

# Grandfather and Grandson

*Orange candles and batiks were part of the old Masses tradition, of which the New Masses is only a partial heir, says the author of "The Big Money"*

By John Dos Passos

**T**WENTY-FIVE years back, writers and painters and their hangers-on, who had been filtering into New York from the Middle West (a crop that suddenly sprouted from seeds of culture sown by a generation of literary housewives and bluestocking schoolteachers) had begun to coagulate in New York in the low-rent section of old brick houses known as Greenwich Village. Greenwich Village stood for bohemianism, yearning for the cafés and red lights and museums of Europe, orange candles, batiks, but also for a genuine community of feeling with the common man who did the work, and for the romantic libertarian creed. If you could strip off conventions, repressions, destroy cramping institutions, the common man would stride forward out of the welter of the past, happy, powerful, and inventive, and willing for his neighbor to be happy and powerful too. The mouthpiece of the writers and artists of the Village was the *Masses*. There was a great deal that was callow about the old *Masses*, but the spirit that gave it life was in tune with the real needs of its generation. Today we can look back on the *Masses* as the grandfather of a whole shoal of magazines with aims as diverse as *Time* and the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*. The NEW *MASSSES* is heir of only one of the tendencies stirred up by that anarchically run and democratic and bohemian sheet.

Looking back on the Village and the *Masses* from this distance it is possible to see that they made up an integral part of what we used to call The Movement, that upsurge of revolt against the ruling business men of which Bryan was the first messiah in the West and which took in the I.W.W., the Non-Partisan League, Progressivism, the huge growth of Eugene V. Debs's following, and the small-town revolt against convention, Sunday-school teachers, and the rusty corseting of conduct left over from the Victorian era. It's these waves of popular insurgence that have, from the time of the Founding Fathers, somehow kept this country a democracy.

The wave swelled forward in an irregular line, broke, and receded. The Movement, on the side of workers' organizations, never recovered from the McNamara case and from the suppression of the I.W.W. Woodrow Wilson's betrayal killed white-collar liberalism at its roots, only on the ethical and literary and artistic side were there any permanent gains made. The period since the war has socially been a period of personal liberty, the writer has recovered the use of unbowdlerized English, and the national capacity to see painting and drawing has enormously increased.

The *Masses* school of cartooning and vivid writing was an opening wedge in that direction.

After the war in a very different, less exuberant world, an effort was made to start the *Masses* up again on the same old basis, but the spirit of the time was different, the old disorderly methods of running the paper didn't seem to work. For labor organization and the growth of social ideas the time was one of defeat, sectarianism, and retraction. As a sort of literary supplement to the *Daily Worker* the NEW *MASSSES* has published a great deal of distinguished work and done a great deal

to educate the country in Marxian thinking, but I don't think it will turn out to have had anything like the fertilizing influence that the old *Masses* had. Now we are on the upward surge of a new democratic wave. If the monopolies and their campfollowers manage to break it before it has reached its full strength it will probably mean the end of the American experiment. Perhaps under the impulse of the time the NEW *MASSSES* will be able to break out of the narrow sectarian channel and furnish again some such focus for youth as the *Masses* furnished twenty-five years ago. I for one hope so.



*The Open Road*

Lithograph by Boardman Robinson

# A Red Village Is Occupied

*The Fifth White Division prepared to attack; with the Chinese Red Army absent, the peasantry acted*

By Agnes Smedley

THE autumn had come and the fields of ripening rice would soon be ready for the sickle. For the sickle—or for the burning torch. For this time, as in the spring and in the autumn of the year before, the war had also been fought around the crops. What the White troops failed to reap for their own food, they burned. They needed the food for two reasons: to starve the peasants into their old servitude under the landlords, and to feed themselves. The peasants would sell them no rice, and not one vegetable or one bit of fruit. All the food for the White soldiers had to be transported from the big White cities such as Nanchang. There was not enough of it to feed them. And so the order had gone out from the White stronghold that the soldiers must conquer the villages and feed themselves.

