

茅盾：《動搖》

Waverings: excerpts

By Mao Dun

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AFTER FANG LUOLAN had seen Lu Muyou and Hu Guoguang off, he stood at the long window in the parlour with his hands in his pockets and looked out at the nandina. Everything had lost its colour in the early evening gloom, with only the flame-red berries still glittering.

Fang stood there, immobile in his frustration. The evening brought with it a strange constriction that evoked a vague feeling of unease. A vision gradually took shape before his dulled eyes: he was suddenly no longer face to face with the nandina, but with a woman's emerald-green gown, dusted with tiny red sparks exactly the size of the nandina berries. They came to life, with the red sparks on the gown all in motion, speeding one after another like the streaks of fire after a comet. They struggled with one another on the way up, finally gathering into a large crimson point above the collar of the dark emerald gown. This crimson point then split and cracked open, revealing two rows of beautiful rice-white teeth. It was a smile, a captivating feminine smile, above which, under delicately arched brows and covered by a pair of black eyelashes, a lime-yellow light shown forth.

Fang quickly shut his eyes, as if not daring to look, but that smiling mouth, those unfathomably deep eyes under their lush eyelashes forced their way inside his closed eyelids. He fled into the parlour, and the vision retreated into the brightness of the oil lamp. The light flickered restlessly, and Fang took it to be his own heartbeat, subconsciously removing his right hand from his pocket and placing it over his chest. His hand felt scorched, as if grasped by a pair of burning dainty white hands.

‘Wuyang, you are the light of hope. I cannot prevent myself from following you.’

Fang clearly heard his own voice in his ears, startling him. He hadn't spoken, but there was no one else in the room aside from himself. He collected himself and

sat on the rattan chair facing the window. From the room to his left, he heard the sound of Mrs Fang and the children which meant dinner was being prepared. At a loss, Fang stood and walked straight in that direction. He was conscious of having failed Mrs Fang, so he tried to put that alluring yet accursed vision completely out of mind. But he was also aware that he seemed to lack the strength to do so, so all he could do was escape to a place with lots of other people to hide from the vision, if only temporarily.

That evening until bedtime, Fang paid close attention to every move and every expression of Mrs Fang's, as if appraising her value anew. He made an effort to find his wife's many virtues and used them to stabilize his wavering heart. In this intoxicated frame of mind, he could tell that the most sensual parts of her figure were her full hips and delicate white arms. Her slightly dull eyes detracted a good deal from her beautiful oval face, but this was more than made up by her gentle smile and voice.

'Meili, do you remember six years ago when we went to the Rain Flower Terrace in Nanjing?' Fang asked happily. It was about nine o'clock and no one was left in the room but the two of them. 'We were only just married. In fact it was just that summer that we graduated. Something happened when we went on an excursion that time and I still remember it with perfect clarity. We were in a stream gathering rain-flower pebbles and you got your skirt and half your cotton blouse soaked through. You had to take them off to dry in the sun before we went back. Don't you remember?'

Mrs Fang smiled slightly without any reply.

'You were so much more vivacious back then—the fire of youth burned in your veins!'

'You could be really naughty when we were young.' Mrs Fang blushed. 'That time—you tricked me into taking my clothes off, and now you want to joke about it.'

'If you were me back then, you would've been tempted too. The way your breasts were moving, that coy little smile of yours—no man could help but be tempted!'

Mrs Fang put her head in her hands and giggled.

Fang went over to her and ardently clasped her hand. 'But Meili, you haven't been as lively lately,' he said in a low but excited voice. 'That old innocence, that old charm, you've hidden it all away. It's as if there are uncountable troubles weighing on your heart every single day, and you're always so busy. I hardly ever hear you laugh out loud anymore. You are still so lovely, still in the prime of youth, but for some reason, you seem lethargic. Meili, surely you haven't already burned through the passion of youth, have you?'

Mrs Fang could sense that her husband's words carried a deep sorrow. She lifted her head and looked at him in astonishment. Fang Luolan's thick brows were slightly furrowed and his eyes were fixed on her. Mrs Fang put her head on her husband's shoulder.

