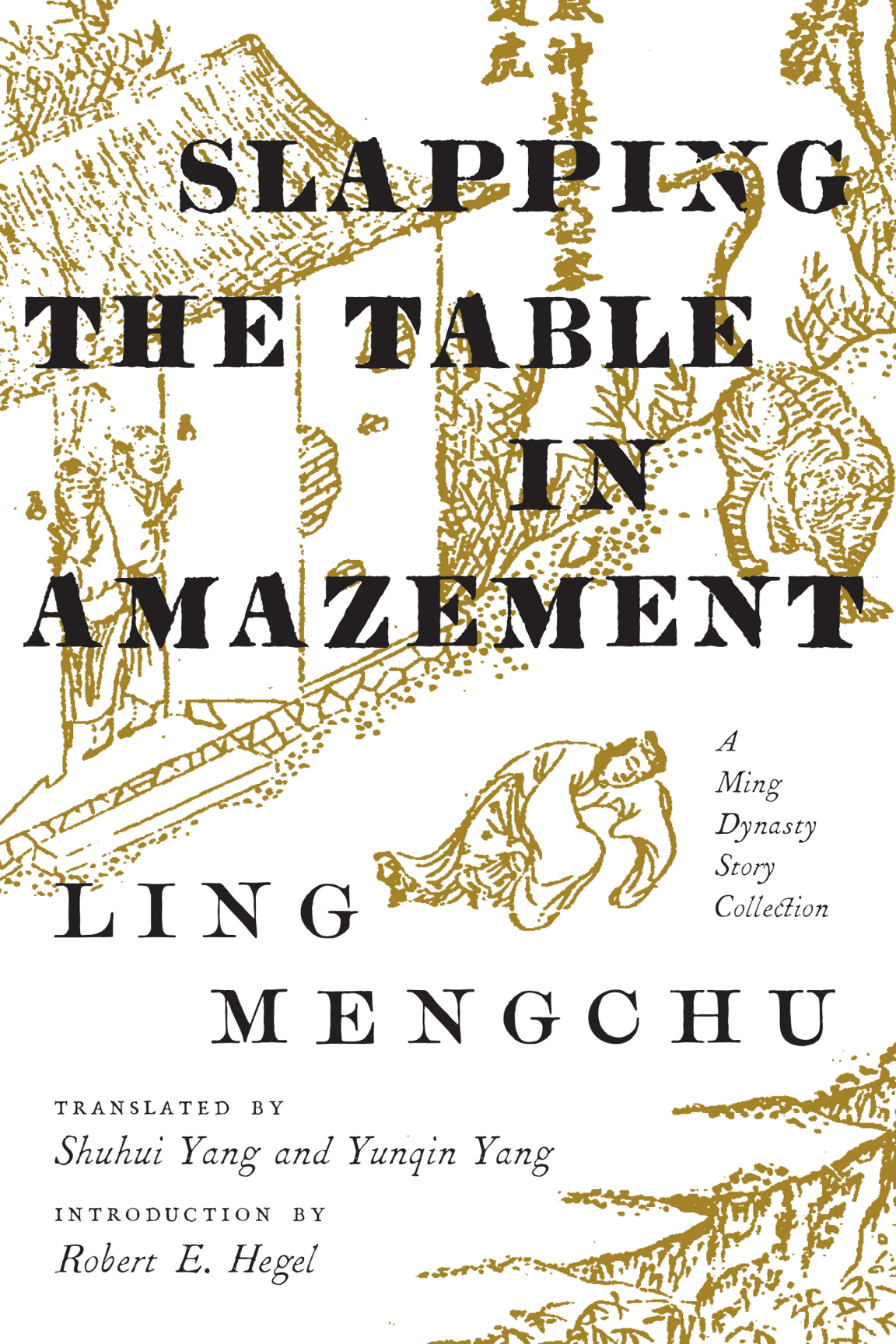




SLAPPING THE TABLE IN AMAZEMENT

LING

MENGCHU

*A
Ming
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Story
Collection*

TRANSLATED BY

Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang

INTRODUCTION BY

Robert E. Hegel

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拍案驚奇

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TRANSLATED BY Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang

INTRODUCTION BY Robert E. Hegel

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Introduction by Robert E. Hegel</i>	xi
<i>Translators' Note</i>	xix
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xxi
<i>Chronology of Chinese Dynasties</i>	xxiii

SLAPPING THE TABLE IN AMAZEMENT

<i>Preface [1628 Edition]</i>	3
<i>Five Editorial Principles for This Collection</i>	5

1. The Man Whose Luck Has Turned Chances upon
Dongting Tangerines; The Merchant from Persia
Reveals the Secrets of a Turtle Shell 9
2. Yao Dizhu Flees from Disgrace Only to Incur More Disgrace;
Zhang Yue'e Uses a Mistake to Advance Her Own Interests. 37
3. Liu Dongshan Brags about His Prowess at the City Gate;
Eighteenth Brother Leaves His Mark in the Village Tavern 65
4. Cheng Yuanyu Pays for a Meal at a Restaurant;
Lady Eleventh Explains Swordsmanship on Mount Cloud. 79
5. Zhang Derong Encounters a Tiger Sent by the Gods
as a Matchmaker; Pei Yueke Becomes the Lucky Mate
Just in Time for the Blissful Date 99
6. Zhao the Nun Drugs a Beauty into a Stupor;
Jia the Scholar Takes Revenge in a Brilliant Move. 115

7.	Emperor Minghuang of Tang, a Daoist Devotee, Seeks Out Eminent Daoists; Consort Wu, a Buddhist Disciple, Witnesses Contests of Magic Power.	141
8.	General Wu Repays the Debt of One Meal; Chen Dalang Reunites with Two Loved Ones.	160
9.	In the Director's Garden, Young Ladies Enjoy a Swing-Set Party; At Pure and Peaceful Temple, Husband and Wife Laugh and Cry at Their Reunion	178
10.	Scholar Han Takes a Wife in a Wave of Panic; Prefect Wu Makes a Match for a Talented Scholar	193
11.	An Evil Boatman Commits Blackmail with a Dead Body; A Heartless Servant Wrongfully Presses Murder Charges	215
12.	Mr. Tao Takes In Strangers Seeking Shelter from the Rain; Jiang Zhenqing Gains a Wife with a Jest	241
13.	Mr. Zhao Spoils His Son and Dies as a Result; Magistrate Zhang Sentences an Unfilial Son to Death in an Ironclad Case.	259
14.	To Steal Money, Yu Dajiao Does Violence to a Drunken Man; To Confront the Culprit in Court, Yang Hua Attaches Himself to a Woman's Body	277
15.	With His Merciless Heart, Squire Wei Plots to Seize Another Man's Property; With His Clever Plan, Scholar Chen Wins Back His House	292
16.	Zhang Liu'er Lays One of His Many Traps; Lu Huiniang Severs a Bond of Marriage	310
17.	Prayer Services Are Held at West Hill Temple for a Departed Soul; A Coffin Is Prepared in the Kaifeng Yamen for a Living Criminal	329
18.	An Alchemist Turns Half a Grain of Millet into a Nine-Cycle Pill; A Rich Man Squanders Thousands of Taels of Silver to Win a Beauty's Smile	369
19.	Li Gongzuo Ingeniously Reads a Dream; Xie Xiao'e Cleverly Snares Pirates.	391

