A SKY FULL OF BLAZING STARS

p.1-14
A Sky Full of Blazing Stars
by
Pai Hsiang-yung

Translated by Pata Leahu and the author
It's always like this, every time, always. He would wait until all the blazing stars in the sky gradually darken and go down one by one. He leans back against the stone balustrade around the lotus pond in New Park and begins to recite those ancient tales of his.

Maybe it's one of those stifling hot days in July or August; the ramblers in the park linger on and on, unwilling to leave, then we start to circle hurriedly around and around on the terrace surrounding the pond, treading on each other's shadows. In the thick, torrid darkness, here a tuft of white hair floats, there a ravaged bald head sways; a stooped silhouette, anxiously, on the prowl, shuttles to and fro, until the last pair of eyes filled with desire vanishes into the murky grove; then, only then, do we start our gathering. By that time our legs are so exhausted we can hardly raise them.

We all call him "the Guru." Ah Hsiung, the Primitive, says that among his people, the aborigines, at the season when the first spring rain comes all the youths run naked into the rain and perform the Spring Sacrifice Dance.
Every time, there will be a white-haired, white-bearded elder who presides at the altar as the Chief Priest. Once we threw a dance-party at Handsome's house in Wan Hua and Ah Hsiung the Primitive got drunk; he tore off all his clothes and started his tribe's Spring Sacrifice Dance.

The Primitive is a big, dark, wild lad, his whole body bulging with muscles sprouting through his face like two balls of dark fire — our acting coach, Old Man Mo, says Ah Hsiung is a born martial-arts movie star — all of us watched him, mesmerized, then, yowling and roaring we all threw our clothes off and joined in his Spring Sacrifice Dance with him. We danced and danced, suddenly Handsome sprang onto the table, waving his snakelike body like crazy, in a voice piercing as a young cockerel's he declared, "We are the Spring Sacrifice Sect!"

Think about it, who besides him has the qualifications to be the Guru of our Sect? Sure, naturally, he belongs to our grandfathers' generation, yet there are plenty among those night-sprites in the Park who are far ahead.
"You just wouldn't believe it——!

Dark-and-Handsome gasped; his mouth popped open and his eyes rolled upwards.

But Guru had been not only a short time; once the talkies came in, he was eclipsed; he was a Southerner and couldn't speak Mandarin. At that time, Old Man Mo told Dark-and-Handsome, everybody at Stars poked fun at Guru; they called him Crimson Flame, the Mute Lead. That night at the stone balustrade around the pond in the Park, we followed Guru and called him Crimson Flame; he turned abruptly, raised a forbidding finger and waved it at us.
“Chu Yen?”

“Crimson Flame?” Did you say Crimson Flame? —

He died a long time ago!”

We all began to laugh; we thought he was drunk, and

that night, indeed, Guru was intoxicated. His hoary hair

stuck out in all directions, quivering in the wind, his

eyebrows close-knit, the three lines in his forehead

sunk even deeper. Have you ever seen that? The lines

could be so deep. As if they had been carved by a sharp-

pointed knife, three of them, right there on his broad,

high brow, one under the other, so deep they darkened.

He was tall, broad-shouldered; once his carriage must have had

been very impressive, but now his back was bowed; he was

always wrapped in that old gray herringbone tweed overcoat

of his; as he walked, his coat flapping in the wind gave you

a sense of infinite desolation. But those strange eyes of

his — what did they resemble, after all? In the dark,

two orbs of burning emerald, they sent forth a flame that

refused to die, like eternal lights in an ancient tomb.

“What are you laughing at?” he shouted at us.

“Do you think you’re going to live for ever?” He walked over
and poked Ah Hsiung the Primitive in the chest. "You think you've got a strong body, huh?" He chucked Dark-and-Handsome under the chin. "You think you've got a pretty face, do you? Think you'll all live till you're forty? Fifty? Some people live long, see, like him — " He pointed at a fortune-teller, the kind who does it by graphology, a fat old man dozing off at his table by the Park fence.

"He can live until his beard drags along the ground, until there's nothing left of his face but a few dark holes — he'll still be alive! But Crimson Flame died early. 1930, 31, 32" — he laughed coldly, counting on his fingers — "Three years, he only lived three years! 'T'ang Po-hu?' All those people at the studio by that name, every one of them rushed up to call him but the moment the cameras stopped grinding on Loyang Bridge they announced 'Crimson Flame is finished!' They wanted the Shun Pao to sign his death warrant: 'An Actor Whose Artistry Is Dead And Gone.' They not only pushed him into the well, they dumped stones on top of him. Buried him alive! Didn't even give him a chance at last breath — "

*The leading newspaper in Shanghai in those days, whose movie reviews could make or break a reputation.
As he was saying three words, all at once his hands closed around his throat, his eyes bulged, he uttered stifled sounds, his face turning purple; he looked frightful, as if someone were about to strangle him. We all broke out laughing, we thought he was acting. Guru had a terrific talent all right; no matter what role he played, he made it real. Dark-and-Handsome said, Guru could have become a famous director, but he took to drinking all the time; and besides, he was headstrong, full of fierce pride, he offended all the big stars, so a first-rate film never came his way.