'Have I really changed? Luolan, you're right. I have changed. I'm not as lively and enthusiastic as I used to be. I'm afraid it may be me getting older, but I'm so busy with housework, too. That's another reason. No. Thinking about it, it's not any of that. Twenty-seven can't be called old, and the housework is really not that difficult, but I am different. I'm depressed, my spirits are flagging and I can't seem to exert any effort at any time or over any thing. It's like I don't have the self-confidence or the courage that I used to have. I don't dare make a move now, and I can never make up my mind anymore. I don't know how to do anything that might make it come out right. Luolan, don't make fun of me, but this world is just changing too quickly—it's too complicated, too contradictory. I'm truly lost inside it all.'

'Too fast, too complicated, too contradictory—that's the truth,' Fang Luolan muttered. 'But we have to deal with it. Meili, you want to find a path out of the complications and the contradictions—if you depend upon composing yourself and figuring out your direction before you can stop feeling depressed and listless, then it would be impossible. The world does change too fast, and it won't wait for you patiently. Before you have found your path, or figured out your direction, the world would have already moved on even further.'

'You're exactly right! But Luolan, I don't think I can keep up, but ... I haven't given up.'

Fang Luolan gently let go of her hands and and put his arm around her waist, looking at her inquiringly.

'I haven't given up,' Mrs Fang repeated, 'because, maybe it might be better not to race with the world, but to watch from the sidelines and see the course more clearly. That way one might make fewer wrong turns.'

Fang Luolan nodded, smiling. He understood his wife's feeling of confusion and wavering, of not knowing where she stood. He also understood that his wife's plan was to remain inactive for the time being. He was going to say, 'If everyone made up their mind to be a spectator, who would be out there running for you to watch?' but he couldn't bring himself to disrupt the splendid fancy his gentle wife had created, so he didn't say it. He gave his wife, wrapped in his arms, a tender kiss and said only an ambiguous: 'Meili, you are so clever! I'll race and let you watch, but when by standing on the sidelines you discern the way forward, don't forget to give me a shout.'

In the embrace of their congenial laughter, Fang Luolan merged with his wife's gentleness. The gorgeous phantom that had been troubling him withdrew completely.

FANG LUOLAN was precisely someone that was 'racing with the world'. Political work seemed to take up more than 100 per cent of his time and energy. Furthermore, he wasn't the type of person who couldn't stop himself from chasing after 'romance'. He was also so buried in his work that he could forget all about the woman in the emerald gown. There was more than enough of his share of the work before him, of which Hu Guoguang's case was of little import. A very difficult matter had come up—the shop-workers' wage-increase movement.

Because everyone was so busy working on the shop-worker issue, Hu's case was dealt with perfunctorily, without a thorough investigation. Fang simply reported to the County Party Office, 'Mr Hu does not have the trust of the masses and should be stripped of his credentials as Committee Member.' Following this report, the County Party Office sent orders to the Merchant Association, and the matter was closed.

Hu was having a melodrama preformed at his home when Lu Muyou brought him this news: for the past few days, the people who had helped Hu out with their votes had been coming by to get their pay-offs. Today the one whose vote Hu had grabbed at the last moment came by. He turned out to have most extravagant expectations, and an overbearing manner to boot. Hu had run out of ways to put him off, so in the end he had to pluck an ear-pick from Jinfeng's hair to give him before he finally left.

Jinfeng had harboured hopes of getting a new sheepskin coat, but now the New Year was already in sight, and not a shred of wool could be seen on the horizon, not to mention the loss of her golden ear-pick; her sadness was readily imaginable. Although she wasn't about to get into a ruckus with Hu, she was brave enough to raise a fuss behind the closed door of her own room. When Lu Muyou arrived, this little contretemps was about half over, and Hu was pacing in his sitting room with an ugly expression on his face.

'Brother Guoguang, you've already heard?' Lu asked him directly.

Hu's eyes bulged out. He didn't know how to answer.

'There's been a decision on the Merchant Association Committee Membership. You've been sacrificed.'

Hu rolled his eyes and spread his hands as he collapsed into the nearest chair. Confiscation, prison ... one after another, the worst, but quite imaginable things

fitted through his mind like flashes of lightning. The final one was Jinfeng being ‘communized’.

He jumped up and cried out, ‘Fang Luolan, you bastard!’

‘Brother Guoguang, Fang actually helped you out. I read the report of the investigation, and it only says, “does not have the trust of the masses”. He didn’t mention anything else.’

‘There won’t be any further investigations?’ Hu asked anxiously, as if he couldn’t believe it.

‘He only said that you didn’t “have the trust of the masses”, which even washes you clean of the “Petty Landlord” label.’

