

Chapter One



The golden rays of the rising sun pierced the light smoky mist that hung over the Yangzi River, dispersing it to reveal the blue-green of the mountain peaks on either shore. The east wind played a soft, enchanting melody. The muddy waters of the Yangzi gradually plunged through the narrow gorges, now and then producing a bevy of small whirlpools in its wake.

An indistinct growl, like the roar of a great animal, issued forth from behind the wall of mountains upstream. After a few minutes it grew into a long, proud bellow, transforming itself into a thundering echo between the cliffs on the two sides of the river. A light green steamship burst majestically through the remaining fog, sailing effortlessly downstream. In an instant, the heavy rumbling noise of its engine swelled up on the surface of the river.

It was the renowned steamship *Longmao*, which plied the Sichuan waters of the Yangzi River. On this day it had pulled up anchor at dawn in Kuifu and was rushing to make the journey to Yichang by two or three in the afternoon. Although it was only eight in the morning, the ship was already packed to the rails with third-class passengers who had come up for a breath of fresh air. The passageway outside the dining hall on the uppermost deck was not as crowded. In fact, there were only two women leaning against the green iron railing, looking out into the distance at the magnificent, clear view of the Wu gorges.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the bow of the ship. One, her body slightly turned at the waist, her left forearm leaning on the railing, looked about twenty years old. She wore a pale-blue

soft satin waist-length blouse, beneath which a long black skirt that billowed out in the wind accentuated the elegance of her slender and graceful body. She had short hair. Two jet-black wisps of hair brushed the cheeks of her oval face, complementing a pair of long, thin eyebrows, a straight nose, two teasingly beautiful eyes, and small, round lips. She displayed all the characteristics of a flawless Oriental beauty. If viewed from behind, she appeared to be the essence of tenderness. But her eyes revealed a vigorous and straightforward spirit. And her small mouth, which was usually tightly closed, gave proof of her resolute disposition. She was the kind of person who knew her goal and never turned back.

Her companion was a short, fat, middle-aged woman. Her face was not unattractive, but her thick lips drooped at the corners, imparting an air of gloom to her appearance. Her clothes were of high-quality material, but their style was old-fashioned. Her feet had once been bound but were now released from their confinement. Encased in black boots that were too large, their humplike deformity looked like two round balls. Next to the long, narrow natural feet of her young companion, they looked quite miserable and pathetic.

The two did not speak to each other. The grandeur of the scenery had long since cleansed their minds of all thoughts. Their hearts were empty, free of concerns, intoxicated by the vastness of the natural beauty surrounding them.

The boat's whistle shrieked once again. Far off in the distance a cliff intruded on the landscape, blocking the river and piercing the sky. The river cut through the tall peaks that lined both banks. They seemed to form two towering natural dikes, barring any possibility of continued forward passage. The sun shone like a ray of gold, sparingly clothing only the tops of the high peaks in its brilliance, leaving the mountain below a carpet of dark green. The boat continued to push unswervingly forward, its whistle blasting with ever more urgency. The cliffs that all but obstructed the river moved gradually toward the two women, higher and higher, more and more imposing, the luxurious growth of trees halfway up their sides becoming faintly visible.

"This is only the first of the twelve peaks of Wushan." The middle-aged woman, as she addressed her companion, nodded her head with an air of self-importance and such vigor that the large

but loosely fastened bun anchored to the back of her skull bounced back and forth as if about to fall off.

The young woman replied with a smile, turning her head to avoid the foul odors that emanated from the large bun. Slowly she took a step forward, concentrating even more intently on the vista ahead. The precipice rushing toward her was now so close she could no longer see its tip. Clusters of jade-green cedars spread like a belt diagonally across the middle of the mountain. Below, thrust directly into the water, were reddish-brown rocks dotted here and there with climbing plants. All of this, this screen of mountains, grew slowly larger, moved slowly closer. Then, suddenly, it shuddered and gently turned around, as if to show off another aspect of its glory.

