

Robert Wexelblatt

PETITE SUITE INTERNATIONALE

I. La Retraite de Castel Ceriolo – Adagio pour Cor Français et Orchestre Militaire dans les Couloisses, lent, énervé, et équivoque

The fifty-seven-year-old agricultural worker, Christophe Moulin, had been among the veterans who rallied to Bonaparte's standard after his almost miraculous return from Elba. Like many others, Moulin's feelings about the Emperor were less than whole-hearted; nevertheless, he resented the restored Bourbons' insulting conduct toward not only the remnants of the Grande Armée but the whole of the French population. He despised the émigré rats scrambling back aboard the ship of state with their arrogance and greed sharpened by exile. Together with prisoners of war repatriated from the East, men hardened by combat and deprivation, he joined up for what the literal-minded historians of Europe had taken to calling the War of the Seventh Coalition. Moulin felt a bitter pride in having been there for the Belgian finale. But he had been there at the start as well, in Italy. What he remembered most vividly was not the defeat of 1815 but the glory of 1800, when he was not yet eighteen years older than the new century.

Now Moulin was limping down a road in the Auvergne, getting away from the Coffinhals. He did not consider that he had panicked in the face of the enemy. No, his tactical retreat was, in fact, a victory. The sobbing of his daughter and the ridicule of his son-in-law resounded in his ears as he tossed his bag over his shoulder and set out. As for the children, they were playing with their latest toys and couldn't be bothered to see their grandfather off. He was sorry to leave Juliette but glad to depart.

Moulin had married Juliette's mother, a good Republican maid from the Allier, shortly after the demobilization. They met that autumn when he was hired to pick apples in the orchard of Françoise's uncle. Juliette was born the next summer. It was a difficult delivery and Françoise had never regained her strength. She died in the terrible winter of 1817 when Moulin had struggled to find firewood, food, and work. But he had kept the child alive, and Juliette grew to be so beautiful that even without a dowry she attracted many suitors. Of these, Coffinhal was the one Moulin liked least. He was good-looking, suave, very sure of himself, and in a hurry. He bragged of his plans. For Moulin's taste, the young man was too much in accord with the status-quo with its marriage of political repression and economic laissez-faire; also, he dressed too well. He was full of promises, had already secured a position in one of the new banks popping up everywhere like weeds, and Juliette had fallen in love with him. There had been heated discussions between father and daughter, but Moulin was incapable of denying his daughter anything she truly wanted. He gave in and, at the church in Doyet, gave Juliette away.

Coffinhal had prospered in the bank and still more through shrewd land speculation. He and Juliette had two children and, when they moved into a substantial house in the country between Riom and Mozac, Juliette had begged her father to come live with them.

“We can make you comfortable. Don’t you want to see your grandchildren grow up? You’re too old to go on doing such heavy work, Papa,” she had argued.

“But not old enough to lose my liberty,” he had replied like a good revolutionary.

Juliette dismissed this and touched on the real point. “Georges isn’t so bad as you think.”

“I’m reassured to hear it,” Moulin had retorted, and that was the end of the matter until he had mounted Detouches’s rotting ladder and broke his leg. Juliette rushed to him. She put her foot down and Moulin consented to stay, but only until he recovered. The look of loving triumph on Juliette’s face signified to Moulin that she believed he would never leave.

For a week, Georges Coffinhal behaved toward his father-in-law with courtesy; though his politeness was chilly and forced, it was sufficient to satisfy his wife. Nevertheless, he found it difficult to conceal his annoyance at the attention his wife lavished on the old man. He frowned every time she fetched him a footstool or offered hot chocolate.

Coffinhal like to dominate dinner conversations with a mélange of name-dropping and sums of money. This aggravated Moulin.

“I ran into Portendieu this afternoon. He let me know that the new Marquis d’Anjony—who inherited a fortune including a vineyard in Burgundy—is in want of a new carriage and four matched horses to pull it. I had a word with Castignac and I think I can expect a tidy fee. I might make inquiries about whether the Marquis might be interested in that property in Le Puy with the good view.”

Georges Coffinhal christened his son Georges—what else?—and certainly not Christophe. The second child, little Berthe-Marie, was named after his mother. Neither child liked having Moulin in the house and the antipathy was mutual. Georges had two attitudes toward his interloping grandfather who,

he'd been told, worked on other people's farms: contempt and fear. The little girl was willful, given to tantrums, disobedient, and precociously vain. Moulin overheard her complain to her mother, "But Maman, he smells so bad!" They were a brace of spoiled children and Moulin did not pretend otherwise.