20.	Li Kerang Sends a Blank Letter; Liu Yuanpu Begets Two Precious Sons.	411
21.	Yuan's Face-Reading Skills Impress the High and Mighty; Zheng's Good Deed Wins Him a Hereditary Title.	447
22.	With Money, a Commoner Gains an Official Post; Out of Luck, a Prefect Becomes a Boatman	463
23.	The Older Sister's Soul Leaves Her Body to Fulfill a Wish; The Younger Sister Recovers from Illness to Renew a Bond.	483
24.	The Old Demon of Yanguan County Indulges in Debauchery; The Bodhisattva on Mount Huihai Puts the Evil Spirits to Death	503
25.	Revenue Manager Zhao Leaves Word for His Love a Thousand <i>Li</i> Away; Su Xiaojuan Achieves Happiness with a Single Poem	524
26.	In a Competition for Sexual Favor, a Village Woman Is Murdered; In Claiming Celestial Authority, a Judge Solves a Case	541
27.	Gu Axiu Donates to a Nunnery with Joy; Cui Junchen Is Shown the Lotus Screen through a Clever Scheme	562
28.	The Master of Golden Light Cave Recalls the Past; The Venerable Elder of Jade Void Cave Is Enlightened about His Previous Life	586
29.	They Remain Loyal to Each Other through Their Trysts; His Success Is Announced at the Jailhouse.	602
30.	Commissioner Wang Rides Roughshod Over His Subordinates; Adjutant Li Gets His Comeuppance from a Reincarnated Victim ...	633
31.	Priest He Commits Fornication via Black Magic; Registrar Zhou Wipes Out Rebels via Fornication	648
32.	Mr. Hu Corrupts a Fellow Man in a Wife-Swapping Scheme; A Chan Master in Meditation Explains the Principle of Retribution	688
33.	Squire Zhang, in His Noble-Mindedness, Adopts an Orphan; Judge Bao, in His Wisdom, Recovers a Document	709

34. Scholar Wenren Shows His Prowess at Cuifu Nunnery;
The Nun Jingguan Goes in Glory to Huangsha Lane 727
35. A Pauper Keeps Temporary Watch over Another Man's Money;
A Miser Resorts to Tricks When Buying His Nemesis's Son 756
36. The Monk of the Eastern Hall Invites Demonic Spirits
during a Lapse in Vigilance; The Man in Black Commits
Murder in an Abduction Attempt 779
37. Qutu Zhongren Cruelly Kills Other Creatures;
The Yunzhou Prefect Helps His Nephew in the Netherworld. 797
38. To Stake His Claim on the Family Fortune, a Jealous Son-in-Law
Plots against the Rightful Heir; To Continue the Bloodline,
a Filial Daughter Hides Her Brother 811
39. Heavenly Preceptors, with Their Theatrics, Claim to Subdue
Drought Demons; A County Magistrate, in His Sincerity,
Prays for Sweet Rain from Heaven 829
40. On the Huayin Trail, Li Meets One Extraordinary Man;
The Jiangling Commander Opens Three
Mysterious Envelopes 848

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INTRODUCTION

Robert E. Hegel

Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story Collection (Pai'an jingqi 拍案驚奇) is a collection of forty stories in vernacular-style Chinese written by Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 (1580–1644) and published in 1628. Ling's second collection, *Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection* (Erke Pai'an jingqi 二刻拍案驚奇), containing thirty-eight more stories, appeared in 1632.

The stories here were meant to be entertainment—but entertainment that makes the reader think. Fate is an underlying theme, and sometimes the central topic. To what degree are human lives controlled by outside forces, either the unseen powers of the universe or simply other people whose decisions deliberately or unwittingly affect our very existence? Are there “marriages made in heaven” that are bound to occur, no matter how great the obstacles? Can one ever relax and simply enjoy good fortune or be justifiably pessimistic about one's prospects while in straitened circumstances? As one might expect, some of the answers embodied in these stories reflect values specific to their time. The Buddhist concept of karma is regularly invoked, and marriage is accepted as the normal state after one reaches the proper age. The civil service examinations were considered the only reliable ladder to success and security—except when the candidate failed, as happened in reality for most aspiring bureaucrats. Yet despite their clearly fanciful plot lines and characters, other stories speak to issues common enough in our own day: How can a woman assert herself among males without being misunderstood? How can one tell a sham opportunity from the real thing? When is an offer too good to be true? And has common human kindness really become as rare as it seems?

Certain stories in *Slapping the Table in Amazement* are deeply satisfying: divine justice does prevail in several, with rewards eventually coming to the

deserving and punishments visited abundantly on those who have earned them. Some characters are precisely as they seem: honesty and goodwill do exist in their fictional world. Other stories are more admonitory: as we have heard so many times, beware of keeping bad company. Likewise, sentiments such as “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18) are as well illustrated here as in any other great literary tradition. It is the deep humanity of these tales, rather than grandiose themes or clever plots, that draws the reader now as it did four centuries ago. We readers can easily sympathize with situations in their world.¹ When these characters hurt, they cry, profusely and openly. They weep at the deaths of loved ones and over separation from friends; they wail loudly in outrage over being abused; tears of relief flow when fears turn out to be groundless. The appeal of these stories, compared to other Chinese stories from the same period, stems from their strong emotions, both those expressed in the fiction and those that they elicit from their readers.

This collection of stories appeared just as the genre of vernacular short stories known as *huaben* was coming of age. In the 1620s, Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) published three collections of forty stories each, in order to revive and develop short fiction in the vernacular (in contrast to more formal writing in the “ancient” literary language) that had appeared sporadically since 1550 without becoming widely popular.² Feng’s stories, handsomely printed with fine illustrations, circulated among the better educated in China’s cultural centers, where they garnered considerable approval.³ At first glance, Ling Mengchu’s stories might seem derivative. Like Feng, Ling selected earlier narratives in the classical language for expansion and adaptation into polished vernacular stories. Ling, too, seemingly took on the guise of the professional storyteller as narrator, which allowed him to intrude into his tales; through pretend dialogues with a skeptical audience, he drew attention to aspects of fiction and also took up issues of the day. But in contrast to Feng Menglong’s stories, Ling’s are more uniform in style and structure. Feng was an innovator; he utilized a number of editorial schemes in his expansion of earlier narratives and of the work of his several collaborators.⁴ Ling enjoyed the benefits of having models to follow—and to improve upon. But compared to Feng’s adaptations of older stories, Ling used such tales as sources of inspiration for his own highly creative stories. Seldom was he constrained by the details of earlier texts or even the limitations of historical events.⁵ Moreover, he amplified the moral messages of his sources and made them more clearly relevant to his readers. Ling’s method

was imaginative satire, his active narrative voice keeping his readers at sufficient distance from his characters to allow reflection on their all-too-common foibles and flaws. Ling developed the specificity of his narrator's perspective from the non-personalized storyteller model present in Feng Menglong's stories; this new voice in turn developed into the very outspoken and individualistic narrators in later *huaben* stories of the early Qing period, the 1650s and 1660s.⁶

Ling Mengchu was from Wuxing (Huzhou) in Zhejiang, a city known for its publishing houses and sophisticated literary culture. His father, Ling Dizhi 凌迪知 (d. 1600), earned the highest civil service degree, that of *jinshi* (presented [to the emperor] scholar), and served in both central government and local posts. After he retired, the elder Ling joined his brother in working with the family printing business, perhaps in collaboration with the Min family to whom the Lings were related by marriage. Careful editing, strong critical commentaries, and fine-quality printing were hallmarks of their publications. Both Ling and Min editions frequently were printed in two or more colors, which made them noteworthy for their clarity in distinguishing commentaries by different authors and for their attractive appearance. These multicolor editions, most of which were produced by Ling Mengchu and Min Qiji 閔齊伋, were also quite expensive. Their generation of Lings and the Mins published collections of poetry, histories, and outstanding plays including *The Western Wing* (Xixiang ji 西廂記), a sequence of five *zaju* plays, and *The Story of the Lute* (Pipa ji 琵琶記), a lengthy *chuanqi* play.⁷

