzhou having a taxi service at the station, like other cities. With bags in both hands, I tried to find somewhere with a telephone, so as to get on to the local travel service. A succession of people with round and rosy faces, and eyes gleaming brightly from under the peaks of caps, or out from the folds of scarves wrapped round their heads, looked me up and down, muttered things among themselves I could not catch, then bent their heads again and headed on their way into a blisteringly cold wind.

It was then that a big fellow apparently in his fifties, with his hands thrust into the sleeves of his grey cotton padded coat, pushed his way through the crowd and addressed me. He had on a grey corduroy helmet, with the flaps pulled down over his ears. His bronzed face was etched with deep lines.

"Hello, where are you from?"

"Hong Kong. I've just got off the train from Nanjing."

"How come there's nobody to meet you? Didn't you get in touch with the travel bureau?"

"All the other big cities have a taxi service at the station, I thought this would be no exception, so I didn't arrange to be met."

He looked at my luggage, picked up one of my bags, and insisted on seeing me to a hotel.

"Please don't let me delay you, I'd be grateful if you would just take me to somewhere I could telephone from."

"It's no trouble; it's cold and you don't know your way. There isn't a decent map of Suzhou to be found, either. My van is not far away, come along with me."

He spoke with decisiveness and palpable warmth. I followed him round a corner, and sure enough a light goods van was parked by the roadside. The words "Suzhou Embroidery Works" were inscribed on the door.

The van went out of the Ping Gate, and headed for the Suzhou Hotel along People's Road. Along the way he acted as my impromptu guide. Unfortunately darkness fell quickly, the streetlights were dim and the town deserted. Even of the Northern Pagoda only the towering outline was visible, but the black

silhouette against the pale grey backdrop of the sky gave one a feeling of serenity and civilization.

"May I ask your name, friend?"

"Liu Qian," he replied with a smile.

"My name is Chen. I feel really bad about holding you up and making you late for supper."

"It's nothing. I've just delivered some embroideries, and have got to take the van back to the works. I can drop you off on my way."

When the van got to the Suzhou Hotel, Liu Qian promptly helped me with my luggage. I was much moved by his kindness, and just as I was thinking how I could express my gratitude, he seemed to divine my intention. He said a hasty good-bye, turned and left. After filling out the forms I was given a room. I collapsed on the soft and inviting bed, and at once felt my bones, weary from the painful jolting of the railway carriage, at blissful ease. As I drifted into sleep, I suddenly realized my stupidity: how could I have forgotten to ask Liu Qian's address!

Soon after five the next morning I was strolling along Friendship Road in front of the hotel. The morning mist was so thick you could not see more than ten paces. I came to a stop on the hump-backed bridge, looked down into the waters, and watched the boats emerge from the enveloping fog and pass creaking on their way. Two women dressed in patterned blue padded coats and carrying two baskets of vegetables and live fish stepped onto the bridge, laughing and chatting. I bade them good morning, and asked where I might find the morning market. They told me that near the Palace Gate there was a market for trading "non-staple foodstuff"—but I would find it very crowded.

I took a car straight to the Palace Gate market. Suzhou fairly hummed with life in the morning. The breakfast cafés lining the streets had removed their shutters, and clouds of steam billowed out from within. Bamboo baskets were filled with Suzhou-style hot savoury buns, and workers and pupils on their way to work and school jammed the doorways. Long strings of concrete and wooden barges in the canals, carrying goods and people and livestock, threaded through the series of arched bridges, all of uniform height, while on the bridges speeding bicycles shuttled back and forth, their riders' faces glowing red as they sprang into view.

The Palace Gate Market consisted of two long narrow alleys, but you could not see its limits for the bobbing heads and the traders' stands. Farmers' private produce was piled on both sides of the alleys: melons and fruits, fresh fish and live shrimps, and trays and trays of eggs both big and cheap. The townspeople got to the market at crack of dawn, and as they took home a basket of vegetables, their faces were full of hope for the day, as if what they carried in their baskets was their personal happiness.

As I looked around amid the noise and pandemonium of the alleys, I suddenly caught sight of a retreating figure I thought I recognized. Carried along by excitement, I forced my way through the milling throng, almost overturning an egg-stand in the process. Eventually I caught up with Mr Liu, but he was evidently oblivious of my existence. He was just drifting with the human tide, his brow knitted and his head bent. The expression on his face was wooden. I had to call his name twice

before he slowly turned his head.

"Mr Liu, so it's you after all. This is a stroke of luck; I was kicking myself last night for forgetting to write down your address!"

"Mr Chen, I didn't expect to run into you in a place like this!"

Liu Qian was carrying a basket. He was dressed the same as the previous evening, but his eyes were all blood-shot. Clearly he hadn't had much sleep.

"It's my day off today, so I set off first thing for the market, to see if I could get some fresh fish for a change."

Although his tone was light, I could see something was weighing on his mind.