The Whites held the cities and big towns. But down in the villages the Soviets still existed and the common people ruled themselves. Some savage power had been engendered in them. This power the Whites did not understand, but they understood that until it was broken the landlords could never return,

White tax-collectors could never be carried in sedan chairs over the country, pawnshops could never reopen, opium could never be sold—that “civilization” could not show itself in the villages. The Whites called it “civilization.” But to the peasants the old order meant serfdom, slavery; it meant hunger, rags, the whip, anguish of body and mind.

Still the order went out from Nanchang: “Conquer the villages; build blockhouses to hold them; feed yourselves.”

It was the autumn of 1934 and the Red armies fought on all fronts in Kiangsi. The odds were heavy against them—the whole imperialist world against them. Yet they fought on. Up in the northeast of Kiangsi the Whites had occupied the town of Kweiki. They looked northward into the villages, toward the fields of ripening grain.

The Fifth White Division in Kweiki drew up its plan. It would take the market town of Chowfang to the north, build a blockhouse, and dominate the many villages that formed a sort of network around it.

The peasants of Chowfang and the villages about soon learned of the plot against them. The Tenth Red Army Corps was fighting on many fronts and could not come to their rescue. Every young, able-bodied man in the region was with the Red army. In the town and the surrounding villages remained the older men, young boys, the women and girls, and a number of crippled Red army men. All the good weapons were with the Red army also. The people were armed with hand grenades, though not enough. The peasants manufactured mines in their own homes, and with these blew up many enemy positions, or mined the roads leading into the Soviet regions. But of these also there were not enough to stop the pressure of the well-armed Whites. In Chowfang and thereabouts were a few old muzzle-loading shot guns that could knock a man out for a few days, but their chief value was in the noise they made.

The peasants of the Chowfang region gathered together, sat down, and began to think. They thought for a long time, and almost everyone had something to say. Then this is what they did.

First, they evacuated every living soul from Chowfang, leaving behind a few things to give the appearance of occupation, such as chairs, benches, rice jars, beds. In the rice jars, under the doors, connected with the benches, stools, beds, were concealed mines that would explode at a touch. When doors were opened, a mine would explode.

The streets were mined, as were the paths

and the road leading to Chowfang, but these mines could be set off from a distance when some hidden person pulled a wire.

This work went on at night, while hundreds of other women, children, and old men sat whittling bamboo sticks down to sharp, needle-like spikes at both ends. They made tens of thousands of these spikes, and when they were finished they began driving them into the earth all around Chowfang, then covering them lightly with earth. In a big circle extending for hundreds of yards around Chowfang, the earth became a hidden bed of sharp bamboo spikes. If stepped upon they would drive straight through the soft-soled shoes worn by all Chinese soldiers. Only the paths were free of these spikes.

Then, around the fields of spikes, the people dug trenches and covered them with weeds, branches, and leaves. They turned grave-mounds into dugouts. In these would lie the men and women who would set off the mines when it was necessary; in them would be concealed the men with the old shotguns and the few hand-grenades.

This complete, the peasants poisoned the wells, left a few jars of poisoned water in the buildings, and departed from Chowfang.

They did not have more than a few hours to wait after their labor was finished. Peasants brought news from Kweiki that a column of about five hundred White soldiers had already left and was approaching Chowfang. They had sent men in advance with long bamboo poles to jab the paths wherever a soft spot was seen; they were trying to discover buried mines. The Whites, said the peasants, were not bringing much food—they were going to reap the harvests and live off the country. They also did not have much ammunition, which showed they were going to build blockhouses and hide in them. They knew the peasants had no guns and they thought they would not need much ammunition. The peasants had also learned that two rich landlords, who used to own Chowfang and the land about, were guides for the White column.

Men and women took up their positions in the dugouts and trenches, and thousands of others, filled with exultant curiosity, lay concealed behind boulders, trees, and along the hills.

When the first streaks of dawn appeared the next morning the advance guard of the Whites could be seen approaching. Then came the others. All marched with fixed bayonets, ready for attack. They were ready to take Chowfang by surprise, capture people and force them to build the first blockhouse.



*“The return of prosperity sure makes a big difference.”*