The tension in the house was just bearable until the afternoon Coffinhal brought home a newly published novel, Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*, and handed it to Moulin at the dinner table.

"Adolphe Bertin gave this to me, though not with much of a recommendation. I read the opening sentence and thought it might appeal to you, Christophe."

This speech he delivered as he did the book, almost with distaste.

"Go ahead," he said with a smirk. "Read the first sentence."

Moulin opened the book.

"No. Read it aloud," Coffinhals insisted.

Juliette, who had always been fond of novels, and had enjoyed *The Red and the Black*, failed to catch her husband's tone. "Oh yes, do, Papa."

Moulin read. "*On 15 May 1796, General Bonaparte made his entry into Milan at the head of a youthful army which but a short time before had crossed the Bridge of Lodi, and taught the world that after so many centuries Caesar and Alexander had a successor.*"

"Oh, children!" exclaimed Juliette. "Did you know that your grandfather was in that youthful army?"

Little Georges scoffed like the miniature version of Coffinhals he was.

Berthe-Marie went her brother one better and made her father laugh. "Grandfather was young?"

Moulin looked at his grandchildren severely. "You youngsters have no idea what we were fighting for, do you? Your history lessons say nothing of the First Republic, do they?"

“That’s not true,” Georges protested. “We know about the guillotine cutting off the heads of all the best people.”

“Best people?”

“That’s what aristocrat means, grand-père,” said Georges condescendingly.

“That’s enough,” said Juliette.

But it was too late.

“The boy’s not wrong,” said Coffinhals. “The Revolution was a catastrophe and it led to your upstart Bonaparte who was both quixotic and pernicious.”

Your Bonaparte. The pronoun hit like a shell striking a depot.

Without a word, Moulin stood and left the table. Five minutes later, as his son-in-law grumbled, “Let the old Jacobin go,” and Juliette tearfully begged him to stay, Moulin threw his portmanteau over his shoulder and was on the road.

His mind left his family behind as quickly behind as his body. Now both were free to go where they wished.

Stendhal’s stirring phrase “youthful army” had excited Moulin and, as he shambled into the June twilight, he was transported back to that other June of thirty-nine years before. There had been marching then, too, double-quick on the orders of the man he revered above all others, General Louis Charles Antoine Desaix, the thirty-one-year-old commander whom they’d called “the good aristocrat”.

Years before, when his eyesight was better, Moulin had made it a point to find out all he could about the dashing Desaix. He was one of those rare, fiercely republican aristocrats who refused to emigrate. He

barely escaped the guillotine and joined the cause, the youthful army. At the age of twenty-four he was already a divisional commander. In June 1800, Napoleon put him at the head of two divisions.

The battle might easily have been lost. Von Melas's surprise attack nearly succeeded. After defeating von B atork ez at Montebello, Napoleon, deceived by a double-agent, sent forces to the north and south, including Desaix's divisions. Seeing the French divided, the Austrians launched two assaults on Berthier's position at Marengo. Grasping the situation, Bonaparte moved up his reserve and sent a staff officer off at the gallop to recall Desaix. By mid-afternoon, the French were in full retreat, the Austrians pressing their advantage. Desaix had reached Rivalta when he heard the cannon at Marengo. Taking the initiative, he ordered his men to turn around and march at speed toward the sound. He met the courier on the way.

Moulin recalled how they had arrived late in the day as the Austrians were advancing in triumph. He could still see Desaix on his horse and hear him shout, "There's yet time to win another battle!" Then he had lowered his sabre and led Moulin's regiment and two others straight at the Austrians' center. They had stabilized the line so that the trap Napoleon had hastily prepared could be sprung. Ordering musket and cannon fire to create a concealing fog, he loosed the surprise attack of de Kellerman's cavalry, pushing the Austrians back with huge losses, driving them clear out of Italy.

French casualties were comparatively light yet costly enough. Desaix's brave words were his last ones in this life.

Bonaparte may have been an egomaniac but he was never one to overlook the heroic service of his officers. Desaix's name figures on the Arc de Triomphe and Napoleon personally ordered two monuments erected in his honor. Perhaps it's fortunate, Moulin thought, that our good aristocrat didn't live to see his republican ideals betrayed by his commander.

June 14, 1800, he mused, the day I was most alive, the day when, arriving breathless and just in time below the castle of Ceriolo, in a twilight just as soft as this, we fixed our bayonets, took one deep breath, ran shouting toward the astounded Hapsburgers, and secured the Republic.