"Ah, if you have time to spare today, I'd like to stand you a lunch. And I won't accept a refusal!"

Liu Qian waved his big hand and shook his head. He led me to the comparative quietness of a side lane.

"I really appreciate your offer, but what I did last night didn't cost me anything. 'Ships that pass in the night', as they say—but it's been nice meeting you all the same. I've got an invalid at home and I've got to get back. Sorry, I'll just have to pass up the lunch."

At my pressing request he wrote his address on a slip of brown paper: No. 60 Liao Lane.

"I hope you enjoy yourself in Suzhou. It won't be all that difficult for you to come back when you feel like it. Drop a line whenever you have time, so we can get to know each other better."

"Yes, I'll do that."

As I spoke I wrote down my contact address in Hong Kong and handed it to Liu Qian. He took me to a bus stop and saw me on to the bus to Tiger Hill. He stood there waving till the bus was out of sight.

That day I toured the famous gardens of Suzhou, all designed with infinite care and ingenuity. The carving on the latticed windows and door panels of the garden retreats once owned by grand families is a sight never to be forgotten. Any of the narrow winding lanes in Suzhou might hide undreamt-of pavilions sited over a lake; to open a window is to reveal a world of waterways, and offer the unforeseen pleasure of a view of "bright flowers against shady willows".

When I returned at dusk to the hotel, the attendant told me a comrade Liu had telephoned. In my mind's eye I saw again Liu Qian's blood-shot eyes and care-worn look. I returned to my room and ran the water for a bath as I waited for Liu Qian to call back. But half an hour passed and my curiosity finally overcame me. I felt for the slip of paper in my coat pocket with Liu Qian's address on it, and decided to pay him a visit.

The car put me down at the end of Liao Lane. The street lamps were dim, but by dint of poring over the numbers on the doors, I finally tracked down No. 60. It was a two-storied wooden house with a gabled roof of dark tiles. The peeling door had two iron knockers, and over the lintels was a sign reading "Promote the Four Modernizations". I knocked, and the door creaked open. A middle aged woman poked her head out, and her doubtful eyes rapidly inspected me from head to foot.

"Yes, who're you looking for?"

"Comrade Liu Qian. Does he live here?"

"Mm, just a minute."

She turned round and called: "Mr Liu, a visitor for you!"

Liu Qian came out from the faintly lit passage. As he saw that I had actually turned up at his house, his genuine pleasure shone through, though nervousness and apprehension was still written all over his face. He immediately ushered me into his room and prepared tea for me. It looked as if the house was shared by three or four families. Liu Qian's quarters were not spacious, but they were bright and clean. A woman lay on a bed. She struggled to sit up and greet me.

"This is my wife. She's got cancer of the lung. She's the invalid I referred to."

Liu Qian handed me a cup of tea and two squares of cake.

"Oh. How is she feeling now?"

"Last night she tossed and turned the whole night. I'm afraid she has got to live with painkillers from now on."

Anguish and pity mingled in Liu Qian's eyes, but perhaps because the illness had dragged on for so long, when he spoke of his wife's condition his tone was remarkably calm.

"I am sorry, I hope my visit hasn't put you out too much."

"Not at all, we don't often get the pleasure. Eat the cake while it is hot. When it's cold it gets hard, and you won't like it."

A photograph hung on the wall. It was of Liu Qian, his wife, and a round-faced young woman in pigtailed.

"This is my daughter Wenhong."

Liu Qian's voice came from behind me.

"Is she still at work as late as this?"

"I'm really sorry to have bothered you like this. You were out when I rang this afternoon. I hope you had a good time today."

"Yes, very nice." I wondered why it was that Liu Qian avoided answering my question and did not explain the reason for his telephone call.

"Mr Liu, I'll be leaving Suzhou tomorrow afternoon, and I don't know if we will meet again. So I came especially to thank you again in person, and to say good-bye. I've brought these sweets for you, I hope you will accept them."

I became aware of Liu Qian's wife lying propped against her pillows, her speechless lips the more prominent due to her sunken cheeks. When she shot an agitated glance at him, Liu Qian quickly bent his head, and mechanically started poking the stove. The coke crackled and sparked, crackled and sparked.

"That's very good of you." He lifted his head, and as if he had come to a decision, his face took on a serious expression.

"I'm afraid my wife won't live beyond the summer. She has her heart set on seeing my younger brother. But he disappeared to Hong Kong in 1955, and we haven't heard of him since. For all these years she has been worrying about him. I was going to ask you if you would put a missing persons advert in the papers for us when you get back to Hong Kong. I know it would be asking a lot—perhaps too much?"

"No, of course not. If you'd write down his name and date of birth, I'll see to it when I return. But there are five million people in Hong Kong, I'm afraid it will be looking for a needle in a haystack. There's no guarantee we'll find him."

"I understand that. To be honest, I have no high hopes, it's really only for my wife's peace of mind. Needless to say, if we are able to find him, we'll be eternally grateful."