"Like this! It was just like this!" Guru let go of himself. "Little brothers, you don't know what it's like to be buried alive, it's as if someone had you by the throat and you couldn't utter a sound, but you could see their faces, you could hear their voices, you could see them shooting straight at you with the camera under the klieg lights; and you? Your pulse beat slower and slower, and one by one your nerves deadened, with your own eyes you saw your limbs rot away piece by piece."
I gritted my teeth and told my White Horse Prince, Charming,

'Son, you must show them, for my sake!' Chiang Ch'ing was a good boy; I really can't blame him. The day Loyang Bridge premiered at the Grand Theater in Shanghai, the crowd was so big it stopped the traffic on Bubbling Well Road.

The minute he came galloping onto the screen in his white horse, in his seagreen silk robe, I heard myself cry out in my heart, Crimson Flames lives again!

To remake 'Loyang Bridge' I staked everything I owned when I was directing him. Once, I slapped him across his face and left five bloodred marks. But is there anyone who knew how I cherished him? Crimson Flame's White Horse Prince they all called him. He was born to be a great star; there was a kind of angelic quality about him — little brothers, don't you think you're such charmers: not one of you has it!

He went round the circle pointing at us; when it came to Dark-and-Handsome's turn, Dark-and-Handsome sneered; we all roared. Dark-and-Handsome thought he was some hot shot...
Some day for sure he was going to make it to Hollywood, he said. We advised him to order a pair of high heeled boots; he was only 5'5" where was he going to find an American woman short enough to co-star with him?

"But why? Why?" Without warning, Guru caught Ah Hsiung the Primitive by the arm. Ah Hsiung started; laughing, he struggled to free himself, but Guru held him fast, his head, hair white and unruly, butted against Ah Hsiung's face. "Why didn't he listen to me? 'Son,' I said, 'you're a genius; don't ruin yourself.'

The first glance, I knew Dandelion was bad luck! That little witch was thrown clear, not a hair on her head was injured; and on top of that she became Heavenly Unity Studios' red hot star! And he? He was burned to a lump of charcoal sitting in that sports car I gave him. They wanted me to claim the body. I refused. I refused to acknowledge it. That heap of charred flesh was not my White Horse Prince — " It was as if a piece of bone were stuck in Guru's throat; he became unintelligible. "Burnt to death — we both got burnt to death — " he muttered; his burning
emeralds of eyes flashed so that sparks seemed to leap from them. Ah Hsiung freed himself; panting, he ran back to us. The Guru leaned back against the stone balustrade, his head slightly bowed; a big lock of his white hair slipped forward and hung there. Behind him the enormous yellow moon was languidly sinking behind that row of coconut trees on the west side of the pond. In the pond the lotus flowers and lotus leaves breathed out waves of fragrance with increasing intensity. Dark-and-Handsome stood on tiptoe, stretched and yawned; we all began to drowse.

There was a period, several months, when you couldn't find a trace of Guru in the Park. Within our circle there were all kinds of rumors; they all said Guru had gotten himself arrested and put in prison by the police from the Fourth Precinct; and not only that, he was booked on a morals charge — all this was spread around by one of the San Shui Street fancy boys. The way that little fancy boy told it, that night, after he left the Park as he passed through Westgate Square he ran into Guru in the China Plaza arcade...
The old man was running after a student and trying to buttonhole him.

"That schoolboy was some gorgeous!" the little fairy smacked his lips. Guru looked absolutely blind drunk; he could hardly walk. He was swaying from side to side, trying to catch up with that student and ask him if he wanted to be a movie star. At first the student tried to get away, he kept turning around and laughing; at the corner, Guru caught up with him; he threw his arms around him and hugged him, mumbling "Loyang Bridge," mumbling "White Horse Charming," and all that.

"Prince!" The student cried out in panic, a big crowd gathered; later the police came.

One night, we finally saw Guru appear in the Park again.

That was a most unusual summer night; for two months there hadn't been a single drop of rain in Taipei. The wind was hot; the stone balustrade in the Park was hot; those lush, fertile tropic trees hazy with sultry smoke; the lotus flowers in the pond smelled so sweet the air tasted sticky. In the dark, thickening sky the moon —— have you ever seen that?

Have you ever seen such a lewd, demonic moon before?
Like an immense ball of flesh, bloodshot, floating up there, flesh-red. In the Park human shadows flickered, circling around wildly like the images on a revolving lantern.