Now, so many years later, on a plodding, less purposeful trek, Christophe Moulin felt as if his brigade's desperate march and headlong charge only appeared to have saved the Republic. Instead, he suspected that, though nobody could have anticipated it, in some way the death of men like Desaix foretold the triumph of those like Coffinhals.

2. Analyse Académique - Duo Contestable à la Manière d'une Parti Perdu pour Violoncelle Ensommeillé et Hautbois Trop Éveillé

At four-thirty on a Monday afternoon an email chimed into Uwe von Gerstenberg's Inbox. It was an official communication from the Vice Chancellor's office with a request that he click on a link to a questionnaire about student engagement. The message explained that a similar questionnaire had already been sent to students, thanked him in advance for his cooperation, and declared that the data gathered would be of the first importance to the University. The link was not to a University site but to something called Bildungsanalytik, GmbH.

Uwe frowned and clicked on the link which told him, among other things, precisely how long it would take him to complete the questionnaire. At the bottom of the page, in tiny gray print, inside a lighter gray lozenge, was the word *decline*. Uwe clicked on it and was at once informed that he would be unsubscribed. He then returned to answering anxious emails from two of his students, one gifted, one not,

both insecure. An hour later, he left his apartment and walked to Grauber's for an early dinner with a friend from graduate school who had phoned the day before to say he would be in town for a conference. Could they get together? The friends both ordered sauerbraten and split a bottle of Trollinger. The conversation being both nostalgic and convivial, they ordered a second bottle.

At six forty-five the following morning, Uwe, not entirely over the wine, was awakened by a well-groomed young man in a blue business suit smiling at him from the foot of his bed.

"Guten Morgen, Dr. von Gerstenberg," said the young man with a little laugh. "Rise and shine."

It is disconcerting to be roused at dawn by a stranger at the foot of one's bed; if he laughs at you as well, it is humiliating.

Groggy, indignant, and vulnerable, Uwe demanded how he had gotten in.

The young man laughed again and held up a key. "This is a university apartment," he explained.

"Who are you?"

The young man gave a rather ironic little bow. "Jürgen Bock."

"But what are you doing here?"

"I'm an employee of Bildungsanalytik, Dr. von Gerstenberg. Perhaps you'll recall declining to respond to our questionnaire at four thirty-seven yesterday afternoon?"

Uwe just stared.

"We would like to know why you made that decision, Dr. von Gerstenberg. May I call you Uwe?" He held up his clipboard and, with yet another little laugh, said, "I feel that I know you very well."

"I declined because declining was an option," grumbled Uwe.

“Yes, to be sure. We always include that choice. But, with respect, you haven’t accounted for your decision to use it.”

Uwe’s mind went back a bit. “Why would you say you know me?”

Grinning, Bock glanced at his clipboard then reeled off a speech *prestissimo*.

“Your Danish great-grandfather, an ironworker, emigrated to Hamburg in October, 1899 and married. The family remained in Hamburg and is still there. You were born three weeks prematurely and have two siblings, an older sister, Margarete, and a younger brother, Johannes. Father was a railroad official, Mother a homemaker and avid reader. She introduced you to books and it was reading that sustained you through a rather lonely adolescence. In your sixteenth year alone, you read three novels by Dostoyevsky, two by Thomas Wolfe, one by Albert Camus, and all of *War and Peace*. Back in eighth grade you were three times punished for reading in class and not paying attention to the teacher. At the Gymnasium you excelled with an overall average of 3.87. You earned your undergraduate degree at Heidelberg *cum laude*. After contemplating a degree in law, which was your father’s wish, you switched to German literature. It took you four years to complete your dissertation. Your doctorate was conferred on you by the University of Bonn. You wanted to write a thesis only on Heinrich von Kleist but your advisor, Professor Klugscheiner, insisted you write also about Jean Paul, born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter. You were indifferent to Jean Paul but loved the writer who lived half as long and produced one-tenth as many pages. Klugscheiner insisted on Jean Paul not out of any enthusiasm for his work but because he judged a dissertation including two writers would make you twice as employable, which turned out to be prudent advice.”

Another glance at the clipboard and Mock went on.