Liu Qian hurriedly found pen and paper, and wrote down: "Liu Yi, from Wuxi in Jiangsu, born June 1929." A comforted but at the same time resigned smile came to his wife's deathly pale visage. No doubt she also felt the hope was decidedly slim. After a while I said goodbye and prepared to return to my hotel. Liu Qian donned his grey padded coat, insisting on seeing me to the end of the lane. We talked as we walked.

"Why doesn't Mrs Liu go into hospital? She couldn't get all the attention she needs at home."

"Alas, they've already taken away most of her lungs. The doctors all say it's just a matter of time now. She prefers to be at home, and wants to die in her own bed. What can I do but let her have her way?"

The wind in the lane was blowing hard. The passers-by had their necks tucked into the collars of their baggy padded overcoats. As we neared the end of the lane Liu Qian put his mouth to my ear.

"Wenhong slipped away to smuggle herself to Hong Kong, last spring it was. So far there's been no news of her. If she is lucky and makes it there, she is sure to write to me, and I'll tell you her address. If by any chance she has run into trouble, I hope you'll be able to help her. I know I've got no right to ask such a favour, but Wenhong means the world to me, and I don't know anyone else in Hong Kong."

"Oh dear, Hong Kong is a pretty tough place too. Seeing that you are so fond of her, why did she have to take such a risk?"

Liu Qian had probably mulled things over for the whole of the afternoon before deciding to put his trust in me, a total stranger. But no amount of misgiving could ultimately resist the tide of family affection.

"I couldn't dissuade her, she wanted to find her father!"

"You mean . . . ?" My astonishment left me speechless.

Liu Qian hung his head. His furrowed brow hinted at a sorrow that could not be put into words. But in no time he reverted to his former calmness of manner.

The hotel car had already driven up to the end of the lane. He held my hand in a strong grip. His palm was warm but trembled slightly from his agitation.

"Liu Yi is her father. I hope you will find him very soon. I'm just afraid that by the time the summer is out, it will all be too late. Take care!"

As the car drove away from Liao Lane I turned to see Liu Qian's slightly bent figure swallowed up in the shadowy depths of the long lane. The dust that swirled up and settled again to earth covered many family tragedies. With the passing of the years, looking back with eyes dimmed with age, all the pain and sorrow had been sublimated, dissolved in mist and haze, leaving an irreducible residue of affection, which as the seasons continued to alternate had become knotted with sadness.

The next afternoon I took a car to the railway station, and along my way I enjoyed the views of Suzhou with its criss-crossing canals. Women rinsing clothes and washing vegetables squatted on the steps at the water's edge at the back of their houses, exchanging cheerful greetings with their familiars among the traders on the boats that plied back and forth. The greyish-yellow water reflected the bridge arches and house eaves, as line after line of tremulous waves spread out towards the banks. The pounding sound of washerwomen drubbing clothes reverberated far and wide, reminding one of the bell of Hanshan Temple.

As the Shanghai train was about to depart, I propped myself on the window ledge watching the street scene. Suddenly I saw Liu Qian, flushed from exertion, hasten onto the platform and start looking anxiously into the carriages. I hurriedly leant out of the window and waved. He ran over and handed me a tin of cakes. The train slowly pulled out. We smiled and held each other in a firm gaze, as if we were both privy to the same secret.

As my holiday was drawing to a close and I was preoccupied with Liu Qian's affair, I only stayed five days in Shanghai and Hangzhou, and then returned with all speed to Hong Kong.

The notice seeking Liu Yi was entered in a whole selection of papers for about two months, but no response was ever forthcoming.

As always there were endless things to attend to after coming back from holiday. The dog days of summer were over, and there was a slight chill in the air at dawn and dusk. Just lately Liu Qian had not replied to my letters, and with Liu Yi not having surfaced, we had reached an impasse.

When I returned to my office today, a letter was waiting on my desk, post-marked Suzhou. The handwriting was well formed but unfamiliar.

Dear Mr Chen,

Mother passed away at home last month. Father is grieved beyond measure. He is in no heart to write. I myself returned home from labour-correction camp just in time for the funeral. Father has bidden me to compose this letter on his behalf, to relieve your anxiety. He will write himself soon to tell you of events. He begs to be excused for any discourtesy.

With kind regards
Wenhong.

2nd Oct.

The whole of my day was spent amid the urgent ringing of the telephone and a frenzy of business matters, but even so those bloodshot eyes of Liu Qian and the deathly pale face of his wife often came into my mind's eye. Now it is night and I cannot get to sleep. The watery light of the full moon floods the windowsill. From time to time the sound of a car breaks the silence of the night. The countless private pains and sorrows that people have to live with have receded into dark corners. Stray cats scavenging for food occasionally let out piercing screeches from their hiding places, repeated yet monotonous, stretching the night out long, so very long. □