

'Calabash Gorge'

*Told by Fei Zhengliang
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Leading his troops of civilian and military officials together with the remnants of his routed army, Cao Cao headed onwards. Well, they were on the march, but why was the sky turning so sinister? He lifted his head and looked up: Oh, too bad! How come? Black clouds rolled over the whole sky. It looked like it was going to rain. Oh, my! It should not rain just now! Why shouldn't it rain? My goodness, if it began to rain now, they would become soaked, and they did not have a change of clothes. 'I have already been defeated to such a degree. It cannot begin to rain on top of that!' Cao Cao wished it wouldn't rain. Ha! Who would have imagined that, the moment he said rain, it rained? At first it was not that bad, just a fine sprinkling, but then: Hua-a-a-a! came a torrential downpour.

"Good gracious! We are done for!"

Everyone tried to hide himself under his coat. Why not find a shelter from the rain? A shelter? Where would they seek shelter from the rain? They were fleeing for their lives! They were travelling in the open country, and their lives were hanging on a thin thread. How could they think of seeking shelter from the rain? What to do? They had better endure it. Everyone was completely soaked by the rain, just like 'chickens dropped in the soup'. Well, fortunately, as soon as the rain had passed, the sky changed again, and then a breeze blew up: U-u-u-u.....! My goodness, when this breeze blew across their bodies, it felt mighty cold!

"Hello!"

"Prime Minister!"

"What kind of wind is blowing now?"

"Just now, Prime Minister, the wind has changed! At first it was a southeast wind, but now it has changed into a northwest wind!"

"A northwest wind? Oh, woe"

Cao Cao sighed. Why did he sigh? 'Oh, when I was defeated in the battle at Red Cliff, I was beaten unjustly. How could I meet with defeat? It was Heaven that defeated me. The Lord in Heaven let me suffer ill. In winter time it never used to blow from the southeast. But, contrary to all expectation, He let a wind from the southeast blow for a whole day and a whole night, so that the fire wrecked havoc on me. And the moment I am stripped of everything by the fire ¡Ð woe is me! ¡Xthen He lets the wind turn again to a northwest gale. Don't you see how Heaven lets me suffer ill?' Dear me, it was surely cold! Why was it so cold? It was winter time and a northwest wind was blowing, so of course it was cold! On top of that it had just rained, and as soon as the northwest wind began to blow, everything turned into ice. Sitting on their horses, everyone of them began to shiver: de'de'de'de'de'..... as if they had malaria. What to do? There was no help. They had to struggle onwards.

Riding his horse Cao Cao moved along ¡X tictac! ¡X tictac! 'What? Confound it! Who slaps my face? Dear me, even if they bully me, Cao Cao, they cannot bully me to that degree! I have been defeated so completely, and now people make fun of me and slap my face! Woe is me! This slapping does hurt, doesn't it, even if it is not very hard, and it feels icy cold to the bones. Let me have a look, and see what they are up to!'

What! He looked askance from the corner of his eye. There was nobody who was slapping him. He was slapping himself! Why was he slapping himself? On his head he wore a fur hat with two straight sideflaps. Who would have imagined that his right sideflap some time during his flight ¡X God knows where ¡X had bumped into something: bada! ¡Xand then the flap was broken and drooping. During that downpour a while ago it was soaked, and

then came the northwest wind and it was frozen. Ha! Now this broken sideflap was almost like a small bell of ice hanging there. And when the wind came blowing it swung against the face of Cao Cao ¡X tictac! tictac! ¡Xas if slapping him again and again. 'Hm! It is Heaven that bullies me!' This could not continue. He lifted his hand and ¡Ð phew! ¡Ð took off his fur hat, and ¡Ð swish ¡Ð ripped off the broken flap, threw it to the ground and put his fur hat on again. My goodness! Who would have imagined. To take it off was all right, but to put it on again looked quite ugly! How come? A fur hat with only one sideflap, that was never seen before! But at this moment he couldn't worry about that. It had to do, ugly or not.

They pressed on again. What was it? They had come to a mountain gorge.

"Call the guides!"

"At Your service, Prime Minister! The guides are not to be found!"

"Where have they gone?"

"The guides have long ago been lost, we don't know where."

"Do you know what is in front of us?"

"Well, Prime Minister, your servant has an idea of the lie of the land. If you ask me, Prime Minister, that place in front of us there, that's a gorge. And this gorge is rather narrow at the entrance. When you have entered the gorge, it widens, and after you have passed through the wide part, it narrows again. And when you have passed the narrow passage, it widens once more, having the form of a calabash. Therefore it is called Calabash Gorge."

"Oh, CALABASH GORGE! Bah!" FZ[1]

'Damn it! No wonder, after I have been beaten in combat, I have ended up ¡X who knows how¡X in a calabash!'