Hu let out a sigh of relief.

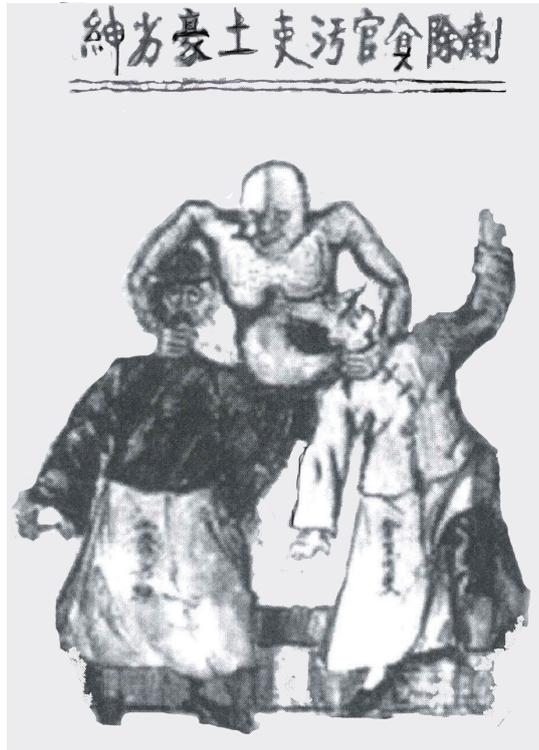
‘Your Merchant Association Committee Membership has been voided. But since the County Party Office said only that you don’t “have the trust of the masses”, you aren’t a petty landlord. That implies that you are free to do what you want. There’s your silver lining.’

Hu took a few steps with his hands clasped behind his back, then sighed. ‘True. But I’ve gone to a lot of trouble for nothing. Brother Muyou, it seems I should make another visit to Fang Luolan’s and thank him for his support; use this to pull him in. What do you think?’

‘Good—but there’s no hurry. I’ve got some things to discuss with you first. I need your help.’

Right then, something floated to the surface of Hu’s memory. He remembered seven or eight days ago, he and Lu had passed by Xizhi road, a quiet back street, and outside a door of what seemed to be a fairly well-off home, Lu had twisted his mouth and said quietly, ‘There’s a little widow in there, a real pretty one!’ At the time, he had smiled and replied, ‘If you are interested, my brother, I can help you land her.’ It must have come time to talk about that.

‘Is it about that “n”-less window?’ he asked with a grin.



‘Ah. No, not that ... You still remember that? That’s not it. Today it’s a very serious political matter. I’m a Merchant Association Committee Member, and I think I should make a proclamation—an inaugural proclamation!’

Hu nodded approvingly.

‘I won’t stand on ceremony and will speak in all candour: this proclamation thing, well, I’m in a bit of a tight spot. Since I was little, my father has forced me to write poems and lyrics. Now if you had me write something in heptameter or octameter, I could muddle through well enough. It’s just that with a long essay like a proclamation, I don’t think I can carry it off. But my brother, you are an old hand at pettifoggery, so I’ve got no choice but to ask for your help.’

‘Of course I’ll help you, but I don’t even know your positions.’

‘Positions? Ah, sure, I have some. I just got the news today that the shop-workers want a wage increase—and I’ve heard they want a very big one. Many of the shopkeepers oppose it and the County Party Office hasn’t yet decided how to handle it. I would like to support the demands of the shop-workers. It’s important that we come out in support of them first. The proclamation should have that position on the shop-workers. Aside from that, whatever else needs to be put in, I’ll leave up to you.’

The same feeling he felt the previous evening when he heard that his son had joined the Union Security Corps floated to the top of Hu’s mind. He couldn’t help himself from rubbing at his whiskers and smiling.

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BECAUSE OF all the commotion the shop-workers were making every day with their protests, the Lunar New Year passed by rather listlessly. Since the twenty-fifth of the final month of the old calendar, the shop-workers had been putting forth three demands that many of the shop owners were unwilling to accept. The three demands were: one—a 20 to 50 per cent increase in shop-workers’ pay; two—no firing of shop-workers permitted; three—shopkeepers will not be allowed to close their shops on spurious pretexts. The shopkeepers could tolerate the first and second demand, but the third was virtually impossible to accept, as the shopkeepers felt that they ought to have the freedom to operate their own businesses. But the Shop-workers’ Union insisted upon their third demand, saying that any shopkeeper who wanted to close up shop had to be in collusion with the local small-time tyrants and petty landlords, and would only be closing up shop and firing workers to create a market panic and disturb public order. The County Party was also split on this issue and had no solution to it.

