STORM IN A TEACUP

Lu Hsun

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The sun's bright yellow rays had gradually faded on the mud flat by the river. The leaves of the tallow trees beside the river were at last able to draw a parched breath, while a few striped mosquitoes danced, humming, beneath them. Less smoke was coming from the kitchen chimneys of the peasants' houses along the river, as women and children sprinkled water on the ground before their doors and brought out little tables and stools. You could tell it was time for the evening meal.

The old folk and the men sat on the low stools, fanning themselves with plantain−leaf fans as they chatted. The children raced about or squatted under the tallow trees playing games with pebbles. The women brought out steaming hot, black, dried vegetables and yellow rice. Some scholars, who were passing in a pleasure boat, waxed quite lyrical at the sight. "So free from care!" they exclaimed. "Here's real idyllic happiness."

The scholars were rather wide of the mark, however. That was because they had not heard what Old Mrs. Ninepounder was saying. Old Mrs. Ninepounder, who was in a towering temper, whacked the legs of her stool with a tattered plantain fan.

"I've lived to seventy−nine, that's long enough," she declared. "I don't like watching everything going to the dogs—I'd rather die. We're going to have supper right away, yet they're still eating roast beans, eating us out of house and home!"

Her great−granddaughter, Sixpounder, had just come running towards her holding a handful of beans; but when she sized up the situation she flew straight to the river bank and hid herself behind a tallow tree. Then, sticking out her small head with its twin tufts, she called loudly: "Old Never−dying!"

Though Old Mrs. Ninepounder had lived to a great age, she was by no means deaf; she did nor, however, hear what the child said, and went on muttering to herself, "Yes, indeed! Each generation is worse than the last!"

It was the somewhat unusual custom in this village for mothers to weigh their children when they were born, and then use as a name the number of pounds they weighed. Since Old Mrs. Ninepounder's celebration of her fiftieth birthday, she had gradually become a fault−finder, who was always saying that in her young days the summer had not been so hot nor the beans so tough as now. In brief, there was something radically wrong with the present−day world. Otherwise, why should Sixpounder have weighed three pounds less than her great−grandfather and one pound less than her father, Sevenpounder? This was really irrefutable evidence. So she repeated emphatically: "Yes, indeed! Each generation is worse than the last."

Her granddaughter−in−law, Mrs. Sevenpounder, had just come up to the table with a basket of rice. Planking it down on the table, she said angrily: "There you go again! Sixpounder weighed six pounds five ounces when she was born, didn't she? Your family uses private scales which weigh light, eighteen ounces to the pound. With proper sixteenounce scales, Sixpounder ought to have been over seven pounds. I don't believe grandfather and father really weighed a full nine or eight pounds either. Perhaps they used fourteenounce scales in those days. . . ."

"Each generation is worse than the last!"

Before Mrs. Sevenpounder could answer, she saw her husband coming out from the top of the lane, and shifted her attack to shout at him: "Why are you so late back, you slacker! Where have you been all this time? You don't care how long you keep us waiting to start supper!"

Although Sevenpounder lived in the village, he had always wanted to better himself. From his grandfather to himself, not a man in his family for three generations had handled a hoe. Like his father before him he worked on a boat which went every morning from Luchen to town, and came back in the evening. As a result, he knew pretty well all that was going on. He knew, for instance, where the thunder god had struck dead a centipede spirit, or

where a virgin had given birth to a demon. Though he had made a name for himself in the village, his family abided by country customs and did not light a lamp for supper in the summer; hence, if he came home late, he would be in for a scolding.

In one hand Sevenpounder held a speckled bamboo pipe, over six feet long, which had an ivory mouth−piece and a pewter bowl. He walked over slowly, hanging his head, and sat on one of the low stools. Sixpounder seized this chance to slip out and sit down beside him. She spoke to him, but he made no answer.

"Each generation is worse than the last!" grumbled Old Mrs. Ninepounder.

