

THE RAMSHACKLE CAR

HAVE YOU EVER OWNED a worn-out watch or a gramophone with its inside hanging out, a thing that was the joy and pride of your father or your grandfather? Most aged treasures have a story behind them; they are like old drabs, with baggy skin round their dull eyes, boasting of a glorious past.

It was with mixed feelings of pity and admiration that we climbed into that wretched car. It is not to be vindictive that I use the word “wretched”—no other is appropriate. It is true that once upon a time the car might have been doted upon by its owner, oiled by a chauffeur several times a day, parked royally in front of the Fortune Theatre waiting for celebrities in mandarin robes to sink into its seats. But alas, even a car finds old age inescapable. It had been sold and re-sold until at last it had come into the hands of this taxi-driver deep in the interior of China. No polish is wasted on it now, and no one looks after it except the driver, who starts up the engine each day, long before the sun comes over the horizon. Huge wooden crates are piled on it until it creaks and groans with the weight; the remaining space is filled up with parcels of vegetables and some odd human freight, and the car starts off on a long bumpy journey. When the car is thirsty the driver fills a petrol tin with rusty-colored water from the ditch and pours it straight down the car’s throat. With this treatment the car has become tougher and tougher, but more and more disreputable. The roof has gradually turned into a kind of sieve that shows patches of sky, now grey, now blue, and when the road is dusty, white clouds come billowing up through the floor. But there is one thing about being driven in such a car: no scenery glimpsed through the window can distract you; the springs projecting through the torn cushions remind you constantly of your means of transport.

In the remoter parts of the North China plain, a car even of this kind is an attraction. As soon as we stopped a large crowd collected round us. It was the middle of winter, and the weather was cruelly cold. The villagers thrust their hands up the sleeves of their cotton-padded gowns and craned their necks, examining this foreign curiosity from end to end. Life on a six hundred mile stretch of unrelieved flatness is lonely

and dreary. The mules are dumb, the cattle low only once in a while, the fields are barren and grey. Life goes smoothly enough, but without excitement. Even the engine turning over makes a pleasant disturbance.

The faces of the villagers looking after us grew smaller and smaller as the car drove on, and soon we were in the midst of the grey, tawny fields. The bare earth looked callous and indifferent: once nature sheds her green cloak, everything seems harsh and sinister. The black branches of nondescript trees were outlined starkly against the sky, and the Siberian gale howled in the distance, disturbing a flock of rooks which flapped their dark wings and settled in another part of the field. The cold air blew in through the front of the car, and we tucked the sheepskin round our thighs.

The driver was a fine chap. With both hands clutching the wheel, he kept his eyes glued to the track. He had to avoid great lumps of frozen mud or ruts made by some heavily-laden mule cart. The windscreen was cracked, and frozen tears hung on his eyelids, but he drove steadily on. Occasionally the car protested at being driven so hard without a rest, and stopped altogether. Then the driver would push or pull every knob or handle he could find. All of a sudden, the heart of the veteran would begin to beat, but before we had gone fifty yards it would stop again.

“Damned box of tricks,” cursed the driver. This time he got out. He opened up the bonnet, and, seeing nothing in particular wrong, gave the car a furious kick, which shook us far more than the car. The wind attacked us from all directions with flying grains of sand which bounced visibly off the body. Did we hear the moaning of ghosts in the distance? Behind the grey clouds there was a yellowish round shape, so blurred that it looked like an eye swollen with crying, but still recognizable as the sun. The driver got out his toolbox, convinced at last that he would have to do something to his wretched car.

Looking round at the grey sky, the enormous, barren North China plain and the car, my companion muttered grimly:

“The nation is just like this wretched car, its past was glorious. . . .”¹

I stared at him, disagreeing whole-heartedly.

“Oh, no. That’s the most shameless pessimism. After all, a car has only one life to live, but a people can start on a new track altogether. . . .” But there was no other car for us at the moment, and only that

1. *Author’s Note:* This was written at the beginning of 1937 when China was inert under the stranglehold of the Japanese. People in North China were filled with anger, disgust, and gloom.

rugged track to travel on. We had to push forward.

By noon we had reached a village. As it was New Year's Day red lanterns hung from the flagpoles and on the willow branches, like blossoms on the cotton trees of the south. Again a curious crowd gathered as our car entered the village, and we were told that we still had twelve miles to go, twelve miles more difficult than the track we had already covered. We also heard that we had already crossed the border of another county.