When the time came for the receiving the God of Wealth and each shop had gone on running the same as it had been run before, the atmosphere grew even more tense. The Shop-workers' Union Security Corps patrolled the streets in twos and threes. Although the members of the Youth Labour Brigade were dressed in plain clothes, each wore an identical red scarf around the neck and carried shouldered staves longer than they were tall. They set up sentries on the boisterous Yamen Street.

On the sixth day of the New Year, the Union brought lanterns for a march to hold a reformed 'Roustering the Dragon Clam' parade. Just as they reached the vicinity of the Qingfeng Pavilion, twenty or so men carrying wooden cudgels and iron bars burst out of the tea-house and broke up the marchers' ranks. The Dragon Clam roisterers had at hand the long bamboo staves that were originally used to push bystanders away from the path of the parade, and both sides immediately fell upon each other. Many of the red and green paper lanterns were broken to pieces or burned and their bamboo handles also became weapons in the melee. The battle went on for about ten minutes before the Security Corps and the police showed up in force. The instigators took to their heels, leaving behind one injured compatriot. The marchers also had about five or six wounded.

The next day, the Security Corps went on patrol with spears. The Youth Labour Brigade started monitoring the shops, not allowing any merchandise to be moved out. There were even a number of members of the Youth Labour Brigade patrolling the neighbourhoods where the shopkeepers lived, keeping an eye out. That afternoon, the local Peasant Association sent 300 of their Self-defence Force, each of whom carried a spear that had a foot-long iron spike at the tip shining in the sunlight. This peasant army stationed itself near the county trade union.

That afternoon, a few County Party Office Committee Members held an unofficial meeting at Fang Luolan's house to discuss opinions about the shop-worker unrest. It wasn't a scheduled meeting, much less one called by Fang, it just happened to come together. Fang was uncharacteristically distracted that day, something caused in part, of course, by the shop-worker unrest, but another cause was a misunderstanding between him and his wife that hadn't been resolved.

As far as the misunderstanding was concerned, Fang was convinced without a doubt that he had been perfectly fair toward her, it was just that his wife's outlook was a little narrow. It would be more appropriate to say that she was not quite liberated enough. She had heard someone talk and had, for no rhyme or reason, started to doubt Fang's faithfulness. And because of a simple handkerchief, she was reduced to tears. Fang of course didn't want any rift between them, so he

told her over and over again, 'No matter who—even if it's a woman—sends me a handkerchief, to refuse it outright would be too inhibited, too old-fashioned.' In these days of open relationships between men and women, sending a handkerchief one way or the other is extremely common. But Mrs Fang refused to understand.

Right then, Fang had to join the others in their serious discussion, but while one ear was listening to Zhou Shida and Chen Zhong talk about the shop-workers' unrest, the other ear was buzzing with Mrs Fang's aggrieved sobs. Although well aware that Miss Zhang and Miss Liu were there comforting her and that his wife had probably stopped crying long ago, that ear of his still rang with her sobs. He unconsciously sighed.

'The Peasant Self-defence Force has sent 300 men,' said Chen, gasping for breath, then, as if in response to Fang, he also sighed. He was a member of the Standing Committee, and a middle school classmate of Fang's. 'It's as if we're under martial law here and rumours are flying everywhere. Some say that tomorrow all property is going to be communized; others say that tonight the small-time tyrants and petty landlords are going to start an insurrection. Chaos might well break out in the streets tonight. I agree with what Brother Shida just said, that the Shop-workers' Union acted too rashly here.'

'What is your considered opinion, Brother Luolan?' Zhou asked, puncturing nearly every word with a thrust of his arm, as if the words would not appear without being shaken out. 'When we got here, things on the streets just didn't seem right and we thought this could only be resolved and disaster avoided if you were to engage in some powerful mediation.'

'I don't have any leeway to act here,' Fang said slowly, forcing himself to focus and block out the droning in his ear. 'The most problematic thing is that we are not of one mind within the Party Office and the Merchant Association. It's because we didn't resolve this earlier that we've come to this.'