Although a highly learned and skilled writer, Ling Mengchu failed to earn more than the initial *xiucai* (also known as the *shengyuan*) degree. Consequently, his official career was limited to small posts in Shanghai and Xuzhou as a tribute student; he received his first position only in 1634 at the age of fifty-four. Like Feng Menglong, he was fiercely loyal to the Ming dynasty and died fighting the rebel forces led by Li Zicheng (ca. 1605–1645).⁸ Before taking office, Ling had been known as a compiler, a dramatist, and a drama critic. His plays in both short and long forms were playful rewritings of classical-language tales; three were based on the Tang *chuanqi* story “The Curly-Bearded Knight” (Qijuanke zhuan 虬髯客傳), and others were unmistakably comical. He also published collections of his verse and essays in addition to his vernacular fiction.

Ling Mengchu was well placed in cultural circles. His friends included a number of well-known and influential scholars of the older generation, among them Feng Mengzhen 馮夢禎 (1546–1605), Wang Zhideng 王穉登

(1535–1613), Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 (1570–1624), the great playwright Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1617), and the editor and man-about-town Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639).⁹ Undoubtedly he was fully conversant with the trends and tastes of his day, which became fodder for his fiction.

Ling wrote a total of seventy-eight vernacular-language stories. In 1628, the forty collected here appeared in Suzhou under the title *Slapping the Table in Amazement*, and thirty-eight more were published four years later in *Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection*.¹⁰ As he later admitted, Ling Mengchu began writing his vernacular stories in frustration in Nanjing after failing the provincial-level civil service examinations. Before long, his fellow examinees got word of them and asked him for more, which he supplied. Small wonder, given his circumstances and the immediate concerns of his original reading audience, that so many of his tales concern scholars and the examinations. Indeed, the collection concludes with a number of anecdotes and a story about how fate, not ability, dictates who passes and who is doomed to failure in their attempts to qualify for office and recognition.

But this account might suggest a lesser degree of serious intent in writing than seems to have been the case. In the preface to the first collection (translated in this volume), Ling comments disparagingly on most contemporary editors of popular fiction, saving praise for Feng Menglong alone. This may well be a response to the sixteenth-century fashion for erotic fiction in the classical language that, perhaps coincidentally, had fallen out of popularity by the time Feng's vernacular stories came to be widely read.¹¹ This preface also reveals that he, like Feng, rewrote earlier tales rather than originating new material. But Feng had used up the best of the older fiction, Ling declares, leaving him to adapt the remaining narratives from the past, a broader range of fictional, historical, and theatrical materials than Feng had used.¹² In so doing, Ling created a narrator who clarifies the moral messages to be drawn from each tale. In tone, this voice shows varying levels of seriousness but inevitably castigates the moral lapses of his day. In many stories, the narrator takes aim at senseless greed and cupidity. His messages are expressed with some urgency because many of Ling's main tales are set in his own time, the Ming, in situations that may well have seemed familiar to his readers.

Perhaps even more than Feng Menglong, Ling Mengchu was highly self-conscious as a writer. This tendency seemingly developed from his refined dramatic theories and aesthetic tastes. He criticized plays written by his contemporaries and predecessors for their lack of authenticity in

responding to the needs of dramatic style and for excessive lyricism that could obscure the truthfulness of character and action. Ling's own fiction is frequently humorous, but one cannot escape its relevance to understanding human shortcomings.

Some of the special characteristics of Ling Mengchu's stories, including their differences from those written by Feng Menglong, can be seen in story 17, "Prayer Services Are Held at West Hill Temple for a Departed Soul; A Coffin Is Prepared in the Kaifeng Yamen for a Living Criminal." Unlike the stories in Feng's *Sanyan* set (*Stories Old and New*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*), each entry here has a title in couplet form. Its first line identifies the catalyst for the action to be narrated, the beginning of the story, and the second line predicts the outcome of those events, the conclusion of the tale. Scholars have identified earlier versions of parts of the story in classical-language collections, as they have for Feng's *Sanyan* stories. But unlike the best of the *Sanyan* tales, Ling's central characters here are nearly caricatures, making it hard to sympathize with them regardless of how easy it may be to understand their motivations.

After a lengthy prologue that includes short anecdotes and a moralistic warning from the narrator to set the stage, the main story begins with a young woman who has just been widowed, leaving her with a young son. She is beautiful, but because she has no older relatives to help her, she must make all the funeral arrangements herself. When she visits the local Daoist temple to arrange for a prayer service, the temple's young master spies her and is at once deeply infatuated. For her part, it is only when the Daoist priest draws attention to himself that the young widow notices him and begins to reciprocate his feelings. Thereafter, throughout the weeks of funeral services, they meet each night for passionate lovemaking facilitated by the master's pubescent acolytes. After formal mourning is complete, the priest continues to visit the widow's house, where they regularly satisfy their passions. The situation continues as her son grows into a teenager, and the acolytes become as interested in sex as their master. When the son realizes what his mother is up to, he tries to thwart the relationship by various schemes in order to protect her reputation. His successes cause the lovers such frustration that his mother decides to kill him so that she might continue her sexual relationship with the Daoist master—and now with one of his mature acolytes as well. Failing in that (and because the priest continuously argues against murder), she charges her son with unfilial behavior, a crime punishable by execution according to Ming law. The perspicacious

local official sees through the half-truths of the testimony given by the two and discerns an illicit relationship, even though the son refuses to accuse his mother of any wrongdoing. The magistrate has the priest arrested and beaten to death. The sinful acolyte dies of longing, and after the filial son cares for his repentant mother for the rest of her short life, he matures and becomes a successful husband and official.

The characters in this story all seem wooden compared with, for example, the vividly portrayed protagonists of story 9 (the remorseful mother) and story 27 (the faithful young wife). The lovers in story 17 are too single-mindedly obsessed with sexual gratification. The mother hesitates at nothing to satisfy her desire—although she was a sincerely grieving widow before she met the priest—and the son is nearly prescient in finding ways of preventing the priest from seeing his mother. The characters seem to be simply going through the motions needed to justify an extended narrative about an illicit relationship and to comment on the emotional satisfaction of stolen sex—and rationalize its tragic outcome.