Bu...hong! The whistle gave a joyous cry, and the boat navigated the bend in the river. On the right the mountains that had been soaring to the heavens moved out of the way; once again the limitless waters of the Yangzi rushed between the mountain peaks.

“That’s just like the Yangzi! From a distance it looks impassable. It’s only when you get there that you see there’s a way through. Who knows how many bends like this there are. Miss Mei, this is your first time. You must find it very interesting indeed!” the middle-aged woman called out loudly from behind. Unfortunately, the east wind was so strong that her words of experience were scattered with it. Mei, who was gazing absentmindedly at the eastward-flowing Yangzi, did not hear a thing.

The unbelievable beauty of the Wu gorges had deeply moved her. She thought of her own past. It, too, had been so treacherous, so quick to change. It, too, had had its dead ends and rebirths. Light and darkness were interwoven into the fabric of her life. She had already courageously made it halfway through. What would the rest be like? This puzzle called the future! Mei had no fantasies. Yet neither was she pessimistic. She was simply waiting, quietly, like a boxing master who has established his position and is waiting for his opponent. Hardship was deeply branded on this young life.

Quite a few people probably envied her life. But she herself still saw her past as worthy of the word “vicissitude.” During the last four years she had begun to attract people’s attention as a “prominent member of the nouveaux riches.” In west and south Sichuan

everyone knew of Miss Mei. She was no ordinary girl. She was like a rainbow. But she had never wanted her life to be like this, nor was she happy this way. She simply charged forward with the spirit of a warrior, doing what circumstance dictated. Indeed, her special talent was “charging forward.” Her only ambition was to overcome her environment, overcome her fate. During the last few years her only goal had been to rein in her strong feminine nature and her even stronger maternal instincts.

On bright spring days and sorrowful rainy nights, she would occasionally feel the ancient legacy of being female stirring in her heart. At such times she would stare into space, immersed in a flood of loneliness and remorse. It was also at times like these that she fell to lamenting her unfortunate fate and conjuring up a million regrets about the vicissitudes of her existence. Nevertheless, her hardships had already cast her life into a new mold, and the whirlwind May Fourth Movement had already blown her thinking in a new direction. She could not look back. She could only strive to suppress and eradicate the traditional in her nature and adapt to a new world, a new life. She did not pause. She did not hesitate. She felt no contradictions.

The Yangzi was now struggling with difficulty to squeeze through the Wuxia Mountains. The river seemed a symbol of her past. But she hoped her future would be as open and surging as the Yangzi would be below the Kui Pass.

Mei could not suppress a smile. She turned her head and saw the middle-aged woman squinting at her, a reminder that the woman had been jabbering at her with that air of authority that older people so often displayed. Mei did not really like this companion, with her dejected look, but neither was she willing to needlessly offend her. Besides, as long as Mei did not have to smell that rancid hair, she didn't mind listening to the woman's pretentious din.

“Mrs. Wen, the wind is strong. Aren't you scared?” Mei spoke cordially. Stepping daintily inside, she deliberately took a position upwind.

“What hardships and bitterness haven't these old bones known? How could I be scared of the wind? This spring when we demonstrated for women's suffrage, the wind was stronger than this and there was a raging rainstorm, too. That didn't scare me. Without

even opening my umbrella, I led the sisters to the provincial governor's office to make our demands."

Mrs. Wen spoke excitedly, the bun at the back of her head bobbing unceasingly.

Mei pursed her lips to hold back a smile, all the while feigning total admiration.

"Why didn't you participate then, Miss Mei? Oh yes, you're the governor's private secretary, the trusted lieutenant of the boss. You're already an official. But Miss Mei, being an official isn't the same as suffrage. Suffrage is . . ."