'Speaking of the Merchant Association, have you seen Lu Muyou's proclamation?' Chen asked Fang, raising his head and puffing out a white cloud of cigarette smoke.

'I read it the day before yesterday. He approves of the shop-workers' demands.'

'That was just the first proclamation. This morning there was a second one that I'm sure you haven't yet seen; it contains a line attacking you.'

'That's odd. Attacking me?' Fang was surprised.

'Muyou wouldn't attack you,' Zhou added quickly. 'I read the proclamation. It didn't do anything but mention your name when describing the Party Office's discussion of the shop-workers' demands. But the wording was a little sharp—and that's not so good. I know Muyou isn't good at that type of writing, so he

probably had someone else draft it for him, and got taken advantage of, don't you think?'

Chen smiled and nodded. He took out a second cigarette and went on. 'The way it was written seemed to imply that the reason the shop-worker unrest hadn't been resolved earlier was because you opposed their demands and wanted to make alterations. It's not as if that were some secret, as the minutes from the County Party meeting would have been made public anyway, but to drag this out during the height of the shop-worker unrest doesn't make you look good.'

'I did not say that with selfish motives, and we can leave it to be taken care of by public discussion.' Fang Luolan sighed, feeling a bit sorry for himself. 'But for now, is there any way to resolve the dispute?'

'The point of contention is the problem of shopkeepers closing their shops,' Chen said. 'I've always thought that this demand of the Shop-workers' Union goes too far, and you two agree with me, but now things are even more contentious. Not only have the shop-workers not budged an inch, now the Peasant Association is butting in where they don't belong. The shopkeepers are quietly making contingency plans too, so the word running around about violence is credible enough. With things moving so quickly to the extremes like this, whoever tries to manage it has a really thorny problem on his hands.'

A silence ensued. Of the three men, Fang was of course the most capable. Unfortunately, that day, his ears were ringing and he had run out of moves. On top of that, he always tried to find a solution where neither side would lose out, which made things all the more difficult.

'The life of a shop-worker is difficult, of course,' Fang sighed. 'But these demands are too extreme; they simply disregard the shopkeepers' livelihood.'

But a sigh was only a sigh, not a solution.

Silence continued to occupy the room.

The tripping sound of footsteps came from the room on the left. The three men turned their heads as if obeying an order and saw Miss Zhang and Mrs Fang walk in hand in hand, followed by Miss Liu.

'You still haven't talked it through yet?' Miss Zhang asked, ever so casually, but she immediately saw the pained expressions on the men's faces, especially the sheepish look on Fang's when he saw Mrs Fang.

Miss Zhang was of average height, a little shorter than Mrs Fang, and maybe twenty-four or -five years of age. She was full-figured with very fair skin that was not even equalled by Mrs Fang. Her long, glossy, black hair was done up in two large buns on either side of her head. Of course, this wasn't the latest fashion for women's hair, but because Miss Zhang's hair was so long and full, she

had to use this method of divide and conquer, and it had its own peculiar charm. Her full breasts, narrow waist, and small red lips were all the very image of Mrs Fang. They had been classmates and were the best of friends. Last year, when Miss Zhang had become the principal of the County Girl's Middle School, Mrs Fang unexpectedly went out to take charge of a four-hour class.

'There's still no outcome,' Fang answered. Then he looked at Chen's and Zhou's faces before continuing, 'Even if the three of us came up with a solution, it wouldn't count. It seems that we're just throwing empty words around here.'

Seeing Fang give vent to these unwonted complaints, something he seldom did, Miss Zhang couldn't think of anything to say. She looked at the watch on her wrist before turning to Miss Liu, and saying, 'It's already three. We'd better go.'

But Mrs Fang wouldn't let the two of them go and Fang also pleaded with them to stay a bit longer. He had a few more things that he wanted to explain to his wife in front of Miss Zhang. When the two women had arrived, his wife was at her most disconsolate. Full of the injustice of it all, he had wanted to vent a little in front of his wife's two good friends, so they could bear witness to the fact that he was completely innocent. He hadn't known that Chen and Zhou would show up, and when they did he had to hand over his wife, with her face covered in tears, to the two women and leave without another word. Now he saw his wife still wasn't completely at ease, and there was resentment in her face. He had no idea what they might have been saying about him behind his back, and he had to find out right then. He had no heart to continue talking about shop-worker unrest even though Chen and Zhou seemed to be more than willing to do so.

