

小橘燈

The Little Orange Lamp

Translated by Gong Shifen

ALL this happened more than a decade ago.

On the afternoon before Chinese New Year's Day I went to visit a friend in the suburbs of Chongqing. She lived on the top floor of the village office building. A flight of dark, narrow stairs led to a room where a table and several bamboo stools stood and a telephone hung on the wall. Beyond this room, separated by a mere cloth curtain, was the room where my friend lived. She had gone out, leaving a note on the desk by the window saying that she had been called away unexpectedly and wanted me to wait for her to come back.

I sat down at her desk, picked up a newspaper and started reading. Suddenly I heard the wooden door of the outside room open with a squeak. Shortly after, I heard someone moving a bamboo stool. I lifted the curtain and looked, only to find a small girl of about eight or nine. She had a pale thin face, and her lips were frozen purple because of the cold. Her hair was cut fairly short and she was dressed in worn-out clothes. She wore no socks, only a pair of straw sandals. She was climbing onto the bamboo stool, trying to get hold of the receiver; but she quickly withdrew her hand as if startled at the sight of me. I asked her,

“Do you want to make a phone call?”

“Yes,” she nodded as she climbed off the stool. “I want to call the hospital. I want Dr Hu. Mum has just spat up a lot of blood!”

“Do you know the phone number?” I asked. She shook her head and said,

“The Little Orange Lamp” was first published in *Zhongguo Shaonian bao*, January 1957. Subsequently it became the title story of a volume of fiction, essays and poetry by Bing Xin, published by Zuoqia chubanshe in 1960.

"I was just going to ask the Telephone Service for it" I immediately looked in the directory beside the telephone and soon found the number. Then I asked her again:

"If I get the doctor where should I tell him to go?"

"Just tell her Wang Chunlin's wife is ill, and she will come," she replied.

I made the phone call and got through to the doctor. The girl gratefully thanked me and turned to leave straight away. I stopped her and asked,

"Is your home far from here?"

"Just down in the valley, under the big yellow fruit tree," she told me, pointing outside the window. "It takes only a couple of minutes to get there." With these words, she clattered downstairs.

Returning to my friend's room I read the newspaper from cover to cover, then picked up the *Three Hundred Tang Poems* and went through half of it. It was getting more and more overcast outside, yet there was no sign of my friend. Bored, I stood up, looked out the window, and watched the hazy mountain scenery in the thick fog. I spotted the small hut under the yellow fruit tree, and suddenly got the idea that I should visit the little girl and her sick mother. I went downstairs, bought a few big oranges from the hawker at the door, put them into my handbag, and walked along the uneven slabstone path down to the hut.

I knocked softly on the wooden door. The young girl I had met just now answered. Seeing me, she was a little taken aback at first, but soon began to smile and beckoned me in. On the plank bed against the wall her mother was lying on her back, her eyes closed. She must have gone to sleep. There were blood stains spattered on the bedclothes round her neck. Her face was turned to the wall, and I could only see tangled wisps of hair across her face and the coil at the back of her head. There was a small charcoal stove by the door, and on it a small, simmering casserole. The girl bade me sit down on the foot-stool in front of the stove, she herself squatting beside me, sizing me up. I asked her in a whisper,

"Has the doctor been?"

"Yes, she gave Mum an injection ... She's quite OK now." Then she added, as if to console me, "Don't worry. The doctor will come again in the morning."

"Has your mum eaten anything? What's in here?" I asked, pointing to the casserole.

She smiled, and replied, "It's yam porridge, our New Year's Eve dinner."

I suddenly remembered the oranges I had brought with me. I took them out and put them on the bedside table. The girl said nothing, just quietly reached her hand out for the biggest one. She cut the peel off the top with a knife, and deftly peeled the rest of the orange with her fingers.

"Who else lives here with you?" I asked her in a low voice.

"No one else right now. My dad went somewhere," she did not finish. She slowly took out the orange segments and laid them beside her mother's pillow.

The tiny fire in the stove gradually died down, and it was getting dark outside. I stood up to go. The little girl held me back, quickly and deftly took out a big needle with a linen thread and worked at the bowl-shaped orange peel. She linked the opposite corners in such a way as to make a small basket, which she hung on a thin

bamboo stick. She then took the stub of a candle from the windowsill, placed it in the orange peel basket, and lit it. When she had done all this, she handed the lamp to me, saying,

"It's dark now, and the road is slippery. Let this little orange lamp light the way for you up the mountain."

I accepted the lamp with admiration, and thanked her. She came out to see me off. I did not know what to say. Again, as if to console me, she spoke.

"Dad will soon come back. Then Mum will be well." She drew a circle in the air with her small hand, and then pressed it on mine, and said,

"Then, we will all be well." Obviously, her "all" included me.

Holding this ingeniously-made little lamp, I walked slowly up the dark, wet mountain path. In truth, the dim orange light could not reach very far. However, the little girl's calmness and courage, and her optimism, made me feel as though the way in front of me was boundlessly illuminated.

My friend had come back. Seeing me with the little orange lamp, she asked me where I had been. I told her,

"I've been to ... to Wang Chunlin's."

She was astonished.

"Wang Chunlin, the carpenter? How did you come to know him? Some students from the medical college down at the foot of the mountain were arrested* last year. Later, Wang Chunlin disappeared. It was said that he had often carried messages for those students ..."

I left the mountain village that night, and have not heard of the little girl and her mother since.

But I recall the little orange lamp every Chinese New Year. Twelve years have passed. Her father must have come back long ago, and her mother got well. For we are "all" "well" now.

9 January 1957.

*Arrested for pro-communist activities.