Sevenpounder raised his head slowly, and said with a sigh: "The emperor has ascended the throne again."

For a moment, Mrs. Sevenpounder was struck dumb. Then, suddenly taking in the news, she exclaimed: "Good! That means the emperor will declare another amnesty, doesn't it?"

"I've no queue," Sevenpounder sighed again.

"Does the emperor insist on queues?"

"He does."

Mrs. Sevenpounder was rather upset. "How do you know?" she demanded hastily.

"Everybody in Prosperity Tavern says so."

At that Mrs. Sevenpounder realized instinctively that things were in a bad way, because Prosperity Tavern was where you could pick up all the news. She looked angrily at Sevenpounder's shaved head, with a feeling of hatred and resentment; then fatalistically filled a bowl with rice and slapped it down before him, saying: "Hurry up and eat! Crying won't grow a queue for you, will it?"

The sun had withdrawn irs last rays, and the darkling water was gradually cooling off. There was a clatter of bowls and chopsticks on the mud flat, and sweat stood our on the backs of the people there. Mrs. Sevenpounder had finished three bowls of rice when, happening to look up, she saw something that set her heart pounding. Through the tallow leaves, Mr. Chao's short plump figure could be seen approaching from the one−plank bridge. And he was wearing his long sapphire−blue cotton gown. Mr. Chao was the owner of Abundance Tavern in a neighbouring village, and the only notable within a radius of ten miles who was also something of a scholar. His learning gave him a little of the musty air of a departed age. He had a dozen volumes of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* annotated by Chin Sheng−tan, which he would sit reading and re−reading, character by character. He could tell you not only the names of the five tiger generals, but even that Huang Chung was also known as Han−sheng, and Ma Chao as Meng−chi. After the Revolution he had coiled his queue on the top of his head like a Taoist priest, and often remarked with a sigh that if Chao Yun were still alive the empire would not be in such a bad way. Mrs. Sevenpounder's eyesight was good, and she had noticed at once that Mr. Chao was not wearing his hair like a Taoist priest today. The front of his head was shaved, and he had let his queue down. She knew that an emperor must have ascended the throne, that queues must be essential again, and that Sevenpounder must be in great danger too. For Mr. Chao did not wear this long cotton gown for nothing—in fact, during the last three years he had only worn it twice. Once when his enemy Pockmarked Ah−szu fell ill, once when Mr. Lu who had smashed up his wine shop died. This was the third time, and it must mean that something had happened to rejoice his heart and bode ill for his enemies.

Two years ago, Mrs. Sevenpounder remembered, her husband when drunk had cursed Mr. Chao as a "bastard." Immediately she realized instinctively the danger her husband was in, and her heart started thumping furiously.

The folk sitting at supper stood up when Mr. Chao passed by, and pointed their chopsticks at their rice bowls as they said: "Please join us, Mr. Chao."

Mr. Chao nodded greetings to all whom he passed, saying, "Go on with your meal, please!" He made straight for Sevenpounder's table. Everybody rose hastily to greet him, and Mr. Chao said with a smile, "Go on with your meal, please!" At the same time he took a good look at the food on the table.

"Those dried vegetables smell good—have you heard the news?" Mr. Chao was standing behind Sevenpounder, opposite Mrs. Sevenpounder.

"The emperor's ascended the throne," said Sevenpounder.

Watching Mr. Chao's expression, Mrs. Sevenpounder forced herself to smile. "Now that the emperor's ascended the throne, when will there be a general amnesty?" she asked.

"A general amnesty?—There'll be an amnesty all in good time." Then Mr. Chao's voice grew sterner. "But

what about Sevenpounder's queue, eh? That's the important thing. You know how it was in the time of the Long Hairs: keep your hair and lose your head; keep your head and lose your hair. . ."

Sevenpounder and his wife had never read any books, so this classical lore was lost on them; but they supposed that since the learned Mr. Chao said this, the situation must be extremely serious, irrevocable in fact. They felt as if they had received their death sentence. There was a buzzing in their ears, and they were unable to utter another word.