"Hm!"

R-r-r-r-rumble! Oh, my! Too bad, now he was hungry, too! Why was he hungry? Of course he was hungry. Yesterday evening he didn't eat, and this morning he didn't eat anything either. Since he had skipped two meals, wouldn't he be hungry? A while ago he only thought about fleeing, he didn't feel it. But now, when he had calmed down a bit, he felt hunger. This hunger was worse than ordinary hunger. In what sense? He was cold! He was shivering all over and felt hungry in his stomach: driven by hunger and cold!

"Hello! Give a message to the officers in charge of forage!"

"Oh, Prime Minister, do you really mean to talk about the officers in charge of forage? I certainly have no idea where the officers in charge of forage have gone, they are probably also lost."

"Hm!"

'So it is, and even if I could have called the officers of forage, what use would it be? All my forage has been burnt up.'

"Are you feeling hungry?"

"We are not bluffing you, Prime Minister, we have been hungry for a long time, but we couldn't get anything to eat, and now even if we want to hasten forwards, we can hardly move."

"Do we have our ration bags with us?"

"And you talk about ration bags! A while ago when we met Zhao Yun at Changshan, we could hardly carry our own limbs, so we threw the bags away a long time ago, left them all for Liu Bei."

"Come on! Pass on my order to take a short rest here. Let's put the pots on the fire and make a meal, let's eat our fill for once, and then we can continue. You must go to the nearby villages and borrow some food."

"Sure, sure!"

Borrow some food? Well, that is called an euphemism, it sounds a little better. What did it have to do with borrowing? Actually it meant looting. But if one used the word 'to loot', that would sound nasty. Consequently somebody gave the order, and everybody stopped. Cao Cao dismounted his horse, and the civilian and military officials followed suit and dismounted. The ground was wet and muddy at this time, so they just had to squat down along the road. Cao Cao looked around: Hey! Beside the road he caught sight of an old tree. That old tree had grown with gnarled branches and twisted roots. The roots were bulging out very high, almost like benches. Old master Cao walked over to the root:

"Ahem!.....Whew! I myself can sit on a tree root, too!"

What did he mean by that? Oh, there was a meaning in it. Who had been sitting on a tree root before? 'That big-eared traitor Liu Bei had sat on a tree root! Earlier when Liu Bei and I fought, it was he who was beaten, and after his defeat he sat on a tree root. Woe me, it never occurred to me that today it would be my turn to sit on a tree root.'

By this time his men were busy. Those who had been assigned hurried off with their troops to the nearby villages: HUA-A-A.....What for? To find food. When they arrived in a village, there is no need to go into details, they simply looted. When the people saw these defeated soldiers, they looked upon them almost like a gang of robbers. They hardly dared to move, they just obeyed orders and that was it! They rummaged in hen coops and beds, turned rice jars upside down, dug everything out of the cellars, searched the vegetable plots. Oh, dear me! They surely managed to get hold of a great variety! Oh, there was not only rice, but noodles as well, and on top of that: red beans, black beans, green beans, yellow beans. And on top of that: sweet potatoes, cabbage, radishes ¡Xdear me! ¡Xall in a large heap!

When they had got hold of all these things, probably they left? Left? Ha! Since things had come so far, they had better go on with it! After they had found food, they started borrowing again. What did they borrow? They borrowed clothes. Everyone of them was completely soaked like a chicken in the soup. They were freezing cold. Why not use the opportunity to get hold of some clothes? So that they could change! This was outrageous! When they came to the homes of the people they turned chests and cupboards upside down and pulled out all their clothes, unlined and lined, fur and cotton. In a second they had stripped off their wet clothes and changed to dry clothes. Those who came first, dressed in good clothes, dressed in men's wear. Those who were late, too bad for them! Why? Well, all the men's wear had been robbed by those who came first, so only women's clothes were left. What to do? They had to take it or leave it! If only women's wear was left, they had to take women's. They had to swallow their pride and change into the bright red and green skirts of these womenfolk. There was even one fellow, who certainly behaved outrageously. One of the families had lost a member, they were in sorrow, dressed in white clothes of mourning. Ha! What did it matter to him! It was better than keeping the wet clothes on. He took the clothes of mourning and put them on. Did he prefer to act as a son in mourning for another family? Well, his mind was only on changing his clothes.

Now they took the rice, noodles, beans and vegetables and carried them down to the pond to wash them. Thereafter they pulled out their belt knives, and began in a crazy hurry to cut the food, fetched the big woks that served also as gong-gongs, put the food into the woks, added water, dug out hollows in the earth, had the woks placed over them, made a fire and began to cook the food. What kind of food? Well! A real meal of genuine 'eight treasure rice pudding'! Good gracious! Such a bright and colourful sight, and with so many ingredients! When they first began to cook, they had to cook for quite a while.

