

I

Testing the Winds

Gou Haoyou knew that his father's spirit lived among the clouds. For he had seen him go up there with a soul, and come down again without one.

It happened down at the harbour, the day the *Chabi* put to sea. When she set sail, Haoyou's father, Gou Pei, would be among her crew and gone for months on end. So Haoyou went with him, down to the docks, to make the most of him on this, their last day together. 'When I get home this time,' said Pei, 'we must see about *you* becoming an apprenticed seaman.'

Haoyou's heart quickened with fear and pride at the thought of stepping out of childhood and into his father's saltwater world.

For the first time ever, Pei took him aboard—showed him where the anchor was lodged, where the sailors slept, how the ship was steered, where the cargo would be stowed. And the biggest excitement of all was still to come: soon, the *Chabi's* captain would be 'testing the wind', checking the omens for a prosperous voyage.

Further along the harbour wall, a great commotion started up, as a ship, newly arrived from the South, disembarked its passengers: a travelling circus. For the first time in his life, Haoyou saw elephants, ponderously picking their way across the gangplank, while tumblers somersaulted off the ship's rail and on to the dockside.

There were acrobats in jade-green, close-fitting costumes, twirling banners of green and red, and jugglers and stilt-walkers, and a man laden from head to foot with noisy bird cages. There were horses, too, ridden ashore across the sagging gangplank as recklessly as if it were a pack bridge, by Tartar horsemen in sky-blue shirts.

'Ragamuffin beggars,' grunted Haoyou's father—which made Haoyou laugh, since the gorgeous circus people, finding his father's tattered, rice-straw jacket, would probably have fed it to one of their elephants. The Gou family was not exactly the cream of elegant Dagu society. Still, he sensed that he should not ask to see the circus perform: circus people were obviously not *respectable*—especially when they included Tartars.

The ship on which his father Pei was about to set sail had a Tartar name now. Last season she had had a perfectly good Chinese name, but in an effort to curry favour with the conquering barbarians, the captain had renamed her after the Khan's favourite wife: *Chabi*. Pei muttered gloomily about it. Her hull had been re-timbered, a new layer of wood hammered on over the old, so that she was beamier than the year before. 'It looks as if the Khan's wife has been eating too many cakes,' said Pei. He laughed and put a loving arm round Haoyou's shoulders.

'Impertinent dog,' said a voice close behind them, and the *Chabi's* First Mate took hold of Pei by his jacket and pushed him over the edge of an open hatchway.

It was no great way to fall, but Pei landed awkwardly, his leg twisted under him, and lay gasping on top of the sacks of rice which were the ship's provisions. Haoyou went to the hatchway and lowered one leg over its edge, going to the help of his father. But the First Mate took hold of him by the collar, wrestled him along to the gangplank, and threw him off the ship.

Haoyou wondered whether to run home and tell his

mother, or stay and see what happened. His father injured on the eve of a voyage? It was not good, not lucky. Lucky for Haoyou (who hated his father going away for months on a voyage), but not for the family dependent on his sailor's wages.

Haoyou decided his mother should know, and turned to run. But he found his way barred by the corpulent bellies of the merchants mustering on the dockside. Word had gone out that the *Chabi* was testing the wind this morning, and it seemed as if every merchant in Dagu had hurried down to judge the omens for themselves. The prosperity of the whole voyage depended on how the 'wind-tester' behaved. Only if it flew well would they entrust their cargoes to the *Chabi*. If it flew badly, they would use some rival ship.

It was for this magnificent sight that Gou Pei had brought his son to the harbour; Haoyou had asked a hundred times to see it.

'I'm not sure,' his mother had said. 'What about the poor soul on the hurdle?'

But Pei had only shrugged and said that worse things happened at sea.

Haoyou looked back at the ship. He did not want to miss the testing of the wind. Perhaps his father had only twisted his ankle, and would be fit to sail after all. The boy stood on tiptoe to estimate the depth of the crowd; his chances of pushing his way through them. None, he decided, and stayed where he was.