"Each generation is worse than the last." Old Mrs. Ninepounder, quite put out again, seized this chance to speak to Mr. Chao. "The rebels nowadays just cut people's queues off, so that they look neither Buddhist nor Taoist. Were the rebels before like that too? I've lived seventy−nine years, and that's enough. The rebels in the old days wrapped their heads in lengths of red satin that hung all the way down to their heels. The prince wore yellow satin that hung down . . . yellow satin; red satin and yellow satin—I've lived long enough at seventy−nine."

"What's to be done?" muttered Mrs. Sevenpounder, standing up. "We've such a big family, young and old, and all depend on him."

"There's nothing you can do," said Mr. Chao. "The punishment for being without a queue is written down quite distinctly, sentence by sentence in a book. Makes no difference how big your family is."

When Mrs. Sevenpounder heard that it was written down in a book, she really gave up all hope. Beside herself with anxiety, she suddenly hated Sevenpounder. Pointing her chopsticks at the tip of his nose, she cried: "You've made your bed, and now you can lie on it! I said during the revolt, better not go out on the boat, better not go to town! But he would go. He rolled off to town, and they cut his queue off. He used to have a glossy black queue, but now he doesn't look like Buddhist or Taoist. He's made his own bed, he'll have to lie on it. What right has he to drag us into it? Living corpse of a gaol−bird. . . ."

Since Mr. Chao had arrived, the villagers finished their meal quickly and gathered round Sevenpounder's table. Sevenpounder knew how unseemly it was for a prominent citizen to be cursed by his wife in public. So he raised his head to say slowly:

"You've plenty to say today, but at the time. . . ."

"Living corpse of a gaol−bird!"

Widow Pa Yi had the kindest heart of all the onlookers there. Carrying her two−year−old baby, born after her husband's death, she was standing next to Mrs. Sevenpounder watching the fun. Now she felt things had gone too far, and hurriedly tried to make peace, saying: "Never mind, Mrs. Sevenpounder. People aren't spirits, how can they foretell the future? Didn't Mrs. Sevenpounder say at the time there was nothing to be ashamed of in having no queue? Besides, the great official in the government office hasn't issued any order yet. . . ."

Before she had finished, Mrs. Sevenpounder's ears were scarlet, and she swept her chopsticks round to point at the widow's nose. "Well, I never!" she protested. "What a thing to say, Mrs. Pa Yi! I'm still a human being, aren't I—how could I have said anything so ridiculous? I cried for three whole days when it happened, everybody saw me. Even that imp Sixpounder cried. . . ." Sixpounder had just finished a big bowl of rice, and was holding out her bowl clamouring to have it refilled. Mrs. Sevenpounder was in a temper, and brought her chopsticks down between the twin tufts on the child's head. "Stop that noise! Little slut!"

There was a crack as the empty bowl in Sixpounder's hand fell to the ground. It struck the corner of a brick and a big piece was knocked off. Sevenpounder jumped up to pick up the bowl and examine it as he fitted the pieces together. "Damn you!" he shouted, and gave Sixpounder a slap on the face that knocked her over. Sixpounder lay there crying until Old Mrs. Ninepounder took her by the hand and walked off with her, muttering, "Each generation is worse than the last."

It was Widow Pa Yi's turn to be angry. "Hitting a child, Mrs. Sevenpounder!" she shouted.

Mr. Chao had been looking on with a smile, but when Widow Pa Yi said that the great official in the government office had not issued any order yet, he began to grow angry. Now coming right up to the table, he said: "What does it matter hitting a child? The imperial army will be here any time now. You know, the protector of the empire is General Chang, who's descended from Chang Fei of the period of the Three Kingdoms. He has a huge lance eighteen feet long, and dares take on ten thousand men. Nobody can stand against him." Raising his empty hands, as if grasping a huge invisible lance, he took a few paces towards Widow Pa Yi, saying, "Are you a match for him?"