“You’ve had three girlfriends in the last six years. None of these relationships lasted less than three or more than thirteen months. You brush your teeth for two minutes, after which your electric toothbrush is programmed to shut itself off, a good habit on which I congratulate you. You favor jeans with a 30-inch inseam and a 32-inch waist, cable-knit sweaters and an old black suit jacket originally purchased for your grandmother’s funeral eight and a half years ago. Since securing your appointment here at Freiberg as junior professor you have published seven articles, three reviews, and delivered four conference papers. Last semester, your students gave you, on average, 4.4 out of 5 points on their evaluations. They are in accord in praising your pedagogy; the standard deviation was exceptionally low. Only three criticisms stood out: two didn’t care for your haircut and one found you—what was his word?—yes, a little too apodictic in class discussions.”

Here Uwe, now fully awake, interrupted Bock’s torrent of words.

“Did any of the students say that they learned anything?”

This drew another little laugh. “Well, Uwe, the grades you gave them averaged 3.16, so I presume they did.”

“Yet you can’t say what, can you?”

“We’d know better had you given them multiple-choice examinations.”

Uwe scoffed. “Would true-false questions have been better?”

“Not necessarily better—just simpler. Binary.”

Uwe threw off the covers. “Would you mind if I peed and then brushed my teeth for two minutes?”

“Oh, sorry. Thoughtless of me” This time Bock’s laugh was apologetic. “Of course. What do you say? Shall I make us some coffee?”

On his way to the bathroom, Uwe said over his shoulder, "Why not? You'll find everything in the kitchen."

"How many cups should I make?" Bock replied through the closed bathroom door.

"Four and three-eighths."

Uwe, finished in the bathroom, pulled on sweat pants and a cable-knit sweater, then went into the kitchen and sat at the oak table that came with the apartment.

Bock was standing by the coffee machine. "Our chief job is not merely gathering data, you know."

"No?"

"It's assessment. That's why your participation is so important. It will be a real contribution. It's why your Chancellor hired us."

Uwe shrugged. "How's it work?"

"You really want to know?"

"Why not, just not in exhaustive detail."

"We generate rubrics, vectors and variables in seventeen categories, establish standard deviations, determine reliability and validity quotients. . . I could go on if you like."

"Please don't."

"You disagree that thorough assessment is essential if the University is to achieve its full potential?"

Uwe sipped his coffee. "No good organization is perfect and no perfect organization is good," he said sententiously.

"Ah. That checks out."

"Pardon me?"

“In your undergraduate philosophy course, you rated Aristotle above Plato.”

“I prefer *reading* Plato; who wouldn’t? But in my opinion, Aristotle was right about so much only because Plato was so much more brilliantly wrong.”

“That sounds just like something a popular docent would say, a real academic *bon mot*. Clever and memorable. In fact, you’ve said it five times, verbatim, in the last three semesters.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“Not at all. Sincerity and spontaneity are of no quantitative interest.”

“And yet they are of enormous qualitative significance.”

“Then why do you repeat what might have been spontaneous the first time but not the next two?”

“You know nothing of the theater, do you?”

“Hardly anything. Do you mean you see a classroom as a stage?”

“I do, and for good reason. An actor has to repeat himself, but Hamlet must always ask ‘To be or not to be’ for the first time.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, I expect you don’t.”

“No call for condescension, Uwe, especially when it’s you who’s missing the point, not me. I think you fail to appreciate how important this project is to your Chancellor.”

“And also to your gravy train?”

Mock laughed, more loudly this time and with more sincerity. “Not at all. Our company’s services are in high demand. Business was up 37.4% in the last quarter alone.”

“How much of the 37.4% was from universities?”

“97.3%.”

“I see.”

“Do you? Like your Chancellor, the real educational leaders have all grasped the superiority of data to sentimentality, of numbers to anecdotes, the imperative to base all judgments on metrics.”

“It’s true. The Chancellor’s favorite word is *metrics*. He deploys it often, rather like a halberd. And yet, to my knowledge, he’s never delivered a speech in anapestic hexameter.”

“Very amusing in the faculty dining room, I’m sure. But your joke shows that poetry too is number.”

Uwe sighed. “And yet numbers are so seldom poetry. In fact, they’re more usually prices. I wonder, Herr Bock, what you Pythagoreans do for fun.”

“Word problems and sudoku. Once, my department went to a karaoke bar and got drunk. The evening, I’ll admit, was not an unqualified success. But it was fun all the same.”

“Karaoke? What did you sing? I’m really curious.”

“I finished off the evening with an old lullaby my grandmother used to sing to me.”

“How sweet. What was it?”

“*Eins, Zwei, Polizei.*”

“Polizei? Am I under arrest, then?”