As she reached this point, the woman paused for a moment and moved a bit closer to Mei in preparation for an extended harangue. Mei took a half-step back to guard her position upwind and adroitly interrupted the other woman: "I'm only the provincial governor's family tutor. What's all this about being a private secretary? That's just a rumor started by people who want to ridicule me. And that's not all people have been saying. It's better to just laugh it off. Mrs. Wen, you lost your husband as a young woman. You of all people should know that people with loose tongues like nothing more than to insult a woman, to spread reckless gossip."

Mrs. Wen's jowls twitched, but she did not reply. Any mention of her youth always depressed her. Nevertheless, her days of "fearing rumors" had long since passed. She was now a wholehearted member of the movement for political suffrage. Yet on the day they had rushed into the provincial assembly and she had heard the guards cursing her as an "old tigress on the prowl," for some reason her ardent spirit had flagged. Subconsciously, she thought back to the past indiscretion that had cast a shadow over her future. She felt that as a woman, the only prerequisite for taking a role in society was that she be pure and above reproach. In believing that a woman should remain ever faithful to one husband and never remarry, she was of one mind with many of those who opposed the suffrage movement.

"The provincial governor advocates the new thought. On the question of relations between the sexes, he has some special views. No doubt Mrs. Wen has heard people speak of them?"

Seeing her companion's discomfort, Mei laughed and changed the direction of the conversation. But the term "relations between the sexes" was probably still very alien to the ears of this eloquent

and ardent supporter of women's suffrage. She looked slightly puzzled at Mei and did not answer. Mei winked knowingly and continued, "This special viewpoint goes like this: a wife is a companion for life. A companion is a friend. The more friends the better!"

Suddenly the boat's whistle sounded again, two short spurts followed by a long, loud wail. The warning bell on top of the boat also began to clang wildly. Hiding in the hollows carved out of the hills on both banks of the river, local bandits had begun firing guns in the direction of the boat. This happened quite often. Suddenly the boat was filled with the chaotic sound of passengers' footsteps. By the time Mei grabbed Mrs. Wen and ran to the passageway in front of the dining hall, she had already heard the intermittent and then continuous sounds of gunfire coming from the left. The first-class passengers, who had already arisen, were now pushing and showing to be first to squeeze down the narrow stairway leading to the cabins below. One of the crew gestured at Mei and her companion to go below as well. Without thinking, Mei took a step forward, but her nose was instantly assaulted by the stench of Mrs. Wen's hair. She stopped.

"I'm not going down. A boat moving with the current goes very fast. Even bandits' bullets won't be able to reach us," Mei said with a slight smile.

She did not wait for Mrs. Wen's reply but walked sprightly through the dining hall to her own cabin, lay down on the bed, picked up a book, and began to read. As it happened, her cabin was on the right-hand side of the boat. The reflection of the sun flashed across the window. Mei got up, thinking to pull down the curtains, when she saw a wooden junk on the water unfurl its sails. It moved along the edge of the cliff and in an instant was gone. She listened carefully. The gunfire had stopped. She returned to her bed, lay down, and yawned. Her nights had been filled with dreams, her sleep unsettled. Once again this morning she had arisen too early. She felt very tired. Folding her hands under her head, she lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes.

The doorknob to the cabin turned softly. Mei opened her eyes lazily and saw Mrs. Wen standing in front of the bed. She must have been jostled by the crowd, for her bun was about to come apart. It drooped limply down the back of her neck, and her temples were sticky with beads of sweat.

“How dare those gangsters even open fire on foreign ships. Aiya! But you’re the bold one, Miss Mei. Bullets don’t have eyes. It’s not worth getting yourself killed.” Mrs. Wen sank heavily onto the bed. She spoke breathlessly.

Mei smiled charmingly, sat up, walked to the window, and leaned over the dressing table. She considered advising Mrs. Wen to rearrange her bun, but in the end Mei changed her mind.

“The pity is it interrupted our conversation. Mrs. Wen, do you think what the governor said was correct?”