A strong, gusty breeze was blowing. Members of the crowd held up wetted fingers and nodded sagely. All the signs were auspicious. A bright, cheerful sunlight brightened all the colours in their silken clothes, bleached the rust-red sails of the *Chabi*.

A foreigner stood among the crowd—neither Chinese nor Mongol, but a tan-coloured man with eyes shaped

like a horse or a dog. The Chinese man alongside him was explaining the process of testing the wind.

'A hurdle is hooked to the end of a rope and set flying in the breeze . . . '

'Like a flag?' asked the foreigner.

'Not a flag exactly . . . More like a kite. Pardon my foolishness: I don't believe you have the word in your language: "kite". As the men tug on the rope's end, the hurdle rises up higher and higher on the wind. If it rises up straight, the voyage will prosper. If it flies out so . . . '—the guide's hand, in darting out at an angle, dislodged Haoyou's cap—' . . . there may be problems.'

'Problems?'

'Storm, perhaps. Becalming. Pirates. Shipwreck.'

The merchants standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the guide eased themselves away from him as he spoke the words of calamity—as if the words themselves might carry bad luck.

Suddenly the tall foreigner with the horse eyes gave a cry. 'You did not tell me about the *man!*' Haoyou smiled secretly at the foreigner's surprise.

The hurdle—a big square hatch-cover woven out of palm leaves—was being carried along the deck by seven or eight sailors. The rope was already attached to it by a harness of four cords shackled to each of the four corners. Also bound to this giant kite was a man.

A cloth had been wrapped round his head, but now, as he twisted this way and that, struggling to break free, the cloth slipped down and Haoyou caught a clear glimpse of his face.

'*Father!*'

The crew must have been pouring rice wine into Pei because the muscles of his face looked slack, and there were stains on his chest. But his pinioned hands opened

and closed, and the tendons of his bare feet were as rigid as birds' talons.

'Do they employ criminals for this?' the foreigner enquired.

'No, no. Just one of the crew—either very drunk or very stupid.'

The horse-eyed foreigner nodded and began sketching on a piece of paper, drawing a diagram of the kite harness.

'Let him go! Untie him! You leave him alone!' shouted Haoyou, and struggled to get back on board. But a stevedore carrying a sack of salt had set it down at the top of the gangplank and sat down to watch the testing of the winds. The gangplank was blocked.

'Father! Don't let them! Let him go, you demons!' But the noise of the crowd swallowed Haoyou's voice like the sea swallowing a whisper. He could not make himself heard.

Should he run to fetch his mother? By the time he reached her, the kite would be aloft. Should he avert his eyes from the humiliation of his honoured father? Haoyou could no more have looked away than a dead man can close his own eyes. He saw the hatch-cover carried up to the bow and angled so as to catch the full force of the wind. He saw its woven fabric flex and bow, and his father's hair spread itself around his head as if glued fast to the hurdle.

With a noisy rattle, the wind-tester shed gravity and rose into the air on a gust of wind, tautening the rope. The crew paid out more, then, as the hurdle tilted, jerked on the rope so hard that Pei's jaw snapped shut. The hurdle caught the wind again and rose straight up—thirty metres, forty. Haoyou could see that his father was shouting, but the wind snatched the words away and left only the black circle of Pei's mouth.

Then the gusty breeze failed. Momentarily, the kite

veered and slumped, dropped down towards the crowded quay. People gasped and ducked, arms over their heads.

Haoyou did not duck. His face, still upturned, saw his father plunge towards him face-first, eyeballs straining their lids, arms spread wide, head and shoulders buckled outwards from the hurdle. Those eyes focused on Haoyou, recognized him, and the boy saw his own name form on the mouth which hung over him. Like a rabbit overshadowed by a hawk, Haoyou was powerless to move. 'Father!' Haoyou called back. Then the crew of the *Chabi* yanked on the rope once more—such a jerk that Pei bit through the tongue still pronouncing Haoyou's name. The giant kite lurched into a gust of wind and soared upwards, drawing a gasp of relief from the crowd. Up and up it climbed, straight over their ship, leaning to neither right nor left but climbing higher and higher, until Pei's shape was no more than a blur beyond range of Haoyou's eyes. He dragged his knuckles through his lashes to be rid of the tears, but still could not see. The wind-tester had climbed to such a height: when it steadied itself in the smooth continuous winds of the upper sky, it was no longer a man on a hatch-cover, lashed to a ship's cable, but a money spider on the end of a silken thread.