Dark-and-Handsome was sitting on the stone balustrade, decked out in a tight-fitting scarlet T-shirt, Bermuda shorts and sandals. Head in the air, legs swinging, he was showing off like a little peacock with its tail spread for the first time.

He'd just landed a role in "Dawn of Spring," director Old Man Mog said, this was his debut; he was so cocksure he'd forgotten who he was. Ah Hsiung the Primitive didn't want to be upstaged. He seemed to be trying to steal the show from Dark-and-Handsome. Snug in a bright purple Thai silk shirt that turned the upper part of his body into an inverted triangle, his white denim pants so tight they looked painted onto his bulging-sinewy legs, his steel belt-buckle as big as a goose egg, flashing like silver, his whole body burst with saturated maleness, tinged with the primitive wildness of the aborigines.

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When he sat next to Dark-and-Handsome, for sure they were the most eye-catching pair in the Park; but that gang of
San Shui Street fancy boys simply refused to be haunted.

In groups of threes and fives, their arms around each others' shoulders, their wooden clogs clicking, they marched to and fro on the terrace as if they were demonstrating, humming amorous melodies. When a fat, bald-headed foreigner made his way over, expostulating, the fancy boys, devil-may-care, chorused "Hello!"

When the excitement in the Park was at its height, out of nowhere emerged Guru; his appearance was so sudden everybody was astounded, awestruck; all at once they fell silent and quietly watched Guru's huge silhouette move up to the terrace. He wore a brand new pale blue sharkskin suit. He was unusually well-groomed; it made his shock of white hair all the more striking, but he moved his steps with such effort, as if he limped from a wound.

He'd probably gone through a lot in prison, you know; the police could be very cruel sometimes, especially to people inside on morals charges. Once a little San Shui Street fairy hooked a wrong customer and got arrested;
the police really fixed his wagon but bad. When he got out he was so scared he lost his voice; when he saw people, the only thing he could do was open his mouth and go ah, ah.

People said he'd been beat up with a rubber hose. Guru dragged his feet along heavily, with great dignity, step by step; eventually he made the stone balustrade at the end of the terrace. Alone, he stood there by himself against the balustrade, his white, unruly head uplifted, his tall, lanky silhouette jagged, imposing, erect, ignoring the whispers and snickers buzzing around him. In a moment excitement returned to the terrace. The night was deepening; steps grew more urgent, one by one their shadows searching, exploring, yearning. Guru stood there alone. Not until that flesh-ball of a red moon went languidly down did he leave the Park. When he left he took a Sanshui Street fancy boy along with him. The boy was called Little Jade; he was a pretty-faced little thing, but he was a cripple, so not many people paid attention to him.
around the boy's shoulder, the two of them, one tall, one small, supporting each other with their incompleteness, they limped together into the dark grove of Green Corals.
"Blazing Stars" is of course not a correct translation. Its image is "hot", "fiery", etc. (as in the phrase: to go out "in a blaze of glory"; there is even a striptease artist whose stage name is "Blaze Starr"!) I suppose it is purposely employed here to echo the hot, sultry, sex-laden atmosphere down below (p. 1 "stifling hot days", "torrid darkness"; p. 2 "balls of dark fire"; p. 3 "Crimson Flame"; p. 4 "burning emerald"; p. 10 "hot", "sultry"; p. 11 "bloodshot", "flesh-red").

But I have a different reading of the symbolism: Each time the Guru tells his story he does not begin until "...the stars...dareken and fade out one by one". This seems to me to pose an effective contrast between what's going on in Heaven and on earth; past glory & idealism vs the destitution and Walpurgis Night of the present; or (as Ouyang Tzu puts it) the spirit and the flesh--the latter explicitly symbolized by the "lewd, demonic moon" that is "like an immense ball of flesh" (pp. 10-11). If this is true, then I think we should translate it "Bright, Twinkling Stars". This is not only literally correct, but also reflects the hard, clean, gemlike quality of the stars, as against all the murky softness represented below. Further--if it is not stretching the imagination too much--"A Sky Full of Bright, Twinkling Stars" inevitably reminds people of the nursery song "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star", suggesting innocence as against the corruption in the world of the "night-sprites" roaming New Park. Innocence in corruption, and vice versa, is a theme found in such stories as Henry James' "Turn of the Screw" and in Gatsby.

P. 1 ...gradually darken and go down one by one (Changed to fade out. Seems not only better wording, but also, by using a cinematography term, prefigures the background of the main character in this story.