“Important people think differently from us common folk.”

A casual observer might have thought that Mrs. Wen was just being polite, but her attitude was exceedingly earnest. Mei laughed faintly. She lifted her foot and lightly kicked the tassels on the lower part of the curtains with the pointed toes of her white leather high-heeled foreign shoes.

“But he said only that a wife is a companion for life, not that a husband and wife are companions for life.”

Mrs. Wen opened her eyes wide in total incomprehension.

“He now has five of these companions for life,” Mei quickly continued. “He treats them very thoughtfully and equally, but he guards them jealously. You’d almost think he used eunuchs in that famous garden of his. It’s practically his Afang Palace.”*

Mrs. Wen did not grasp the point of these words. But the number five conjured up rumors she had heard and aroused her interest. “I’ve heard that some are extremely ugly. Is it true?”

This time it was Mei who did not entirely understand. But just as she threw Mrs. Wen a startled glance, Mei realized what her companion was referring to. With a laugh, she stretched and coldly replied, “There was one who once wrote a poem containing the lines, ‘I’d rather be concubine to a hero/than be the wife of a common man.’ She’d probably qualify as the world’s ugliest woman.”

The sun’s rays outside the window abruptly fell into shadow, as if the boat had entered a tunnel of some kind. Mei craned her neck to see but noticed only an exceedingly tall cliff slowly receding, its peak hidden from view. Suddenly, suspended before her eyes were row after row of trees, both tall and short, their trunks straight and thin like those of the hemp. Mei drew back her head and looked at

*The Afang Palace housed the harem of the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.).

Mrs. Wen's dazed expression. "One of the peculiarities of the general* of the Afang Palace," Mei added, "is that almost all his companions are kind of ugly."

A profound silence crept into the room. The normally talkative Mrs. Wen seemed to have been stricken speechless. She suddenly lay back on the bed and covered her face with her hands. Her fat, clumsy body and her unnaturally small feet all reminded Mei of that woman dwelling deep within the Afang Palace who would rather not be the "wife of a common man."

Images out of the past slowly began to congeal in Mei's mind, enveloping her consciousness like a veil of smoke. As in a dream, she was once again a family tutor in that large garden. She saw the familiar layout of manmade hills, the fish pond, and the Western-style gazebo. Ah! That unforgettable gazebo. It was there that she had refused the temptation of money and jewels. It was not that she did not like luxuries but that she valued her freedom more. Above all, she did not want to become a prisoner of the Afang Palace. It was also there that she had come to know the jealousy that had been bred in women by thousands of years of dependence on men. The vision of a small round face with a pair of fierce triangular eyebrows rushed into her mind. And then the smooth, shiny barrel of a Browning revolver, staring at her like the eye of some bizarre monster.

A barely audible snort of contempt rose up from deep within Mei, waking her out of her gloomy reverie. It was the same snort with which the *yuanzhu* bird in Zhuangzi's famous story replied to the owl who was cherishing his piece of rotting rat meat as if it were a precious jewel.** In fact, the last lesson Mei had taught as a family tutor was that very fable, "The Owl Gets a Rotten Rat."

A faint snoring arose from the bed. Mrs. Wen had fallen asleep. Mei glanced out the window and then walked softly out of the

*Mei refers to the governor as a general because most provincial governors during this so-called warlord period of Chinese history were powerful commanders of personal armies whose political role grew out of their military power.

**This is a reference to the section in *Zhuangzi* entitled "The Floods of Autumn" in which the philosopher chides the prime minister of the kingdom of Liang for fearing his job is coveted by the philosopher. He likens the prime minister to an owl who has just caught a rat and fears it will be stolen by the phoenix flying overhead. Just as the phoenix eats and drinks only the purest and most delicate foods and would not want the rat, Zhuangzi would have no interest in such a job.

cabin, back to the passageway outside the dining hall. She sat down on one of the rattan chairs.