Mock smiled but not cordially. “You’ll have your joke, of course. On the other hand, if you insist on not completing our questionnaire, I can’t rule out that your position may be in some jeopardy. The Faculty of German Language and Literature currently employs fifteen docents, a number somewhat surplus to requirements by our reckoning. It could easily make do with fourteen—even thirteen.”

Uwe calmly sipped his coffee. “Why don’t you take a seat, Herr Mock? There’s something I want to ask you.”

Mock remained by the counter, as if bonded with Uwe’s coffee-maker, and looked down on Uwe, mockingly. “I prefer to stand. What do you want to know?”

“Well, I suppose you’d say it’s about your business model.”

“Yes?”

“As I understand things, your firm’s principal metric of faculty excellence is not how many articles and books we publish, but how often those publications are cited by other scholars in *their* publications.”

Mock looked slightly impressed. “That is correct.”

“Good. Now, let’s suppose I write an article about Heinrich von Kleist’s story *Michael Kohlhaas*.”

“Made from the conference paper you delivered a year ago last November?”

This time it was Uwe who smiled. “No, something entirely different. In this article I present a new interpretation of the story. I argue that it is a symbolic displacement of the author’s mad plan to assassinate Napoleon Bonaparte whom he represents in the nasty and rapacious character of Wenzel von Tronka. Kohlhaas’s ferocious attack on Castle Tronka, the three attempts to burn down Wittenberg—a stand-in for Paris—are all expressions of Kleist’s urge toward violent and patriotic retaliation. It took Kleist years to find his way out of the story and, during this time, he shifted the role of his protagonist so that, in the conclusion of the story it’s Kohlhaas who represents Napoleon as, in his megalomania, he declares himself the head of a ‘provisional world government’. The beheading of Kohlhaas on the order of the Holy Roman Emperor is Kleist’s scarcely veiled plea for all of Europe to unite against the French tyrant.”

“Did Kleist really plan to kill Bonaparte?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard of Kleist, of course, but I didn’t know that.”

“It’s beside the point.”

“Which is?”

“Let’s say I succeed in getting this ridiculous article published, accepted perhaps by an editor with a sense of humor. Now, suppose every essay published about *Michael Kohlhaas* for the next decade includes a footnote that reads, more or less, ‘For a truly bone-headed interpretation of Kleist’s story see Uwe von Gerstenberg, “Kleist’s Crypto-Politics: *Michael Kohlhaas* and the Assassination of Napoleon Bonaparte.’”

“And your question is?”

“Would Bildungsanalytik, GmbH, applying its rubrics, quotients, and metrics of assessment, report that I am an ornament of the University?”

“That’s absurd.”

“Agreed. But is it true, Herr Mock?”

Mock’s smile had a touch of menace in it. “You’re a stiff-necked one, Uwe. Why are you so stubborn, so hostile? After all, it’s only a questionnaire?”

“One that would require no more than eleven minutes to complete. I know. But you’re quite right, Herr Mock; I am hostile to your work.”

“Then you don’t understand it.”

“I understand very well why the Chancellor likes assessment or at least sees it as part of his job. I understand why he wants your metrics, numbers, graphs, and charts. It’s because they can all be read quickly; it’s because they amalgamate *numbers* of articles and people into *amounts* of people and articles. It’s

because he believes that quantities reveal qualities, which I do not. In the end, the purpose of it all is simply to judge our lectures without listening to them and our publications without reading them.”

“But to do what you’re suggesting would be not just logistically unfeasible but also so subjective as to be of no statistical or administrative value.”

“Yes, it’s absurd, just as you say. Prohibitively inefficient and unreliable. Contrary to the needs of administration.”

“Then you *do* grant the premise of our work?”

“No, Herr Mock. Precisely the opposite. Perhaps I can explain by telling you a story.”

“I’d prefer a completed questionnaire, Uwe.”

“Nevertheless. Here, do sit down.”

Mock unconsciously stroked his thighs, as if to reassure himself that the crease in his trousers was as sharp as ever. Then he sat.

“Good. Three years ago, the University’s newly appointed head of Pedagogical Information Technology was making the rounds and invited himself to a meeting of our faculty. He was a man of no more than twenty-five, not nearly so well dressed as yourself, nor as cordial. I had the impression that he did share your confidence, though.”

“Confidence?”

“The intoxicating feeling that comes when you’re certain you possess the kind of knowledge that’s power and that others don’t.”

“You think that’s what confidence is?”

