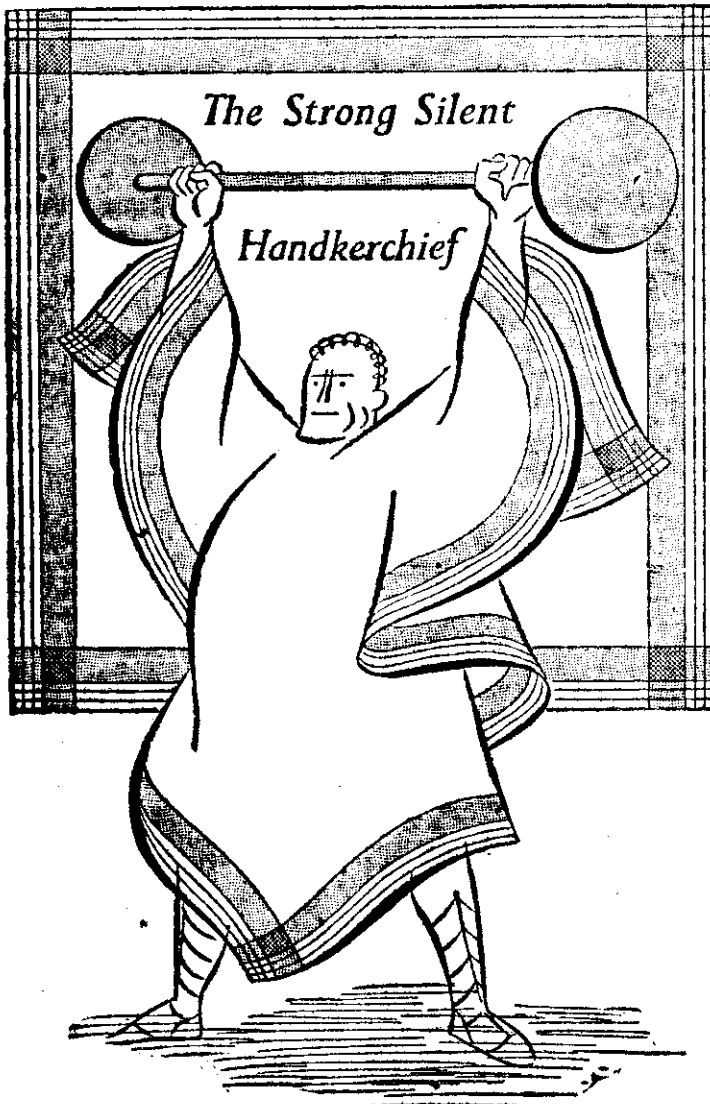


STORY FROM SANDAN

REWI ALLEY is known to us as a New Zealander who has, in his time, played many parts, all good ones. But this is the first time we have come across him as a short-story writer. The item printed here appeared first in "Gung-Ho News," the organ of the Chinese Industrial Co-operative movement, and deals with life at the Bailie Training School, conducted by Alley, at Sandan



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ER WA led a donkey down from Hung Shih Hu. Hung Shih Hu was just inside the Asashan Mongols border stone. It had red cliffs, and two streams, one salty, one fresh. It had seven houses, each separated by a few li. The people there grew barley in the summer to live on during the winter months. Sometimes they tended the camels of the passing caravans.

Er Wa literally means "Second Kid" or "Second Plaything." It was the only name he knew. He was proud to lead the donkey, as this was the first time he had been trusted to carry out a big commission — and the first time in any winter he had been clothed at all. Very proud was he of his clothing — a white felt upper-garment and a shovel-shaped felt hat. Er Wa's tunic was like Peter Pan's. It just covered his thighs, leaving hardy, lithe legs free to jump over stones, and lead the donkey through the passes that led down to the grasslands and the city of Sandan.

His mother had given him Mongolian "tsamba"—butter, tea, and barley meal—for a parting celebration, and he had a barley-meal cake inside his jacket to eat on the road. His father had looked up at him as he was carrying out manure to the frozen fields in preparation for the spring; the look had a bit of pride in it, the boy was quick to see.

He was to take 100 catties of wool down to Sandan, and bring back whatever grain was possible. It was a high adventure, and the donkey seemed to be enthusiastic. Behind them trotted the great mastiff which the boy called "Huang," and which was his protection against wolves, as well as his closest friend.

In the afternoon Er Wa arrived at the gates of Sandan, where the sentries stood. Huang stuck close to Er Wa's heels all the while. The soldiers asked what he was carrying, and Er Wa stopped while they prodded the wool. Relieved that nothing more had been demanded of him, he moved into the city when they waved him on.

THE trouble came in trying to sell the wool. The traders' apprentices at shop fronts shouted half the value, and scoffed at him when he asked for more. He inquired of the prices for grain and for other things he had been asked to take home. They had all risen high. He went down the four main streets several times,

leading the donkey, and now and then munching on his barley cake. Then he sat at the crossroads, and no one took much notice of him, except to come over and offer 600—which was half the value.

As he sat there a magnificent figure came by—a boy who had once come with camels to his village. Now in a school cap and sheepskin coat he looked immense. Er Wa hardly dared approach him, but their eyes met, and the boy he had once known as "La Pa" smiled and came and squatted down by him, and was soon listening to his story.

"I am called Fan Bao Ching now," said La Pa, "I am at the Bailie School."

Er Wa had heard of the fabulous Bailie School—a place where they printed their own bank notes whenever they wanted them; where they used all the poor men's wheat to burn in a big boiler and turned it into white light to play under at nights, when they should be sleeping on their k'angs;

where they took poor boys and then sent them away to big cities so that they could never see their families again.

"Worse than the soldiers," had said a landlord who was travelling through Hung Shih Hu, and Er Wa had huddled closer to his mother on the k'ang, and his father had spat on the ground and cursed.

"T'a ma di—what is the Government doing to let such bad people come to our country?"

There were foreigners there, too, who ate up everything and beat the people, it was said. They had come and thrown out many good Buddhist images from an old temple, and now they lived there themselves.

HE asked Fan Bao Ching about these things, because Fan Bao Ching had been his good friend. Fan Bao Ching had played with him, and worked with him in Hung Shih Hu. And now Fan just laughed.

"Come and see for yourself," and off they went, the two kids, the donkey, and the dog, to the gates of the school, where Fan went to find the boys in charge of the woollen spinning section.

The lad who came out was tall and quiet.

"How much do you want?" he said. "1,400," said Er Wa, flying high.

"1,100," said the tall boy, "bring it in and weigh it. Have you rolled sand into it?"

"Not much, not much," said Er Wa quickly.