On both banks of the river, mountains so tall they had never been inhabited jutted out of the muddy waves and pierced the sky like two high walls. The steamship *Longmao* puffed asthmatically down the middle of the river. Every once in a while a junk or two appeared on either side, but they clung so closely to the cliffs that it seemed as if those aboard could stretch out a hand and pick the wisteria growing on the rocks. Below the distant towering cliffs ahead were several small wooden boats. Crowded together as if immobile in the narrow pass, they seemed to leave no space for the steamship to squeeze through. But only a few minutes later, with a triumphant blast of its whistle, the *Longmao* was hurrying past. Only then was it clear that the Yangzi was really wide enough for four steamships. The wake created by the steamship's propellers dashed against the shore, and the snail-like wooden boats clinging to the cliffs swayed like a gathering of drunken men.

Mei smiled as she looked at the wooden boats. She admired the great power of this machine and had no pity for the snail-like objects being buffeted by the violence it created. She had complete faith in the huge monstrosity that carried her and was intensely conscious that this mammoth product of modern civilization would bring her to a new future. Although before her was a world unimaginably strange, it was surely more vast and more exciting than anything she had known. Of this she was firmly and unalterably convinced.

But she had no illusions. The experience of the last four or five years had taught her three lessons: never long for the past, never daydream about the future, but seize the present and use all your abilities to cope with it. Her past was just like a boat moving through the Wuxia Mountains. She often saw precipices blocking her path, convincing her that there was no way out. But if she bravely and resolutely pressed on, she would always discover that the road ahead was actually very wide. Then as she went a little farther on, the cliffs would again loom before her, and a way out would seem even more remote. If at that point she had looked back from whence she had come, she would have seen that the mountains were already hidden by clouds. To look back on the past was unbearable. The future was indistinct and full of hazards. She

could only seize the present and press forward with both feet planted firmly on the ground. She was a "disciple of the present."

A hot wind passed over her. The sun's rays danced on the water like myriad specks of gold. It was almost noon. Mei leaned back in the rattan chair and felt her eyelids grow heavy. Although the scenery before her was fascinating, it now made her feel somewhat weary. The endless river pressed between the barren mountains, twisting and turning interminably as the torrents of water rushed ceaselessly forward, always promising new mysteries and yet always the same. And amidst it all, the ever present triumphant, yet mournful, sound of the ship's whistle.

She slumped down in the chair, letting herself drowse off to escape the monotony. No thoughts of the past disturbed her peace, and no thoughts of the future came to arouse her emotions.

A waiter arrived to call her to lunch. She found out from him that it would be around three o'clock before they reached Yichang and concluded that this so-called fast steamship was no better than a slow boat after all. She wished she could cross the Kui Pass immediately. The closer they approached the Sichuan border, the more her impatience grew. To Mei, everything about Sichuan was narrow, small, meandering, just like the river flowing before her.

After lunch, taking advantage of a reprieve from Mrs. Wen's incessant chatter, Mei withdrew into the cabin to take a nap. She had long since found this leading member of the women's suffrage movement boring. Now Mei had begun to hate her. She hated her vulgar manners; she hated her extreme narrow-mindedness; she hated the way she put on airs to mask her base nature; she hated her extremely muddled ideas on women's rights.

Half consciously, she compared herself to Mrs. Wen. Then, suddenly, Mei thought of what would happen after they reached Shanghai. She asked herself, "We are representatives, but as a group, what do we represent? How will we be able to accomplish our collective mission?" She could not but laugh. She admitted to herself that she had used her attendance at the National Student League conference as a pretext to evade the advances of that diminutive warlord. She knew if she did not escape now, it would be difficult to avoid being forced into becoming one of the ladies of the Afang Palace. As to whether her companion, Mrs. Wen, also had personal motives for attending, Mei was even less inclined to speculate.