The primary prologue tale in story 17 is a lightly rewritten version of an entry in the encyclopedic twelfth-century, classical-language story collection *Records of the Listener* (Yijian zhi 夷堅志). The entry tells of a Daoist priest who makes suggestive comments to a pair of young women only to suffer fatal punishment from the gods for profaning his ritual duties.¹³ The portion of the main tale devoted to the courtroom scenes was presumably adapted from a late Tang period collection, *Anecdotes from Court and Provinces* (Chao ye qianzai 朝野僉載), although nearly identical versions of Prefect Li's investigation appear in other collections of historical and legal narratives from the Tang through the Ming, including in one of Feng Menglong's classical tale collections.¹⁴ The court case was in turn adapted into another classical tale that refers in slightly greater detail to Ms. Wu's amorous adventures as the reason for her indictment of her son; in both anecdotes, the priest readily admits to the adulterous affair, and the fornicators are executed as a result.¹⁵

The brief classical version (approximately 250 characters long) appears in *New Tales from the Green Window* (Lüchuang xinhua 綠窗新話), from which Ling Mengchu regularly drew inspiration for his stories. But at around 17,000 characters for his main tale, this is one of the longest in Ling's vernacular story collection. A master storyteller, he elaborated on every element in the earlier tale in order to draw out the affair to its inevitable conclusion. But along the way, he constantly piques his reader's curiosity about just how

much detail the author will provide and what outrageous acts the lovers will commit when consumed by lust. The magnitude of the lovers' passion is similarly hard to ignore: here, as in other stories, emotional outbursts are narrated and described in considerable detail, some redundantly in both prose and verse. In their intensity, Ling's stories surpass many of Feng's, and despite the simple characterizations in story 17, readers must confront their own prurient excitement while reading; given its devotion to descriptions of sex, there would be scant other reason for continuing to read through to the predictable conclusion. In this story, as in so many others in the collection, the prologue seems to have taken place in the undefined but distant past. The main tale of story 17 is unusual for not being set in the Ming. Ling thus means to bring his stories home, to the time—and the circumstances—that his readers might most easily identify as their own. This makes his stories, with their messages and satiric barbs, even more effective than those of Feng Menglong, which might be set at any time in the past. Raw desire might function similarly in challenging the reader to apply their message to his own day.

Story 17 has been discussed in some detail here because it is unusual for this collection. Although illicit behavior is regularly condemned, sex is generally treated somewhat unconventionally. Ling's standards are "reasonable" rather than absolute,¹⁶ that is, lovers' fidelity to each other is represented as far more important than chastity, and it is accepted that sex with one's husband is not necessarily satisfying for a woman.

Homosexual activity is considered a matter of course for many men, although the perspective of both narrator and characters is clearly one-sided, concentrating on the desiring older male rather than the desired boy or young man. Even so, story 26 explores the multifaceted nature of uncontrolled sexual desire—and does not avoid comment on the pain involved in anal intercourse. The disastrous consequences for the obsessed in story 17 and other stories in the collection are clear—but they are punished for their extreme selfishness and its outcomes, not for merely having desires. In story 2, for example, a young man has only momentary qualms about having sex with a prostitute who looks so much like his sister that he initially mistakes her for his sister, a situation that might well have made incest-averse Chinese readers uncomfortable. But the two are devoted to each other and end up living happily ever after.

Through this magnificent translation project, Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang have succeeded in bringing these centuries-old tales back to life for

modern readers. Their chosen style of English is easy to read; one can only marvel at their ability to find just the right aphorism for rendering the witty phrasing in Ling's original language. Their notes, too, fill in just what we need to know to appreciate his innumerable references to popular historical and literary lore. Here, as with their previous story collections, the Yangs' translations are unsurpassed in their vitality. Once again they have done a remarkable service for world literature and comparative studies of the arts of narration. Earlier translators selected individual stories on the basis of theme or content, and none has attempted anything like translating the complete collection.¹⁷ Unquestionably, no other version can surpass what the Yangs offer us here, their truly amazing tales from the Ming dynasty.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

This translation follows the text of the 1628 Shangyou Tang edition of *Pai'an jingqi* as reprinted in the 1986 facsimile edition published by Shanghai Guji Chubanshe. In this translation, the interlinear comments (IC) and marginal comments (MC) in the original text, often difficult to read, appear in italic within parentheses in roman text and in roman within parentheses in italic text.

The illustrations in this volume are from the facsimile edition of *Pai'an jingqi* in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1990).

Chinese proper names are rendered in the pinyin system. For the convenience of readers who are more accustomed to the Wade-Giles romanization system, we have provided the following short list of difficult consonants:

c=ts'

q=ch'

x=hs

z=tz

zh=ch

FREQUENTLY ENCOUNTERED CHINESE TERMS

chi a unit of measurement, translated as "foot"

jin translated as "catty," equals half a kilogram

li approximately one-third of a mile

liang translated as "tael," equals one-sixteenth of a *jin*

shi a married woman known by her maiden name (e.g., Wang-shi)

zi translated as "courtesy name," the name by which an educated person was addressed by people of his or her own generation and probably the one used more often than the person's official name

CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION DEGREES

The civil service examination system, the best-known political institution of imperial China, consisted of examinations at three levels in the Ming dynasty: district (prefectural), provincial, and national (metropolitan). Successful candidates at the first level received a *xiucai* degree; at the second level, a *juren* degree; and at the third, *jinshi*, the highest degree. Normally, *xiucai*-degree holders were not appointed to official positions.

Examinations at each level included a number of sessions in which candidates wrote new essays. At the lowest and middle levels, the examination questions required extensive memorization of the classic Confucian texts, including works of philosophy, history, poetry, and divination. The highest-level examinations also required essays on administrative policy and ethical questions, with the final examination given orally by the emperor in the palace while the candidates knelt before his throne. Those who passed the highest level were called *jinshi*. A *zhuangyuan* was a *jinshi* who ranked first in the palace examination.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

STORY 1

The Merchant from Persia Reveals the Secrets of a Turtle Shell

STORY 5

Zhang Derong Encounters a Tiger Sent by the Gods as a Matchmaker

STORY 11

An Evil Boatman Commits Blackmail with a Dead Body

STORY 12

Jiang Zhenqing Gains a Wife with a Jest

STORY 13

Mr. Zhao Spoils His Son and Dies as a Result

STORY 17

A Coffin Is Prepared in the Kaifeng Yamen for a Living Criminal

STORY 18

A Rich Man Squanders Thousands of Taels of Silver to Win a Beauty's Smile

STORY 33

Squire Zhang, in His Noble-Mindedness, Adopts an Orphan

STORY 34

Scholar Wenren Shows His Prowess at Cuifu Nunnery

STORY 37

The Yunzhou Prefect Helps His Nephew in the Netherworld

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINESE DYNASTIES

Xia	ca. 2100–ca. 1600 BCE
Shang (Yin)	ca. 1600–ca. 1028 BCE
Zhou	ca. 1027–ca. 256 BCE
Western Zhou	ca. 1027–771 BCE
Eastern Zhou	770–256 BCE
Spring and Autumn	770–476 BCE
Warring States	475–221 BCE
Qin	221–207 BCE
Han	206 BCE–220 CE
Western Han	206 BCE–8 CE
Xin	9–25
Eastern Han	25–220
Three Kingdoms	220–80
Wei	220–65
Shu	221–63
Wu	222–80
Six Dynasties (Wu, Eastern Jin, Former Song, Southern Qi, Southern Liang, and Southern Chen)	222–589
Jin	265–420
Western Jin	265–316
Eastern Jin	317–420
Southern and Northern Dynasties	420–589
Southern Dynasties	
Former Song	420–79
Southern Qi	479–502
Southern Liang	502–57
Southern Chen	557–89

Northern Dynasties	
Northern Wei	386–534
Eastern Wei	534–50
Western Wei	535–56
Northern Qi	550–77
Northern Zhou	557–81
Sui	581–618
Tang	618–907
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms	907–79
Five Dynasties	
Later Liang	907–23
Later Tang	923–36
Later Jin	936–46
Later Han	947–50
Later Zhou	951–60
Ten Kingdoms	907–79
Liao (Khitan)	916–1125
Song	960–1279
Northern Song	960–1126
Southern Song	1127–1279
Xixia (Tangut)	1038–1227
Jin (Jurchen)	1115–1234
Yuan (Mongol)	1260–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Qing (Manchu)	1644–1911

SLAPPING THE TABLE IN AMAZEMENT

拍案驚奇

Preface [1628 Edition]

As the saying goes, “To one who has seen too little of the world, everything is strange.” People of our time marvel at stories about monsters and demons, little realizing that there is much in our experience of everyday life that is quite magical and out of the ordinary. In days of yore, Chinese travelers abroad were appalled that cow manure was cherished as a valuable asset in a land they were visiting, but the local people countered with this remark, “In your country, you raise writhing worms and use their excretions to make colorful fabric with which to clothe yourselves.” What they clicked their tongues at in disbelief is something the Chinese take for granted. Therefore it simply does not make sense to marvel only at occult and uncanny things beyond the easy reach of our eyes and ears.