The crowd murmured its approval. The voyage of the *Chabi* would be prosperous. A cargo entrusted to this fortunate ship would reach its destination in safety and bring a good profit.

Strands of straw drizzled out of the sky, falling on to the faces of the crowd. Idly the merchants pulled strands out of their hair or brushed their shoulders. It conveyed nothing to them. But Haoyou let the fragments of his father's rice-straw jacket rest on his face and shoulders like a blessing. His father was among the clouds, and Haoyou did not feel entitled to so much as breathe until the flight was over.

What was Pei seeing up there, in the province of the birds? Could he see Haoyou's little board-built house and his mother hanging out the washing or shelling peas for the cooking pot? Could he see the white furrows ploughed by ships, and the shoulderblades of whales hummocking the ocean? As far as the Imperial City? The island of Japan? Could he see into the Past or into the Future?

The crowd began to mix and moil, merchants shouting to their secretaries, factors shouting to the warehousemen, money-lenders offering terms of credit. The first sacks of salt were being carried over the springy gangplank by agile barefooted stevedores. Haoyou was jostled and pushed out of the way. Still his face was upturned, his thumbs trapped inside his fists, his eyes on the tiny, distant kite, as the crew hauled it in.

They worked with no great urgency. The urgency was over: the captain had secured a prosperous voyage. So they wound in the kite slowly, like old women skeining wool. Little by little, the hatch-cover became visible for what it was, its passenger taking on detail: the colour of his trousers, the tilt of his head. The lower it got, the more the wind tossed it about, to left and right. At last the breezes failed to hold it and it slammed down into the sea, narrowly missing the harbour wall. It floated passenger-uppermost, and Pei was jarred and jolted as the crew scuffed it across the surface of the water. As it scraped and banged against the ship's hull and was pulled aboard, Haoyou dashed between two stevedores and crossed the bendy gangplank in nimble strides. 'Father! *Father!*'

Pei had returned to earth with the hatch-cover. His eyes were still open, his lips still drawn back from his teeth in shouting. But his spirit had remained among the birds. Somewhere during the flight, his heart, over-crammed with fear, had burst like a sack of grain and his spirit had been spilled into the path of the prevailing easterly winds.

Only tatters of his rice-straw jacket encircled his armpits, and the skin of his bare stomach showed, tinged with the blue of cold and death. To Haoyou, though, it seemed as if his father's body had taken on the colour of the sky.

The crew, who had known and liked Pei, began to mutter syllables of sorrow and regret, slapping out at Haoyou with sympathetic hands. One even ran to snatch feathers from a chicken running loose about the deck, and held the feathers to Pei's lips, hoping for signs of life. The feathers fluttered in the wind, but not with the passage of breath.

'He was a good man, your father.'

'Di Chou should never have . . .'

'Fate is hard, boy.'

But the *Chabi's* captain, not wanting a death to detract from the favourable omens of the kite's flight, sent the First Mate to break up the little knot of mourners.

'Get rid of him and sign a new man in his place,' said First Mate Di Chou. 'And the rest of you . . . get back to work.'

Haoyou flung himself at the man—a brute as thickset and sturdy as a bollard, with a round, neck-less, bollard head. '*You sent him up there! You killed him!*' Haoyou shouted, pummelling the flat, unyielding stomach, bruising his fists on Di Chou's leather belt.

Di Chou took hold of Haoyou by the ear, and the shining flesh of his cheeks twitched with menace, as he smiled down at the boy. 'Your pretty *mother* needs telling, boy. She's a widow now. Tell you what, boy . . . I'll come myself and tell her. These things shouldn't come from a stranger. A woman needs a friendly face at a time like this.'