They talked for several minutes more before the two male guests finally left. Fang stretched, then went over to his wife, and said very gently:

'Meili, you must understand it all by now. Sun Wuyang and I are comrades and nothing more. We're not really even friends, so how could love even enter into it? Miss Zhang and Miss Liu can vouch for me. Naturally, she often comes to talk to me, but that's nothing but to discuss work. I can't exactly ignore her. It's really unfortunate that you were ill and couldn't go to the New Year's gathering at the Party Office and meet her. You would have seen that she's just an innocent, energetic girl, very straightforward and friendly to all the men. That's just her personality; it's not that she's fallen in love with any one of them. That day when she just up and sent me a handkerchief—it wasn't even one she had used herself—she did it in front of everybody. She just pulled it out and put it in my pocket, it wasn't some secret exchange. What meaning could it possibly have? It was just for fun. Didn't Miss Zhang and Miss Liu see it with their own eyes? I've said all

this over and over again, but you just won't believe me. Now you've probably asked Miss Zhang, right? She would never lie for me.'

He seemed overly worked up with beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. He reached into his pocket to pull out a handkerchief—a completely ordinary white one with a light yellow border, the one Sun Wuyang had given him.

'A store-bought handkerchief.' After Fang touched the handkerchief to his forehead, he opened it up and said with a smile, 'no marks on it at all. Now you've seen it, and I'm passing it on to you.' He stuffed it into Mrs Fang's hand.

Mrs Fang dropped the handkerchief on the table without saying a word.

Having heard Miss Zhang's and Miss Liu's explanations and assurances, Mrs Fang's suspicions had dissolved, but his praise of Sun Wuyang's innocence and vivacity, as if she were an angel without a single impurity, was completely at odds with the Sun Wuyang that Miss Zhang had described and caused her doubts to rise again. To have the Sun Wuyang of Miss Zhang's description, a loose and flirtatious woman involved in numerous love triangles, all designed to get as many men as possible to madly pursue her, become a paragon of the female in Fang's words, led Mrs Fang to two possible conclusions. One: Fang was covering up for her. Two: he really thought she was a good person. Mrs Fang thought if he was actually covering up for Sun Wuyang, then things seemed to be over between Fang and her. If a man covers up for a questionable woman in front of his own wife, does one even have to ask the reason for it? On the other hand, if he thought that Sun really was a good person, then that was enough to show he was already bewitched. Thinking this through, she gave an involuntary shiver.

These thoughts came to her in a flash and coiled around her like a poisonous snake, but she didn't speak. She only lowered her head, even more dispirited.

Fang was completely unaware that his words had brought about a reaction completely opposite to the one he had hoped for. He took Mrs Fang's silence for tacit understanding.

He smiled again, saying, 'Miss Zhang, you're well aware of Meili's gentle nature—this is the first time I've ever seen her angry. I was so worried then, but luckily you two arrived and sure enough Meili came around and understood right away. The day's black clouds were all blown away. We'll just take this as a little rough patch in our life history, and since there was no cause for Meili to get upset, I guess there's no one that should be held responsible for it. Here's a joke: it must be that the demons are so jealous of our happiness that they've come to trick us. It's just a pity that we fell into their trap!'

'The demons arrived via Sun Wuyang,' Miss Zhang said with a smile, looking

at Mrs Fang. 'She gets along just fine with Zhu Minsheng, but she didn't give him a handkerchief.'

'That Sun Wuyang is a bit odd to be sure.' Miss Liu didn't often speak out, but took this opportunity to explain her observations. 'As soon as she meets someone, she seems to warm to them right away, but if anyone tries to get close to her, she goes cold and pays them no mind. Everyone says that she and Zhu Minsheng are really close, but I've watched them several times at the Women's Association. When Zhu comes looking to talk to her, it's like she doesn't even see or hear him—she just tilts her head and walks off to talk to someone else. She doesn't even bicker with him, she just flat ignores him.'

Miss Liu and Sun Wuyang worked at the Women's Association together so she saw her almost every day. Sun Wuyang had been sent by the province to work at the Women's Association about a month ago and Miss Liu was the first to work with her. The two of them got along very well.

'That's exactly right! She's got the temperament of a child. Today, she gives me a handkerchief, but tomorrow if I go talk to her, she'll just tilt her head and ignore me. Meili, we'll go over and I'll show you sometime, how about that?'