Old Master Cao sat on the roof. Uhm! After a little while he could smell a flavour! What flavour? The flavour of food! Oh, who would have thought that this food even had such a flavour? Ha, the flavour was much stronger than it used to be! To begin with rice just has the plain flavour of rice, but when you add a few beans and mix some vegetables into it, the flavour comes out, doesn't it? And then you can smell the flavour from a long distance. Now they had managed to cook this meal

FZ[2] with great difficulty, and the men came forward to serve themselves from the food. How did they eat? Good gracious! How would they eat at a time such as this? They had to make do with their five fingers! At a time

such as this, the civilian and military officials had occasion to observe how they used to treat the rank and file. Those who had treated their men well would, in this situation, see some of their men come along with a bowl of food for them to eat. Those who used to treat their men badly ¡X sorry! ¡X you would have to serve yourself, nobody would pay attention to you! There was a man in the escort who saw their Prime Minister sitting there on the root of the tree. Then he thought he would curry favour with the Prime Minister. What for? Well, at this moment the Prime Minister was having bad luck, so if he could curry favour with him now, he might be remembered in the heart of the Prime Minister, and tomorrow when they came back to the capital, he might be bestowed with ¡Xwell ¡Xif not an official post, then at least a handsome gift. The escort took out his dipper and filled it to capacity with 'eight treasure rice'. The he stepped in front of Cao Cao:

"Prime Minister, let your servant present you with a dipper.....!"

With both hands he lifted up the dipper over his head. When Cao Cao saw this, [he thought]: 'How could he get that idea? Normally we only speak about 'presenting someone with wine' or 'presenting someone with a delicacy', I have never heard anybody talk about 'presenting someone with a dipper'. Well, now things have gone that far, better not talk more about it.' He received the dipper. He had never had a meal like this, a hotchpotch in all the colours of the rainbow, but it was surely very fragrant.

"Serve me the chopsticks!"

"Oh!"

Poking his nose into this affair he would get more trouble! If he had not presented Cao Cao with the dipper, there would have been nothing more to it! But now that he *had* presented him with the dipper, you would also have to provide him with chopsticks! Did anybody have chopsticks at a time like this? What was to be done? He got an idea, hurried over to the tree, and looked for two twigs. Then he got his belt knife out and cut off two twigs. Then he cut them a little more even. Nothing to speak of, just so-so, one long and one short.

"Please, Prime Minister!"

Cao Cao picked up the two twigs between his fingers. My goodness, how scalding hot the food was. How come? It had just come from the cooking pot, of course it was hot! Hm, he had better wait a little.

"Ah, ha, ha, ha, ha.....!"

"Good gracious! Who is that? Who? To be so merry! We have been defeated to this stage, and then somebody is laughing? Who is that laughing?"

"Master, it is not me laughing, it is our Prime Minister laughing!"

"Who? Is our Prime Minister laughing again? Good grief, he should not laugh! A while ago when he began to laugh, his laughter caused the white-faced Zhao Yun to appear, and we were at the brink of death. Now he begins to laugh for the second time. As soon as the Prime Minister laughs, my heart starts to pound."

"I don't understand, whom is the Prime Minister laughing at?"

"Oh, do you want me to ask and see?"

"Yes, ask and see?"

"Prime Minister, why do you laugh?"

"This old man does not laugh at anybody else, but that bumpkin Zhuge Liang!"

"Oh, you are laughing at Zhuge Liang? Please, tell me, Prime Minister, why do you laugh at Zhuge Liang?"

"Even if that bumpkin Zhuge Liang is well read and knows many tricks, he is after all only a greenhorn, and he doesn't know anything about strategy."

"Oh, so Zhuge Liang doesn't know anything about strategy. Well, please tell me, Prime Minister, how should he act if he had known something about strategy?"

"Look! You gentlemen have all seen that the Calabash Gorge in front of us is a very precipitous terrain. If Zhuge Liang had laid an ambush here of one contingent of troops, less than three thousand soldiers and one general, then this old man and you gentlemen wouldn't even be able to enjoy this meal!"

"Oh, the words of our Prime Minister are very logical. My reverence to you, my reverence to you! But may I ask you, Prime Minister, how do you know that Zhuge Liang has not prepared an ambush for us here?"

"Look, if he had prepared an ambush, his men would have come forth a long time ago. Since nothing has happened as yet, why would there be an ambush?"

"Oh, that sounds logical, too. Until now nothing has happened. I am only too willing to believe in the words of our Prime Minister. Provided there are no soldiers in ambush, everything is well."

Everyone around took faith in the belief that there were no soldiers in ambush.