All thought of sleep departed. From Mrs. Wen, Mei's mind wandered to recollections of other acquaintances. Xu, a good friend from middle school with whom she had kept in touch until two years ago, when she was a teacher in southern Sichuan, leaped into her mind. "She's in Nanjing," Mei thought excitedly. And with this a multitude of disconnected memories streamed into Mei's head, finally driving her from her bed.

A rumbling sound arose from the deck. From outside the window came the sound of swarming footsteps. Mrs. Wen stuck her head in through the window and shouted joyfully, "Don't you want to see the Kui Pass? We're almost there!"

Mei replied with a smile. The enthusiasm of the throng outside made her feel hot. She changed into a muslin blouse, wiped her face with a towel, and ran nimbly out to the passageway.

Lofty cliffs still stood on both banks, but now they were not so high and had begun to slope slightly. Behind them rose row after row of mountains, each taller than the ones before. The rays of the sun had now turned them a brilliant golden color. The wind had died down to a gentle breeze, as if it, too, had barely awoken from its afternoon nap.

The boat seemed to be moving more slowly. The splashing of the waves became more even. The whistle emitted a constant arrogant bellow like the cries of the heralds in ancient times who ordered the people to make way for an approaching official.

Many people were lined up along the railing, staring straight ahead. Mrs. Wen was among them. Mei stood in the passageway. She clasped her hands behind her neck and gently swayed her shoulders from side to side. Her short sleeves fell back to her shoulders, revealing her snow white arms like two triangles on either side of her head. The sight of her bare skin attracted quite a few sideward glances. Mei bit her lip and grinned as if no one else were there. Then, impulsively, she raised her eyebrows and skipped off, cutting right through the clusters of passengers to the door of the captain's cabin.

About one hundred feet from the front of the ship, two walls of stone jutted out of the water and faced each other across the river, so vertical and smooth they seemed to be sliced out of the rocks with a knife. There were no trees, no vines, no ferns, only the pitch black rocks looming majestically over the river like a monumental door frame without its top. Joining these two strange stones

were row after row of undulating mountains. Each billowing wave of the Yangzi rushed to be first to reach the shore, crashing violently against the foot of the cliffs.

The boat's whistle once again let out a long ear-splitting shriek as the *Longmao* sailed into the great stone gateway. Mei craned her neck to see. The intensity of the sun made her dizzy. She felt as though the rapidly receding stone precipice was swaying, about to topple. Instinctively, she closed her eyes. She saw a flash of red light and then all was dark.

Mei buried her face in her hands and thought to herself, "So this is the Kui Pass. This is the great pass out of Sichuan. This is the demon pass* that separates Sichuan from the rest of the world!" These thoughts left Mei momentarily distracted, until the boat's whistle once again roused her. She lifted her head and felt a blinding flash from the returning sunlight. The Yangzi opened up before her, so broad that she could not see the shore. All that was visible were distant, smoky objects like the shadows of clouds lying on the horizon. As if a great weight had been lifted from her chest, Mei smiled, raised her arms high, and took a deep breath. She paid tribute to this glorious work of nature. It was only at that moment that she fully realized the vastness and power of the Yangzi River.

She turned her head to the right. The cliffs of the Kui Pass were still faintly visible. The pass itself now seemed but a crack among the myriad peaks, and within the crack lay a mysterious darkness.

"From here on you won't be seeing any more good scenery. Once you leave Sichuan the Yangzi is really quite ordinary. The Kui Pass is a natural boundary."

From her left came the sound of Mrs. Wen's voice. Mei turned her head and saw Mrs. Wen straining to move her small feet. As she nodded and walked away, Mei pursed her lips in a smile and called gently after her, "This is also the last time we'll be following a meandering, narrow, dangerous, mazelike route. From here on we enter the broad vast world of freedom!"

*This is a pun on the word *gui*, or demon, and the name of the pass as well as an expression of Mei's hatred of her isolation in Sichuan.