Uwe smiled sweetly. “It’s a politer word than arrogance. Anyway, our youthful IT chief took the podium from the dean and began by saying that he had actually spent the entire afternoon in our building, standing outside doors, peeking into classrooms and eavesdropping on what was going on in them. For a nano-second I thought what he said next was the highest compliment he could possibly pay us. He said, ‘I didn’t see or hear anything that Socrates wouldn’t have understood.’ In the next nano-second, I realized that what I’d taken for praise was meant as the opposite. And a nano-second after *that*, I concluded that he and I would never see things the same way. And that, you could say, is why I declined to complete your questionnaire.”

Jürgen Mock rose, again checked the crease in his trousers, pulled down the sleeves of his suit jacket, not neglecting first to make a note of the time on his wristwatch, then deposited his coffee mug in the sink. Looking down on Uwe with a rueful smile, he shook his head twice and walked to the door without another word.

3. Un Morceau de Justice - Septuor Chinoise pour Cordes en do-majeur avec un Début Triste et Fin Gratifiante

The Empire was in the hands of a cruel ruler, obsessed with completing the Grand Canal, restoring the Great Wall, and conquering Goguryeo. The number of lives sacrificed to the first two enterprises is beyond counting; but, for his third and last campaign against Goguryeo, the lives were counted to a man and recorded. 305,000 marched across the frontier; 2700 returned.

Song Yu made his farewells to the other survivors three days after they dragged themselves across the border at Liadong, defeated, terrified, starved. They looked angrily and greedily at the heaps of supplies that were supposed to have reached the army a month before. The troops at the depot regarded the filthy and

thin veterans with disgust. The officers refused to believe their story, accused them of desertion, and put them under guard. They were only released the next morning when Captain Suh staggered in with three horsemen and their two pitiable mounts. When Suh, his stern face running with tears, confirmed their account of the rout, Song and the others were released. At once they fell on the supplies and gorged themselves. Then they curled up among the bales and boxes and slept like corpses until the next day after the sun was well up.

Song had heard that in his youth Yang Guang showed himself a talented poet and a deplorable human being. He had proved a ruinous emperor, an unfit successor to the esteemed Wendi, who unified the Empire, restored the government, and built many temples. Song began to believe the rumor that Yang had assassinated his father. He also decided to leave the army, simply to walk away. In the East, there was no army left anyway. His plan was to walk to his village in Jingzhou. It had been three years since he was conscripted at the age of seventeen, and he longed to see his parents, his siblings, all his cousins, aunts, and uncles.

It was high summer and the fields looked green, abundant. But the villages he passed through felt depopulated and sullen. There were only old men, women, and children who looked indifferent or lost. He knew that those men who had not been sent north to work on the Wall or south to dig the Canal would have marched east into Goguryeo. He did not want to tell people about the campaign; yet none of the women who gave him a place to sleep or shared their soup and rice asked. Perhaps, he thought, they're already resigned. Few returned from the Wall or the Canal either. He knew well the fatalism of peasants.

Song arrived at the large village of Boling late in the day and during a rainstorm. As he passed a hut, drenched to the skin, an old man appeared in the doorway and with a big smile motioned for him to come in out of the rain. It had been a long time since Song had seen anyone smile like that.

Lyu Yingzhe introduced himself and said that he lived with his son's wife and his two grandchildren. "We grow three kinds of radishes, bok choy, and rice, some wheat." He pointed to a dilapidated shed. "We keep pigs as well, the best in the whole district. The landlord will buy only from us." Peasants can be proud as well as resigned.

Song gave his name and explained where he was headed.

"Jingzhou! That must be a long way off."

"Long enough."

"You're all wet. Come in. We'll warm you up and you can spend the night here."

The old man called for his daughter-in-law, who bowed to Song. He asked her to fetch some of her husband's old clothes and build up the fire. Song changed behind an old screen and she laid his things out to dry. It was strange wearing another man's clothes, being with his wife and father.

The two little children, a boy and a girl, had run to their bed as soon as Song entered the hut and pulled the quilt over their heads. Now they peered out at him curiously. He gave them a wink.

Lyu's daughter-in-law knew the way to make simple food delicious. She treated the guest with courtesy. To her father-in-law she was respectful without being servile and, with the children, at once firm and loving.

When the sun was down, Lyu insisted the guest share his pallet and worn blanket. Once he was sure the others were asleep, Lyu elbowed Song and whispered, "Come with me."

They went out into the summer night. The moon was almost at the full and peeked out, like the children, from between thin clouds.

Song had thought Lyu wanted to check the pigs, but his purpose was to ask what about Goguryeo.

“There are terrible rumors,” he said.

“Why do you think I’d know?”