Cao Cao lifted that pair of twigs, grasped a mouthful of 'eight-treasure rice' and balanced it towards his mouth. Did he get it into his mouth? No, he didn't. At the moment the food touched his lips, but had not yet entered his mouth, one heard all of a sudden from Calabash Gorge: TA-A-A-A.....! Dong-dong-dong-dong.....!

"Kill them!"

HUA-A-A-A.....! Under roaring guns and thundering drums three thousand men swarmed out. The general leading them was a fellow of the sort: you hear his voice long before you see him in person! He came forwards with a resounding laughter:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! You old traitor and swindler! On the order of the counsellor, I, the man of Yan, have been waiting for you here for ever so long!"

When Cao Cao caught sight of him, he shivered:

"Woe me!"

Who was this? The black-faced Zhang Fei. Why did Zhang Fei only sally forth from his ambush so late? Oh, he, he had his orders from the counsellor: 'Do not come out too early, and not too late!' When was he supposed to come out? 'When you smell the food, then you come out!' Zhuge Liang had foreseen that when Cao Cao arrived at this place, he would be hungry, he wouldn't be able to stand it any more, he would have to get the pot over the fire and prepare a meal. If you come out too early, he hasn't got the meal ready, and if you come out too late, he has already eaten it up. So you have to come out just when you smell the food, at the moment when the food is ready, but not yet eaten. What is the point in coming out just in that moment? Well, then you can have a free meal for once! Therefore Zhang Fei had sallied forth just in that moment.

Did Cao Cao have something to eat? To eat! He didn't know how to save his life! He dropped the dipper and threw away that pair of twigs.

"Come here, my officers! Hurry up and ward off that black fellow! Get my horse!"

FZ[3] "Yes, sir!"

Cao Cao's men hurried off to fetch his horse for him. Cao Cao mounted his horse, and all his civilian and military officials rushed to their horses and mounted. The officers looked at each other in confusion. Why? They had to mount their horses and ward off Zhang Fei. Zhang Liao threw a glance at Zhang He and thought to himself: 'Oh, my! Now it's our turn!' What did he mean? Well, some people were wounded and couldn't fight. Others had been locked in a clinch with Zhao Yun a little while ago. 'Everyone has to take a share, and now it's our turn!' Well, both of them mounted. Zhang Liao and Zhang He both reined in their horses and lifted their spears:

"Bah! You black fellow! Stop your unbridled behaviour! Here comes Zhang Liao!"

"Here you meet Zhang He!"

Zhang Fei saw the two of them approaching. During fighting he always had his own habit: he didn't allow anybody else to make the first move. All of a sudden Zhang Fei spurred his horse and lifted his five-metre steel serpent-spear:

"Let's go!"

"Click!"

He thrust his weapon against Zhang Liao's breast. But Zhang Liao was not slow in warding off with his lance:

"You are welcome!"

Clank, clank, clank! The sound rang out two or three times, before Zhang Liao had with great difficulty fended off the spear of Zhang Fei. In the next moment Zhang He came forward:

"Bah! You black fellow! Where are you going? It is Zhang He coming! Look at my lance!"

"Click!"

He stabbed with his lance towards the throat of Zhang Fei. Zhang Fei pointed his spear in a forward thrust:

"Ha, ha! You are welcome!"

"Clack!"

In no time he had knocked the lance out of Zhang He's hand. Cling-ling-ling-ling.....! The horses galloped off. Were these two men really so strong? Normally these two men would never be up to Zhang Fei. How much less now that they were wounded, hungry and cold, had been reduced in every aspect. Their two lances could not conquer the single spear of Zhang Fei. But nevertheless, they forced themselves to fight out five or six rounds. Zhang Liao had a look around: 'Hm, the Prime Minister has already run off into the far distance.' Then he threw a meaningful glance in the direction of Zhang He: 'Hey, let's get out of here. If we are too slow, we'll have no thanks for it.' At this moment he shook his lance in pretence:

"Bah! You black fellow! I am weary of war! Don't pursue!"

Cling-ling-ling-ling.....! He spurred his horse and off he went. Zhang He followed on his heels. What about Zhang Fei? Zhang Fei saw them flee:

"Follow them, my lads!"

"Follow them!"

"Let's follow them!"

"You soldiers of Cao Cao, surrender if you want to save your lives! Hurry up and throw down your knives and spears!"

"God in heaven! We are done for! Zhang Fei is terrible! Let's surrender!"

Zhang Fei spurred his horse, lifted his spear. He didn't look like someone jabbing people: Cut! Cut! Cut-cut-cut-cut.....! He rather looked as if he was

pitchforking bundles of straw. The corpses and skeletons of Cao Cao's soldiers were piled up, blood flowing everywhere. Those who had some wit left knelt down and surrendered.

FZ[4]