During the Song and Yuan dynasties, there was a school of writers who collected stories from local communities and presented them to the imperial palace for entertainment. The language was colloquial, and each story had a moral. Although lacking in elegance, those writings nonetheless constituted a genre, albeit a minor one, that provided amusement in its own way.

Peace has reigned in the empire for so long that the easy life has compromised public morals. A few flippant and wicked young men learning the rudiments of writing have taken it into their heads to malign the world. They invent a profusion of tall tales that are the height of absurdity and depravity. They are second to none in their transgressions against Confucian moral values and their incitement to karmic sins. What is worse, such volumes are so popular that they fly off the bookshelves, driving up the price of paper. Men of insight, concerned by the morals of the times, rightly call for strict laws banning such filth.

Feng Menglong’s collections of short stories (*Illustrious Words to Instruct the World*, etc.) are an exception. Eminently refined and tasteful and in

conformity with moral principles, they mark a break from the corrupt practices of today.¹ But, alas, all the available old texts written in the Song and Yuan dynasties have been included in those collections. Impressed by the rapid circulation of those volumes, book dealers assume that I have secret copies of more of such stories and encourage their publication so as to start a competition. The fact is, the few stories left over are not any more presentable than debris in the ditches. Therefore I have fleshed out miscellaneous fragments of old and new stories and gathered them into several volumes in the hope that readers may find the stories refreshing enough to add delight to their bantering conversations. Only about half the stories and the names that appear in them are true. The stories may not be credible as historical fact, but they are meaningful nonetheless. As for stories that astonish, the reader would do well to bear in mind that strange things do abound in this world. Therefore, blame not the storyteller but be warned by his words, and that is all there is to it. Challenging the novelty of these stories would be suggestive of questioning the value of cow manure while taking the raising of silkworms for granted. The stories in this collection were certainly not fabricated out of thin air.

Master of the Studio of the Void
Written next to the wine vessel

Five Editorial Principles for This Collection

First: Each story in this collection has a title. Titles of stories from earlier times were so well written that Yuan dynasty dramatists adopted them as titles for their plays. Half the titles that appear in *A Formulary for the Correct Sounds for an Era of Great Harmony* read like phrases out of short stories.¹ There have been recent attempts to pair two entirely different stories and give each a one-line title, thus presenting the two titles as a couplet.² As a consequence, preexisting titles were altered and reduced from precious gold to humble iron. This is why I have instead opted for one couplet for each title, in the tradition of *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *The Journey to the West*.³

Second: In compiling the stories, I try not to offend decency and good taste. The resulting collection is not entirely free of stories about sins of the flesh, but the selection is limited to actual events only, and the restrained and subtle language provides nothing more than hints to the reader. There is absolutely nothing filthy that would offend decency and corrupt morals. It is only right for a writer to maintain refinement in literature. This is not the sanctimonious posturing of a pedantic moralist.

Third: The poems in these stories serve as what I call “seasonings,” and most of them are written by me for the purpose of this collection. Any pre-existing material that appears on these pages is adopted because it fits the plot to perfection, and such adoptions are not acts of plagiarism but constitute an established practice among story writers.

Fourth: Most of the stories are about everyday life rather than ghosts and fantasies. As they say, it is harder to draw dogs and horses than ghosts and demons, but I chose not to exclude stories of the latter kind just because they are easier to write and not amenable to proof. If the few that concern deities, ghosts, and the netherworld are found to be close to life, they should

be given credit for differing from those that are nothing but pure figments of the imagination.

Fifth: These being cautionary tales, words of admonishment are given multiple times in each. Rather than mark them out, I leave them to the discerning eye of the reader.

Master of the Studio of the Void

The cyclical year of wuchen [1628] of the Chongzhen reign period [1628–44]

SLAPPING THE TABLE IN AMAZEMENT

拍案驚奇



The Merchant from Persia Reveals the Secrets of a Turtle Shell

The Man Whose Luck Has Turned Chances upon Dongting Tangerines

The Merchant from Persia Reveals the Secrets of a Turtle Shell

THERE is a poem that says,

*Day after day, the wine cups are filled to the brim;
Dawn after dawn, flowers bloom in my small garden.
By myself I sing and dance to my heart's content;
What a pleasure to be free of all cares and trammels!*

How many daydreams have ever been brought to pass throughout history?

(IC: How lamentable!)

How many brilliant talents are lost in this mortal world?

All stratagems and plans are to little avail;

Just take and enjoy what is offered here and now!

This *ci* poem, written by Zhu Xizhen of the Song dynasty to the tune of “Moon over the West River,” makes the point that since fame, glory, wealth, and grandeur are all predestined, one might as well seize the day and enjoy life while one can.¹ Consider how few mighty heroes, as recorded in the Seventeen Histories from the earliest times, have ever acquired the riches and ranks that they deserved!² (MC: *This is enough to bring tears to the eyes of mighty heroes.*) Literary gentlemen able to dash off a thousand words at a moment’s

notice are consigned to oblivion once they have outlived their usefulness, and their volumes of writing end up covering jars of pickled vegetables. Masters of martial arts able to shoot an arrow through a willow leaf from a hundred paces away meet the same fate once they are no longer needed, and the few arrows left in their possession do not even suffice to sustain a kitchen fire until the rice is done. At the same time, benighted but lucky souls pass the imperial civil-service examinations, however unqualified they are, and men undistinguished in the military arts receive lavish rewards. It is all a matter of timing, luck, and fate. As the proverb rightly says, “If you are destined to be poor, gold turns into copper in your hand; if you are destined to be rich, paper turns into silk at your touch.” (MC: *How true!*) The long and the short of it is that everything is under the control of the Master of Destiny.

There are also these lines from a *ci* poem by Wu Yangao:³

*That good-for-nothing Creator follows no rules;
He flips, he flops, he turns things upside down.
Such are the ways of the world witnessed by all.*

Monk Hui'an had this to say in a *ci* poem:⁴

*Who would not want a house of gold?
Who would not want a well-lined purse?
But they just may not be in your stars.
All machinations will be labor lost.
Let your children seek their own fortune.*

Su Dongpo had this to say in a *ci* poem:⁵

*For hollow fame the size of a snail's horn,
For profits the size of a fly's head,
Why let your labor go to waste?
Since everything is predestined,
Who is to judge who wins and who loses?*

These eminent personalities in their eloquence all make the same point, but, in fact, an ancient axiom puts it even better: “In this fleeting life dictated by fate, you get nothing for all the pains you take.”