Miss Zhang and Miss Liu both laughed. Even Mrs Fang couldn't hold back a smile.

Fang took this opportunity to take his wife's hand and say, 'Meili, you should get out and about. If you just stay at home by yourself thinking, it leads to these unfounded suspicions, just like today. If you'd met Sun Wuyang a few times, you wouldn't have gotten upset over a handkerchief and suspected me of being unfaithful.'

Mrs Fang allowed her hand to be held, but still made no reply. All of what they said had been projected onto her heart, causing all kind of reactions, but her feelings were muddled and contradictory, rising and falling by turns. She couldn't come to a consistent view of it all, but her agitation gradually settled down, and at that moment, having her hand held gave her a warm feeling of solace, something close to happiness. The bulwark against Fang she had built just a little while ago was in complete ruins.

'Meili, why don't you say something?' Fang importuned, squeezing her hand slightly as if to add emphasis to his words.

'Sister Zhang, Sister Liu, do you think what Luolan says is right?' Mrs Fang avoided answering his question directly, but she had already broken into a charming smile.

The two young women nodded.

'Then let's go out for a walk right now,' Mrs Fang said, suddenly happy. 'Luolan,

you aren't busy today, right? Sister Liu's coat is in the side room. Go get it and join us.'

The atmosphere on the street was tense.

Fang had only walked with the three women a few dozen steps before they saw a group from the Youth Brigade. They were escorting a man toward the main street who had a white paper placard hanging from his collar on which was written in large characters, 'Merchant Traitor Destroying the Economy'. All the members of the Youth Brigade were shouting slogans, and people were hanging their heads out of windows to look at the spectacle. A few children were running along behind the group also shouting, 'Down with the Merchant Traitor!'

Then four or five members of the Peasant Self-defence Force emerged from the same direction, shouldering strange long spears, their bamboo hats hanging from their shoulders, exposing dark faces dripping with sweat. They marched in strict cadence, two to a rank. Two yellow dogs blocked their way, barking angrily—their ferocity not to be slighted, but in the end they gave way and let them pass, if only to be able to jump around behind them and continue barking. They passed along, heading toward the setting sun, soberly and bravely. In the lonely street, there remained a few stalwart shadows swaying back and forth, with the long black spears silhouetted against the lane like huge pillars.

On Yamen Street, it seemed like there was a sentry every five steps. The blue-clad Security Corps, the Youth Brigade in yellow, and the Peasant Force, with the big bamboo hats hanging from their shoulders, were all there—together, it was a truly bizarre scene. The atmosphere of the whole street was jumpy. The stores were open as usual, but only the general store and grocery were busier than normal.

Two older women brushed by Mrs Fang, intently whispering to each other. One sentence caught in Mrs Fang's ear: 'The shopkeepers are striking tomorrow, better buy more preserved foods.'

Mrs Fang grabbed the edge of Miss Zhang's apple-green silken fur coat and looked at her as if to say, 'Did you hear that?' Miss Zhang simply shook her head sweetly.

'Rumours!' Miss Liu, who was walking on her left, interjected. 'But I hadn't heard that one before we went to your house.' She raised her hand to brush aside her hair, which had been cut quite short, her dark and liquid eyes never leaving the 'sentries'.

A young man wearing a slightly worn black wool Sun Yat-sen suit approached them, greeting Fang as he passed by. Fang suddenly grabbed his wife's hand and

called back to him, 'Comrade Lin, I have something to talk to you about.'

The youth stopped and turned around. His small, pale face smiled at Miss Zhang and Miss Liu, but Mrs Fang didn't recognize him. Because the small group had stopped in a very narrow lane, a few loiterers gradually wandered up and looked on, forming a half-circle around them.

'This is my wife, Lu Meili. This is Comrade Lin Zichong,' Fang introduced them, then followed up, 'Is there a rumour about a shopkeepers' strike? That would be a really bad situation. Do you know if the representatives from the Shop-workers' Union are finished meeting yet?'

'They're done. They've just finished.'

'Were there any important resolutions?'

'How could there not be! They're calling to crack down hard on the reactionaries. We know that the small-time tyrants and petty landlords are preparing for a large scale insurrection. The twenty or thirty thugs at Qingfeng Pavilion from last night were bought and paid for by them. They're the ones that started the rumour about a shopkeepers' strike tomorrow, too. If we don't crack down, it will be pretty bad.'