P. 3 "Crimson Flame, the Mute Lead"--First of all, you know I'm always leery of translating the meaning of a person's name, because we cannot do it uniformly with all names; also, while sometimes helpful (as in feminine first-names) it often leads to confusion and over-exaggeration. I think this is a case in point, especially when the name is repeated several times later. True, the transliteration "Chu Yen" loses something, but I consider that one of the minor hazards in translation. One way is to explicate it with a footnote, which I'd object here. With Chinese movie stars especially, the names often involve a pun--perhaps can further be interpreted as , signifying the ephemeral quality of youthful beauty. If that's the case, even translating it "Crimson Flame" would be inadequate and we'd need a double footnote!

Incidentally, wherever necessary, without hurting the texture of the writing, I've interspersed a word or two here and there to make the background of the story more intelligible. For instance, on this page:

...the biggest star under contract with the Star Motion Picture Corporation in Shanghai
...some of the old movie directors' homes
...a star of the first magnitude
...in the role of...in the film classic

P. 7 The literal trans. from the Chinese, "White Horse Prince", is awkward and inelegant. Actually, the very popular neologism 白马王子 is a trans. of "Prince Charming", from the fairy tales. And it fits in well here. The name Chiang Ch'ing ( ) is a bit unfortunate; for if Westerners know anybody by that name it would be 朱 、青 . If that's the case, even translating it "Crimson Flame" would be inadequate and we'd need a double footnote!

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P. 7, line 3 I added the word: our 'Loyang Bridge' (preferably in italics) to distinguish it from the first mention of 'Loyang Bridge' on p. 5. Otherwise, the reader will find it confusing--in spite of the word "remake" which appears 6 lines later.

P. 7, line 11-12 My phrase "Was there ever a one who knew..." may sound a little odd, in which case change back to "anyone".

P. 7, last line "hot shit", too strong. Original is: 太熱了,热死人.

P. 8 I'm uncomfortable with Dandelion, but can't think of a better way out. Couldn't we at least say Dandelion Chen, to personify it?

Dear Patia:

I suppose Kenneth Pai will forward this for your reference along with the revised translation. I'm sorry--I don't know what moved me to write such a long memo to a comparatively short story; I hope it doesn't present any problems.

Earlier, I heard from Kenneth that you had been ill. I trust you are completely recovered now, and getting more and more acclimatized to your human and physical environment in Taipei.

I'm telling Kenneth that I'll make an effort and get the two remaining stories--"Bygone Days" and "State Funeral"--wrapped up in Feb.

With warmest regards, and take care of yourself!

[Signature]

1-26-80
Dear George:

I got the revised translation of the "Bright, Twinkling Stars," bless their hearts and yours! this Saturday, and hasten to return it to you and Kenneth. Your long and gorgeous memo not only didn't "present any problems," it made me very happy. "The two remaining stories" — it seems hard to believe there are only two left. I can wait to see them, with difficulty! (I can hardly wait to see them.)

Thank God and everybody, I am indeed getting more and more acclimatized to my human and physical environment in Taipei, though I'm not completely recovered from illness and a battle fatigue of longer standing and greater grounds than I realized. But this is a fascinating place! Everybody's fascinating, including us furriers.

Really, "Bright, Twinkling Stars" is so beautiful now, thanks to you. "Prince Charming" it is! I can't begin to tell you how moved I was. God bless you! and thank you. It is wonderful. Kenneth says you've promised to write an editor's note, and that delights me, too. The whole English version is full of your divine sparks and rare understanding. HAPPY CHINESE NEW YEAR! to you and your family.

With warmest regards, and take care of yourself!

Pattie

2/11/80
一九八四年二月九日辰

先勇：

tou 16 事奉 “满天耀亮” 的 “是” 梦已足矣。

书内附上“思想赋”的改稿。此篇也很短，且

原译读起来很顺，没有大问题。只是我看了

篇首信声听，未免吃惊（此篇稿子我于心细读

之前，再未翻阅过）。母以前我寄信表示过，直接

提议用思周词，很难评论，dealed更不必说。

如效果只及此，不但Inubiera那边的人会抗议，一
般试周词中也含莫疾其功。但读书的感觉

是很自然，而且已经老练得时level及speed

也没有什么别好方法可以使其更为逼真。因此

我深为可用，不过篇首信声次章一定要移动。

此外有几处地方，稍嫌过大，即所谓verbal

overkill，我也没法把此改过来，希望有实力帮

助。

早几天Inubiera给F. vivian街房得了电请诸
事。说说他和 Rees Kee及JUP的John Goldmann一班

下月（三月廿一至廿三）都要到D.C.来。在AAS闭会

会要跟我奉承。我想你应该考虑，不会来接会

吧？很奇怪，只剩最后一篇，短时间一定改

完了！（Joe Kee也未便问此妙的进度如何，

我告诉你手中还有两篇，不过我他说恭喜的！

你赶快才好！）祝候辛酉吉！