Storyteller, the way you put it, lazy people with no civil or military accomplishments need only wait for good luck to fall from the sky into their laps and spendthrifts need only wait for Heaven to shower money on their families without having to engage in business or build careers. Wouldn't this be a bitter disappointment to those who wish to better themselves? (MC: *A perfect, unassailable argument.*)

Well, gentle reader, you may not have thought about this, but a family with lazy people in it is fated to be lowly, and a family with spendthrifts is fated to be poor. This is the way things are. (IC: *This is the case of an honest man stating the facts as they are.*) However, there are indeed cases of reversals of fortune that happen in the twinkling of an eye, contrary to all expectations and calculations.

Now let me tell of a certain Jin Weihou, a native of Bianjing, who lived in the Song dynasty.⁶ A merchant by profession, he rose early and went to bed late, as was only to be expected, and spent all his waking hours devising ways of landing better deals. (MC: *This makes the preceding query about lazy people more interesting.*) When he had amassed quite a decent fortune, he thought up a long-term strategy (IC: *To last for a thousand years.*): He would use only loose pieces of silver for his daily expenses and hoard large, nice pieces of high-grade silver. When he accumulated about a hundred taels, he would have them melted and fashioned into a large ingot. He would then braid red yarn into a ribbon, tie it around the middle of the ingot, and place the silver by his pillow, so that he could toy with the ingot for a while before going to sleep at night. (IC: *What a fool!*) After he had accumulated eight ingots over a lifetime of work, he began to take it easy and gave up trying to save for another one-hundred-ael ingot.

Mr. Jin had four sons. On his seventieth birthday, the four of them prepared a feast and set out wine to celebrate the occasion. Impressed with their proper etiquette, Mr. Jin Senior said to them, "Thanks to blessings from Heaven, I've provided well for the family by working hard. (MC: *He is one of those fathers who serve their children like beasts of burden.*) On top of that, I've painstakingly set aside eight large ingots of silver, although I'm determined never to use them. They're tied with yarn in four pairs and lie next to my pillow. I'll pick a lucky day and give one pair to each of you, so that you'll each have a family treasure to call your own." Delighted, the four sons thanked their father, and they did not part company until they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Later that night, when a slightly tipsy Mr. Jin Senior lit his bedside lamp and got into bed, he saw through his wine-sodden eyes his eight large glittering ingots of silver sitting by his pillow in a neat row. He ran his fingers over them a few times, let out a chuckle, and lay down in bed. (IC: *Being foolish again.*) Before he had quite drifted into sleep, he heard footsteps beside his bed. Afraid that there might be a thief in the house, he strained his ears to listen, and it seemed to him that there was more than one person and that they were deferring politely to one another as they tried to approach him. When he pulled the bed curtain aside, he saw by the dim light of the lamp eight big men, each wearing a white robe that was gathered around the middle by a red ribbon. Bowing from the waist, they stepped forward and said to him, "We brothers were decreed by Heaven to reside at your home and await further instructions. You, sir, in your kindness to us, which we hardly deserve, raised us until we've come of age without ever requiring our service. After cherishing us for so many years, your allotted span of time is now drawing to a close, and we're supposed to seek a new destination after you, sir, have gone to heaven. However, now that you've decided to bequeath us to your sons in equal portions, we'll have to bid you farewell, because we have no predestined bond with your sons. (MC: *Too bad for his sons.*) We're going to serve Mr. Wang Something of such and such a village in such and such a county. But this doesn't mark the end of our predestined bond with *you*, sir. We'll be seeing you one more time!" And with that, they turned to go.

Mr. Jin tumbled out of bed in alarm and, without sparing a moment to put on his shoes, ran barefoot after the eight men, but by this time, they were already quite some distance from his house. In his haste, he tripped on the threshold. As he fell, he woke up and realized that it had all been but a dream. He quickly got out of bed and turned up the wick of his bedside lamp but found no trace of his eight ingots of silver. Recalling what he had heard in his dream, he realized that those were by no means idle words. With a sigh, he broke into sobs and said to himself (IC: *He is being foolish again. One foolish act leads to another.*), "It's hard to believe that my life savings are meant for other people rather than my own sons! But I did hear the surname of that family and where they live. Why don't I track them down? I'm prepared to take all the time I need." He did not get a wink of sleep for the rest of the night.

The next morning, after he told his sons about what had happened, some of them were startled, others were apprehensive. (MC: *It is only natural that people vary in degrees of intelligence and worth.*)

Those who were startled said, "How very strange! So those things are not meant for us after all."

Those who were apprehensive commented, "The old man must have made that promise to us when he was in a sunny mood. But he regretted it when he thought back on it and just can't tear himself away from his silver. That may be why he has come up with such a preposterous lie."

Seeing that not all of his sons believed him, Mr. Jin Senior burned with impatience to get to the truth. Off he went to such and such a village in such and such a county, and sure enough, he did find one Mr. Wang Something. He knocked at the gate. Once led into the brightly lit main hall, he saw that it was laid out for a sacrificial ceremony complete with the three sacrificial animals [the ox, the pig, and the goat]. (IC: *Also an act of foolishness.*)

"What occasion calls for such a grand ceremony?" asked Mr. Jin of a servant, who then went in to announce him and brought out the master of the house, Mr. Wang.

After an exchange of greetings, Mr. Jin sat down, and Mr. Wang asked him about the purpose of his visit.

"This old man is here to try to solve a mystery," replied Mr. Jin. "But now that I see a sacrificial ceremony going on, I beg to be enlightened as to the reason for this ritual."

Mr. Wang launched into these explanations: "It all started when my humble wife felt slightly indisposed. So I engaged a fortune-teller. He said, 'The ailment will go away as soon as the bed is moved.' Yesterday, my wife, in her illness, became dimly aware of eight big men before her, each wearing a white robe with a red ribbon around his waist. They said to her, 'We used to reside in a Mr. Jin's house, but our predestined bond with him is over. We've now come to join your household.' With that, they dived under the bed. My wife broke into a cold sweat and immediately felt like herself again. After the bed was moved aside, we found eight large ingots of silver sitting in the dust, each tied around the middle with a red ribbon. (IC: *It did pay to move the bed. The fortune-teller has been proved right.*) We have no idea where they could have come from. This must be a blessing from Heaven. That's why we bought the sacrificial offerings as a token of our gratitude. Since you, sir, asked about this, would you happen to know what's behind all this?"

Stomping his foot, Mr. Jin said, "Those ingots of silver are my life savings. I also had a dream last night, and when I woke up, they'd vanished. I heard your name and address in my dream, which is how I found my way here. So this must have been the will of Heaven. This old man has no complaints

(IC: *Complaints wouldn't do any good.*), but I do wish to have a look at them, so that I can relieve myself of this weight on my mind." (MC: *As foolish as ever.*)

"That can easily be done," said Mr. Wang. He went smilingly into the interior of the house and led four servants out, each carrying a tray with two ingots on it. With red yarn around their middles, they were the very same ingots of silver that had belonged to the Jin family.

Mr. Jin could not help shedding tears as he looked resignedly at the silver. (IC: *There's just no end to his foolishness.*) Running his fingers over them, he said, "I don't get to enjoy them. Just my luck!"

Although Mr. Wang ordered the servants to take the silver back into the inner quarters of the house, it pained him to see Mr. Jin in such a state, so he took out three taels of loose silver, wrapped them up, and gave the packet to Mr. Jin as a farewell gift. (IC: *An honest man deserves a good turn.*)

Mr. Jin said, "Since I'm not meant to enjoy even what rightfully belongs to me, this gift is quite unnecessary!" Adamantly, he declined the offer over and over again, but Mr. Wang forced the packet up his sleeve. Mr. Jin tried to retrieve it from his sleeve, but failing to get a grip on it in the heat of the moment, he turned crimson in the face. He yielded to Mr. Wang's pleas and took his leave with a bow.