Lyu frowned. “You’re about my son’s age. You’ve still got all your limbs and you’re traveling west which means you aren’t coming from either the Wall or the Canal. So, you must have been in the Emperor’s army.”

“I can’t deny it.”

“Then tell me what happened, no matter how bad. I can bear it. I’m a veteran myself. I fought the Turks.”

A burden shared is half as heavy, says the proverb; and it really was a relief to Song to speak of what he’d been through. Song told how the crafty Mundeok had sent small detachments to harass them, hitting and running, all the while leading them deeper into the country, always in the direction of their goal, the capital. He told how the supplies never arrived, that some died of hunger, but the generals commanded them to press on, promising everything they needed would be arriving the next day. At last, he told what had happened at Salsu River, how Mundeok had had it dammed, cutting the flow so that it was only a shallow stream between high banks when the army began to ford it.

“The officers ordered us to cross in a broad front rather than in columns, to be ready in case of an ambush on the other side which was heavily wooded. When we were in the middle of the river bed, Mundeok had the dam broken open and the river came down on us like a divine judgment. Thousands

drowned. Then their cavalry came out of the woods, screaming like barbarians. The few of us who survived ran in a panic back the way we'd come. Many died of exhaustion or starvation. We'd eaten up all the crops we could find during our march, making a wasteland for ourselves. If your son was with us, I fear he won't be coming home. I'm sorry."

The old soldier nodded once, stiffly, as if what he'd just heard wasn't news but a confirmation.

In the morning, Song thanked everyone and asked if he could perhaps help with some of the heavier chores before going on his way.

"The roof could use some repairs," said Lyu.

"The woodpile," said the daughter-in-law shyly.

Song spent the morning fixing thatch and chopping wood. "You'll spend another night," said the daughter-in-law when she brought him tea and bing cakes.

After replenishing the woodpile, he taught the children to play Catch the Dragon's Tail. Their screams and laughter were better than any tune from a bamboo flute.

Over supper, Song asked about conditions in the village and, knowing how things worked, whether their landlord was a good or a bad man.

Lyu and his daughter exchanged a glance.

"After the children go to sleep," said the old man.

"Father?" said the woman anxiously.

"It's all right. He'll be leaving."

The night was even more pleasant than the last. Lyu and Song took stools outside and Song heard the story of the landlord, Chiang Hongxu, his second wife, Pingyang, and his two daughters, Shih and Ching-ling.

As the wealthiest man in the district, the one from whom most of the peasants rented their land, Chiang and his household were not spoken of in public but closely watched.

“Everybody knows what’s been going on in that family, but nobody says anything. They’re afraid of Chiang’s temper, though he’s not really a bad man.”

“Not bad?”

“Only deceived,” said Lyu.

“How?”

Lyu hesitated only briefly, then went on at length.

“Nobody liked the first wife. She was vain, greedy, and cold. When that fever took her, Chiang was left with the two girls. They already resembled their mother, but he doted on them. So, he needed a wife. Pingyang is the youngest child of Huang Hui-liang who was deep in debt to Chiang and so it was arranged. Pingyang is only a few years older than her stepdaughters who were not pleased. They felt superior to Pingyang and let her know it. She is humble and modest, soft-spoken and also very pretty. Chiang grew fond of her. He even chided the girls for showing no gratitude for all she did for them. This only made them more hostile to Pingyang whom they saw as their slave. So, they got their friends to start a rumor that she’d been seen flirting with Chu, the young bailiff. They arranged that the rumor would get back to their father. He confronted Pingyang. What could the girl do but deny it? Chiang was furious. It seems he thought of sending her back to her father but he still needed her to run the household and wait on his daughters. So, he

dismissed his servant Bao-zhai and handed all his work over to his wife. Not satisfied, the girls constantly made up complaints to tell their father about their poor stepmother. The more they slandered and tyrannized over her, the more they played up to Chiang.” Lyu shook his head. “The man must be blind. He can’t see the truth. He appeases the girls by buying them things. Some say he beats Pingyang, and everybody’s seen how rough he is with her. The girl bears everything without complaint.”

Song knew that injustices were beyond counting and understood the imperfection of the world. He saw how the extravagant ambition of an inhumane ruler sowed misery across the empire. He knew Lyu would never again see his son, that widows wail and children forget dead fathers. About such things, he could do nothing. Yet Lyu’s story had moved him; and, as if it might make up a little for all he couldn’t do, Song resolved to achieve a small measure of justice in this village, one not so different from his own in Jingzhou.