As soon as the car had been satisfied with a few jugfuls of water and the driver fed with half a catty of pancakes, we started off again. This time a man in a black uniform rushed up, shouting, "The Sergeant wants to make an inspection." It was maddening. We complained, but the policeman who had brought the order had nothing to say. My companion said that we would save ourselves trouble in the future by hiring a mule cart.

As we were grumbling at the policeman another official came out. He had stars on his shoulder badge. In one hand he held the end of a rope; the other end was tied to the arm of a man with an ashy-pale face, a prisoner, evidently. The prisoner carried a parcel under his arm, and as he was led towards the car he kept trying to button his coat with his free hand.

"You miserable turtle-born," the officer jeered at the prisoner as they came towards us. "There are plenty of cigarettes; why on earth did you take to smoking that stuff? And then when you'd once been cured, how could you go back to it?" Then the policeman took hold of the rope so that his superior could speak to us. There was to be no "inspection." All they wanted was a lift in our car. We said we had no objection provided that the prisoner sat in front. My companion was already thoroughly scared by the bloodless face and the two rows of blackened teeth which the prisoner exposed as he grinned at the driver.

Sitting next to this living ghost made the driver more savage than ever. The prisoner was a smallish, thin man, about thirty, perhaps, wearing a blue padded gown with several patches. His eyes were deeply sunken in his face, and he looked like only the skeleton of a human being. He was shivering, and the cold made him draw in his breath with a hissing sound, otherwise we might have taken him for a corpse with its eyes open. The most frightening thing was the chattering noise his teeth made all the time.

The yellowish disc behind the clouds was sinking westward. The

wind screamed as we drove out of the village, and the car jolted even more than before as we entered a field which in the summer was a stretch of marshland. All at once a gale began to blow, the sky turned a greyish-yellow and seemed to hang just above our heads, as low as a ceiling. The ghostly sun disappeared altogether, and the whole landscape was overcast with a greenish light, heavy and sinister like the atmosphere of a medieval nightmare. One felt hemmed in by an inimical force, not animal, like wolf or tiger, but revengeful Nature.

Presently the car tilted over into a ditch and stuck there on its side. No engine alone would pull that out. Even worse, not more than 100 yards in front of us lay a frozen river. This time we had to get out and help.

"But where are we . . ." puzzled the driver. It seemed that even the policeman had lost his way. Holding tightly to the white rope, he looked about him in astonishment.

"We're near Tung Chia Chuang," whispered the ghostlike prisoner, peering at the policeman.

"How far are we from Wu Pai Hu, then?" asked the driver, beginning to take an interest in this living map of a prisoner.

"You'll have to go by the wooden bridge farther up the river, about seven and a half li," the ghost answered promptly, but with the same apathy. "There is a new Temple of Earth built there. You'll see its flagpole and parasols in a minute."

We were all grateful to that talking compass. We found the wooden bridge, and soon we could see from the river bank a stretch of red wall screened by a grove of pines. A solitary piece of vermillion cloth fluttered from the top of a slender pole. The new temple looked altogether out of keeping with its surroundings.

"Could we go into the village too?" the prisoner asked the policeman as they were getting out.

"What for?" the policeman asked.

"I . . . I've got a widowed sister living there. I'd like just to . . ." The prisoner looked at us, and then at the driver, as if trying to remind us that we owed him something. The reflection from the drab earth gave his face a greyish tinge; he was begging for pity.

"Widowed sister!" the policeman retorted gruffly, as though warning us against being taken in. "If you'd thought of her sooner you wouldn't have touched that drug."

The driver was ordered to stop, and they got out at a fork in the road.

The policeman thanked us, still clutching the rope, then dragged off the unwilling prisoner towards the east. The driver spat after them.

“Damn them, we’ll be lucky if we get back by midnight,” he said. When we asked what drug it was that the prisoner had taken he turned round and said very seriously, “Something even worse than opium. The Japs are clever with such stuff. You only have to have one puff of it in your cigarette! It’s called heroin. Pretty enough name!”

As our wretched car entered the village a woman was chasing a little pig which had escaped from its sty. Screaming wildly the little creature ran backwards and forwards across the road. Some children in red-checked gowns were playing round a cornmill. A crowd of villagers quickly gathered round us as our wretched car hissed and throbbed. It was an excitement, a change from their rural monotony. The grey dusk crept slowly over the plain of North China.