On returning home, Mr. Jin told his sons about what had happened. Everyone sighed with emotion. As he was praising Mr. Wang's kindness in giving him a farewell gift of three taels of silver, he began to feel in his sleeve but failed to find it. He thought he must have lost it somewhere along the way, but in fact, what had happened was that while he was strenuously resisting the gift and Mr. Wang was frantically trying to stuff it up his sleeve, the packet fell into the outer lining of Mr. Jin's sleeve, the seams of which had split in one place. The packet ended up slipping through the hole and landing by the threshold, which was why Mr. Jin could not have retrieved it even before he left Mr. Wang's house. After Mr. Jin was gone, Mr. Wang found the packet while cleaning the entrance. Clearly, every sip of water and every mouthful of food cannot but be predestined. If the money was not meant for him to have, even three taels—never mind eight hundred taels—would be denied him. He who had them would lose them, and he who had none would gain them. These things are beyond human control.

Let me now tell of a man whose every step on solid ground went awry. Without a penny to his name, he eked out an existence that was as wretched as it could be. But then, in a place that he could not have imagined even in his wildest dreams, he suddenly found himself a fabulously rich man without

even knowing what had happened. This is something quite unheard of since time immemorial, as these lines attest:

*Riches and honor that lie in your lot
Come to you whether you're brainy or not.
If you're born to be a man of wealth,
Treasures come your way from the ends of the earth.*

Our story takes place in the Chenghua reign period [1465–87] of this dynasty [Ming]. Outside Chang Gate in Changzhou County, Suzhou Prefecture, there lived a man by the name of Wen Shi, courtesy name Ruoxu.⁷ A quick learner, he could get the hang of whatever he tried his hand at and could easily take up anything taught to him. He had rudimentary skills in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting and was also something of a flute and zither player, a singer, and a dancer. In his childhood, a fortune-teller had said that he would become a fabulously rich man someday. (IC: *A prophecy that will be fulfilled.*) Made presumptuous by his cleverness, he drifted through life without applying himself to any profitable undertaking. As the saying goes, he who sits idle will eat away a mountain of a fortune. Only when a substantial amount of his hefty inheritance had vanished did he realize the limits of his resources and, impressed by the several hundred percent profits of some merchants, began to try his hand at business, but none of his ventures paid off.

One fine day, he heard that paper folding fans were selling well in Beijing. So he found a partner and began to deal in fans. For exquisite gold-flecked fans of superior quality, he offered gifts to famous artists like Shen Zhou [1427–1509], Wen Zhengming [1470–1559], and Zhu Yunming [1460–1526] and asked them to put a few casual strokes on the fans, so that he could hike the price for each of them to one tael or more. For fans of middling quality, he approached counterfeiter and had them imitate the styles of the above-mentioned artists. He would sell the fans to unsuspecting customers, claiming that they bore the work of the great masters. He himself could also do a pretty good job of copying their works. As for fans of inferior quality with no gold flecks and no calligraphy or painting on them, he would settle for dozens of copper cash each, which meant a 100 percent profit, something that he felt was certainly within reach. So he chose an auspicious day, packed his merchandise, and went to Beijing.

As it turned out, however, it had been raining in Beijing every day since the onset of summer. With the sky always overcast, it did not feel at all like

summer, and his customers were few and far between. Then autumn came, and the weather cooled down. Though it was by now the wrong season for fans, at least the sky had cleared up.

One day, a flamboyant young man showed up, asking for a Suzhou-made fan so that he could swing it over his billowing sleeve. After opening the boxes, Mr. Wen let out a cry of woe. He could not unfold the fans. What had happened was that Beijing's rainy season, which fell in the seventh and eighth lunar months, and the prolonged dampness had joined forces with the sticky ink on the fans to glue the folds together. (MC: *The works of calligraphy and paintings are up to mischief*.) When forced open, the fans became a torn and blotchy mess. Those with calligraphy and paintings were now worthless. Those left blank were undamaged, but how much could he get for them? He sold them without caring what he was paid and got only enough money for his trip back home. All his capital had gone down the drain.

This same pattern held in his later business ventures. Not only did he lose his own capital, but he also brought ruin to his partners, hence his nickname, The Luckless One. In a few years' time, his entire family fortune gave out. He could not even afford to marry. Day in and day out, he knocked about, offering his services as a calligrapher and painter, but all to very little effect. To his credit, he did have a clever tongue and a ready laugh, which endeared him to his friends, who found his services indispensable when they were on pleasure outings. But that was only in exchange for free meals, not by any means a proper way to make a living. Moreover, he had been used to living in style and therefore felt uncomfortable as a hanger-on. Some felt sorry for him and recommended him for a position as a tutor, but honorable families found him inadequate in the diverse skills he claimed to have. And so he was unfit for a decent job but unwilling to take a lower position. Both the professional hangers-on and the tutors made faces at him and ridiculed him, calling him "luckless." But of this, for the time being, no more.

One day, he learned that a group of his neighbors who regularly traveled overseas to engage in trade were about to set sail. There were altogether more than forty of them, led by men with nicknames like Big Zhang, Second Brother Li, Zhao Number One, and Qian Number Two. Mr. Wen said to himself, "Being such a loser with no means of making a living, why don't I join them on their seafaring journey? If I get to see what lies there beyond the seas, I won't have lived my life in vain. (MC: *Luck comes to him at this low point in his life.*) And I don't think they'll turn me down. That way, I'll be spared

worries about where my next meal is to come from, and I'll get to have some fun."

It so happened that at this point in his thoughts, Big Zhang strolled over. Big Zhang, Zhang Chengyun by name, was exclusively engaged in overseas trade. A connoisseur of rare treasures and a straightforward, generous man always ready to render assistance to good people, he had won himself the sobriquet Zhang the Judge of Quality.

On learning of Wen Ruoxu's intentions, Big Zhang said, "Good! Good! We get bored easily at sea. If you could join us and liven up the conversation, time will pass more quickly. I think everyone in our brotherhood will like that. There's one thing, though: All of us will be taking merchandise with us. You're the only one with empty hands. It will be a waste for you to take the trip without getting anything out of it. I'll work out something with my friends. We'll all chip in so that you can also have some goods to sell." (MC: *Such a man is quite exceptional.*)

"You're too kind!" said Wen Ruoxu. "But I doubt that anyone else would be as willing to help me out as you are."

"I'll see what I can do," said Big Zhang. With that, he took himself off.

A blind fortune-teller happened to be approaching with his clappers at this time. Wen Ruoxu retrieved a copper coin from his pocket and asked the fortune-teller if he was going to have any luck in business.

"There's a windfall in store for you, and it's nothing short of spectacular!" exclaimed the fortune-teller.

Wen Ruoxu thought, "I'm going out to sea just to have some fun and fill the time. I'm in no position to make business deals. Why would I even need help from them? Even if they do help me out, how much can they scrape together to qualify as a windfall? This fortune-teller is nothing more than a quack!"

At this point, Big Zhang came back to him, looking quite upset. "Just as the proverb goes, 'The talk of money drives friends away,'" said Zhang. "What a bunch of clowns I have for friends! They all liked the idea of having you join us, but as soon as I suggested pooling some money for you, every one of them clammed up! (IC: *Such are the ways of the world.*) Now, here's one tael of silver that I managed to put together with two of my closest friends. But it's too little to get you started in business. Just use it to buy some between-meal snacks for yourself to eat on the boat. We'll take care of the regular meals."