It took Song two days to come up with half a plan. He would require Lyu’s help but not in any way that would risk the displeasure of his landlord. He asked two things of the old man: first, to point out Pingyang; second, to let her husband know that a stranger had arrived with news from Goguryeo. He wanted to get some sense of the woman, and he guessed that Chiang, as the richest man in the district, would think he also ought to be the best informed. Beyond seeing Pingyang and meeting with Chiang he had not thought.

Lyu agreed. “Pingyang fetches water from the well at least twice a day. As for Chiang, I can ask to see him about delivering the pig and drop a word about you.”

The next morning, the two men went to the village center. Pingyang soon arrived with her buckets and yoke. Song saw that she was pretty but worn down and noted how shabbily she was dressed. When she

leaned over the well, he observed that she wore a string necklace with a pendant of green jade. The jade seemed out of place and he asked Lyu if he knew anything about it.

“That piece of carved jade is the one thing she has from her father. It’s her one personal possession. She’s never seen without it.”

Then Lyu pointed to two adolescent girls who had strolled into the square. They were dressed in colorful silk robes and had elaborate hair arrangements. They went at once to the merchant who sold luxury goods. They looked at him haughtily and he bowed.

“Shih and Ching-ling,” Lyu whispered.

That night Song recalled a story he’d been told by his grandmother about Emperor Wendi’s consort, his beloved Dugu. The Emperor loved Dugu faithfully. He prized her intelligence and also her frugality. When he came down with diarrhea, the court physicians recommended a medicine that required a quantity of black pepper, a spice more expensive than gold. The court ladies prized it as a cosmetic. When Wendi asked Dugu for some of her stock, she replied that she had none because it was too costly.

Song had calculated correctly. Shortly after Lyu went to see Chiang about the pig, a boy arrived at the hut inviting the stranger who had been in Goguryeo to dinner.

Chiang’s villa was the finest house in the village, with two red-painted pillars in front and a tiled roof. The landlord greeted Song with courtesy but distantly.

During the meal, the girls flirted with Song openly but not seriously, as if practicing their skills by competing for his admiration. After all, they rarely saw a young man. The meal was served by Pingyang. Song thanked her for each dish. Chiang and his daughters entirely ignored her.

Song delivered a sanitized version of the catastrophe then suggested that, if Chiang desired more details, he should excuse the girls to avoid offending their sensibilities. This Chiang did. He wanted to know everything.

After hearing Song's account of the army's suffering and the catastrophe at the river, Chiang sighed.

"It's terrible. It could even mean the end for the Sui. But what's to be done?"

He rose, went to a cabinet, and drew out two wooden cups and a jug of yellow wine.

"At least we can drink." And they did.

Once Chiang had become a little tipsy, Song asked about the woman who had served them. "Is she your only servant?"

"That's my wife, my second wife."

When Song expressed surprise that she had not dined with them, Chiang launched into the story Song had heard from Lyu about Chu the bailiff and the catalogue of the daughters' false complaints.

"Are you sure your wife doesn't love or respect you?"

"She is a slut who comes from nothing. She fears me, no more."

"And your daughters?"

"What? My precious nestlings? They love me dearly. They tell me so three times a day!"

Song was quiet for a while, drinking. "What if you tested them?"

"What?"

"I noticed that your daughters, though they hardly need them, use cosmetics."

"What of it?"

Song laid out his idea. “First check to see if your daughters have a supply of black pepper. If they do, pretend to have a stomach ailment and tell them your doctor has prescribed a medicine requiring ground pepper and ask them to give you all they have.”

Chiang objected that such a test was unnecessary, but Song persisted until he had made his host angry enough to agree.

The girls did have a supply of black pepper but when their father asked them for it, they claimed to have none. Pingyang, overhearing the conversation, went to the market where she sought out the luxury merchant and exchanged her jade pendant for his half his supply of pepper.

After weeding the field and feeding the pigs, Song thanked Lyu and his family profusely for their unforgettable hospitality then went on his way. He left too early to witness all the changes in the Chiang household. Shih was married off to an elderly widower and Ching-ling given the choice of becoming a Buddhist nun or taking on all the tasks formerly assigned to her stepmother, whose pendant Chiang redeemed and whom he now treated with a loving tenderness fortified by remorse.

Song’s long journey ended with a happy reunion and many tears. When Yangdi, from whom Heaven had withdrawn its mandate, was strangled by his generals and the new Tang dynasty established, Song was appointed to the position of district magistrate, a job he carried out with both justice and compassion.