Widow Pa Yi was trembling with rage as she held her child. But the sudden sight of Mr. Chao bearing down

on her with perspiring face and staring eyes gave her the fright of her life. Without finishing what she had to say, she turned and fled. Mr. Chao left too. As they made way, the villagers blamed Widow Pa Yi for interfering, and a few men who had cut their queues and started growing them again hid hastily behind the crowd for fear Mr. Chao should see them. However, Mr. Chao passed through the group without making a careful inspection. Suddenly he dived behind the tallow trees, and with a parting "Think you're a match for him!" strode on to the one−plank bridge and was off.

The villagers stood there blankly, turning things over in their minds. They realized they really were no match for Chang Fei; hence Sevenpounder's life was as good as lost. And since Sevenpounder had broken the imperial law, they felt he should never have adopted that lordly air as he smoked that long pipe of his and told them the news in town. So the fact that he was in trouble gave them a certain pleasure. They would have liked to discuss the matter, but did not know what to say. Buzzing mosquitoes brushed past their bare arms, then zoomed back to swarm beneath the tallow trees. The villagers scattered to their homes, shut their doors and went to sleep. Grumbling to herself, Mrs. Sevenpounder cleared away the dishes, table and stools and went inside too, to close the door and go to sleep.

Sevenpounder took the broken bowl inside, and sat on the doorsill smoking; but he was still so worried he forgot to pull on the pipe, and the light in the pewter bowl of his sixfoot speckled bamboo pipe with the ivory mouthpiece gradually turned black. Matters seemed to have reached a very dangerous state, and he tried to think of a way out or some plan of action. But his thoughts were in a whirl, and he could not straighten them out. "Queues, eh, queues? A huge eighteen−foot lance. Each generation is worse than the last! The emperor's ascended his throne. The broken bowl will have to be taken to town to be riveted. Who's a match for him? It's written in a book. Damn! . . ."

The next morning Sevenpounder went to town with the boat as usual. Towards evening he came back to Luchen, with his six−foot speckled bamboo pipe and the rice bowl. At supper he told Old Mrs. Ninepounder he had had the bowl riveted in town. Because it was such a large break, sixteen copper clamps had been needed, and they cost three cash each—making a total of forty−eight cash altogether.

"Each generation is worse than the last," said Old Mrs. Ninepounder crossly. "I've lived long enough. Three cash for a clamp. These aren't like the clamps we used to have. In the old days . . . ah. . . I've lived seventy−nine years. . . ."

Though Sevenpounder went into town every day as before, his house seemed to be under a cloud. Most of the villagers kept out of his way, no longer coming to ask him what the news was in town. Mrs. Sevenpounder was always in a bad temper too, and constantly addressed him as "Gaol−bird."

About a fortnight later, when Sevenpounder came back from town, he found his wife in a rare good humour. "Heard anything in town?" she asked him.

"No, nothing."

"Has the emperor ascended his throne?"

"They didn't say."

"Did no one in Prosperity Tavern say anything?"

"No, nothing."

"I don't think the emperor will ascend the throne. I passed Mr. Chao's wine shop today, and he was sitting there reading again, with his queue coiled on the top of his head. He wasn't wearing his long gown either."

". . . . . ."

"Do you think maybe he won't ascend the throne?"

"I think probably not."

Today Sevenpounder is again respected and well treated by his wife and the villagers. In the summer his family still sit down to eat on the mud flat outside their door, and passers−by greet them with smiles. Old Mrs. Ninepounder celebrated her eightieth birthday some time ago, and is as hale and hearty as ever, and as full of complaints. Sixpounder's twin tufts of hair have changed into a thick braid. Although they started to bind her feet recently, she can still help Mrs. Sevenpounder with odd jobs, and limps about the mud flat carrying the rice bowl with its sixteen copper rivets.

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