Lin's face hardened and his pale cheeks flushed red. He looked at the four or five loiterers who were gathering ever closer, and furrowed his brow.

'But the shop-workers' three demands, were they discussed?'

'They're resolute about the three demands. Many of the shopkeepers are using losing money as an excuse to close up shop and damage the market—it's one of their plots. Tomorrow the Shop-workers' Union is sending a delegate to present a petition to the County Party Office.'

The three women looked on with concern, listening to what Lin was saying. Miss Liu put her left arm around Miss Zhang's waist, leaning in closer with an alarmed expression. Miss Zhang, on the other hand, remained calm.

From behind, a stealthy hand slowly moved up from under Miss Zhang's right arm, but no one noticed.

'So there wasn't anything else?' Fang asked.

Lin leaned forward a bit as if to say something important, but suddenly Miss Liu screamed.

Everyone blanched, and focused their attention on Miss Liu. With one hand fumbling about her own person, Miss Zhang blurted out: 'Thief! Miss Liu has had something stolen!'

Lin's eyes were quick and had espied a human form flash off to the side from behind Miss Zhang. The Security Corps and the Youth Brigade both showed up. Someone recklessly blew on an emergency whistle, and not long after came

a signal in response; soon there were emergency whistles wildly blowing from all directions. All at once, the sounds of shouting and running feet exploded all around them. Mrs Fang saw the thick dark layer of people surrounding them pressing in and started to feel uncomfortable. She pulled Miss Liu over and asked, 'What did you lose?'

'It was only a handkerchief—nothing important!'

Miss Zhang called out to the Security Corps in a loud voice, 'The thief has already run away! It's over and done! Just get things under control!'

Lin helped out, too, waving his hands at the people who were running around pell-mell.

But the emergency whistles coming from a distance hadn't yet stopped. Further down, the street looked to be in complete chaos. People's silhouettes were waving back and forth in the yellow light of dusk. A squad of Security Corps and police rushed over, squeezing through the crowds, and a loud voice shouted out, 'Who blew that emergency whistle indiscriminately? Catch him!'

Lin also ran over to investigate. Fang furrowed his brows, lifted his head and looked on with an anxious gaze. The Security Corps and the Youth Brigade had dispersed from around them, and the loiterers were fewer, too. The centre of the disturbance had moved further down the street.

'Is everything all right, Luolan?' Mrs Fang asked.

'It's probably just a small misunderstanding, but it's clear people have lost their moorings.' Fang said with a low sigh.

Lin ran back. According to him, the troublemaker who had blown the emergency whistle had been caught, but the area further down the street was locked down, with no one getting through. It was already completely dark, so they each headed home.

When Fang and his wife returned home, they saw the notice from the Party Office. It set tomorrow morning at nine for a general meeting with the people's organizations—the Merchant Association, the Shop-workers' Union, the Women's Association—to decide the issue of the shop-workers' three demands.

Fang slowly crumpled up the paper and threw it into a waste-paper basket.

He sank into silent thought.

He thought about the recent turmoil on the streets, and figured that the agents of the small-time tyrants and petty landlords were everywhere and arrayed in substantial numbers, looking to take any opportunity to spread an atmosphere of terror. The blowing of the emergency whistle was certainly one of their tricks. He couldn't help balling up his fists tightly, saying to himself, 'If we don't crack down, it will be very bad!'

But through his confusion, he could almost see row after row of stores, with a dauntless member of the Security Corps at the door of each one. He could see the pale-faced shopkeepers cowering in the corners ... he could see all those fingers pointing at him, so many mouths, all uttering the same ugly curse at him, 'So you support communization, too? Ha!'

Fang's blood ran cold. He stood up, flustered, and looked around nervously.

'Luolan, have you gone a little touched in the head?' Mrs Fang called to him with a smile.

It was then that Fang saw his wife sitting in the chair opposite him, playing with the yellow-bordered handkerchief she had discarded earlier that day. The handkerchief immediately changed the direction of his thinking. Embarrassed, he walked over in front of her, caressed the alluring white nape of her neck and said to her in a low voice, 'Meili, I want you to have that handkerchief.'

Her reply was a smile, half-annoyed, half-happy. As Fang passionately kissed her blood red lips, all traces of the reactionaries, the Security Corps, the shops, the trembling shopkeepers, the accusatory fingers, the cursing mouths, vanished completely from his mind.