With profuse thanks, Wen Ruoxu took the silver.

"Why don't you go and pack? We're about to set sail," said Zhang as he took leave of Wen and headed for the boat.

"I have very little packing to do. I'll join you shortly!" said Wen. All smiles as he examined the tael of silver in his hand, he wondered what could be done with it.

As he walked along, his feet took him to a street lined with peddlers and their baskets, and what lay inside were

*As red as raging flames,
As big as hanging bells,
The rind not yet wrinkled, the taste still sour,
Ripe before the frost sets in, they are in scant supply.
They are different from the ones that grow on Su's trees,⁸
Nor are they the kind planted by Prefect Li.⁹
They are brothers to Guangdong tangerines
And a smaller version of their Fujian brethren.*

In Lake Tai stood a Dongting Hill, where the soil was as fertile as that of Guangdong and Fujian. While Guangdong and Fujian tangerines were celebrated throughout the empire, Dongting also produced tangerines that were very similar in color and aroma. There was only one drawback: The fruits tasted slightly sour before they were ripe, although they turned sweet enough on reaching maturity. Named "Dongting Red," they sold for only one-tenth the price of Fujian tangerines. Looking at the fruit, Wen Ruoxu thought, "My one tael of silver can buy me more than a hundred catties of them. I can eat some when I get thirsty on the boat and also offer some to my fellow travelers by way of thanking them for their help." So he bought enough tangerines to fill a large bamboo basket and hired a man to carry the basket and his luggage to the boat.

As they approached the boat, his fellow travelers said, clapping their hands and laughing, "Look at Mr. Wen's precious merchandise!"

Deeply embarrassed, Wen Ruoxu sheepishly stepped on board, determined not to say a word about the tangerines along the journey.

The boat got under way and slowly sailed down the river and out to the sea. There came into view silvery-topped raging waves that seemed to threaten the sun and the moon and submerge the galaxy.

The boat drifted before the wind for a good three to five days without anyone knowing how much distance they had covered. And then, suddenly, they sighted a place with imposing walls and a dense population, a place that seemed to them to be the capital of a country. The seamen maneuvered the boat into a haven safe from the wind and waves, drove in a wooden post next to the shore, dropped anchor, and tied the boat to the post.

Most of the men went ashore. They soon realized that they had been in this place before. It was the country of Jiling, where merchandise from China could sell for three times more than it did in China, and the same went for merchandise from there in China. A round-trip could therefore mean an eightfold to ninefold profit, which was why many chose to take this route even if they had to put their lives on the line. Since all of Wen Ruoxu's boat companions were experienced traders with their own networks of middlemen and interpreters and their own preferred inns, they went their separate ways to dispose of their merchandise. Wen Ruoxu was the only one left on the boat as a caretaker. Being unfamiliar with the land, he did not know where to go.

As he sat there, feeling low, a sudden thought struck him: "Since I got on board, I haven't opened my basket of red tangerines. They may have rotted in the heat generated by so many people. Why don't I take a peek while my fellow passengers are all gone?" (IC: *Poor thing!*) So he had the seamen search for it in the hold. When the lid was opened, he saw that the top layer of tangerines looked fine, but, still not reassured, he had all the tangerines in the basket taken out and spread over the deck. What happened next was indeed decreed by fate, for he was meant to rise in life at this time, and fortune favors those whose time has come.

When seen from afar, the fiery-red tangerines on the deck appeared to be ten thousand sparks of light and a galaxy of stars. Pedestrians onshore drew near and asked, "What fancy stuff have you got there?"

Instead of answering, Wen Ruoxu picked one that had spots on it, peeled it, and sank his teeth into it. The swelling crowd of spectators commented in surprise mixed with delight, "So this is something edible!"

A more curious one in the crowd stepped forward and asked, "How much for one?"

Wen Ruoxu did not understand their language, but one of the seamen who did raised a finger and said, trying to fool them, "One coin each."

The one who had asked for the price opened his robe and took a silver coin from his red brocade money belt, saying, "I'll try one."

Wen Ruoxu took the silver, weighed it in his hand, and found it to be about one tael. He thought, "I have no idea how many tangerines this piece of silver can buy, and there are no scales to be had. Let me first offer him a sample." He picked a large and appealingly red one and offered it to the man.

Before everyone's eyes, the man took it, toyed with it, and said, "This is good stuff!" With a quick movement, he split it open. As the aroma assailed everyone's nostrils, the spectators burst into a cheer.

Not knowing the proper way of eating it, the buyer imitated Wen Ruoxu and peeled off the rind. But then, without separating the segments, he stuffed the whole tangerine into his mouth. As its sweet juice filled his throat, he swallowed it whole, seeds and all. (IC: *A good way to eat a tangerine*.) "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he said, laughing. Then he reached a hand into his belt, took out ten silver coins, and said, "I'd like to buy ten of them as a gift for my boss."

Overjoyed, Wen Ruoxu picked ten for him. The other onlookers followed suit, some buying only one, others buying two or three. They all paid with silver and went away, very pleased with their purchases.

As a matter of fact, silver, as the currency of that country, was divided into different grades, as indicated by the patterns engraved on the coins. Those bearing engravings of a dragon and a phoenix were of the highest grade. Next came those with engravings of human figures, followed by fowls and animals, trees, and, lastly, water plants. But all were of standard purity and weight, down to the smallest denomination. The pieces of silver used to buy the tangerines were of the lowest grade, bearing water-plant patterns. The buyers rejoiced because they thought they had landed a good deal by exchanging inferior silver for fancy stuff. In petty acquisitiveness, they were no different from the Chinese.

In the twinkling of an eye, two-thirds of the tangerines were gone. Some onlookers regretted having no money with them and hurried off to get money, but by the time they rushed back, the supply of tangerines had dwindled so much that Wen Ruoxu said calculatedly, "I need to keep some for myself. So I'm not selling any more of them."

One man offered an extra coin each and bought two tangerines for four coins, all the while mumbling, "Luckless me! Just because I'm late!"

Noticing that he had offered to pay more, a bystander said bitterly, "We were also going to buy some. Why did you have to pay so much?"

The man who had just paid more responded, "Didn't you hear him say that he wasn't selling any more?"

In the midst of all this talk, the first customer, the one who had bought ten, was seen returning to the boat on a galloping piebald horse. After dismounting, he parted the crowd and shouted at the boat, "Don't sell them piece by piece! I'm going to buy up all that's left! My boss wants to offer them as tribute to the khan!"

On hearing this proclamation, the spectators stepped back to stand at a distance and watch. Being the sharp and clever man that he was, Wen Ruoxu surmised from the man's air of importance that a windfall was coming his way. He promptly emptied his basket of the remaining tangerines, about fifty in all. After counting them, he said, again artfully, "I just said a moment ago that I wanted to keep them for myself. But if you're willing to pay more, you can have a few. I just sold a couple of them at two coins each."

The man unloaded a large bag off the back of his horse and retrieved a silver coin bearing the pattern of trees. "How about one coin, of this kind?"

Wen Ruoxu replied, "No. I'll take only the kind of coin you gave me before."

With a smile, the man took out another coin, one bearing the pattern of a dragon and a phoenix, and asked, "How about this kind?"

"Won't do," said Wen. "I insist on the other kind."

With another smile, the man said, "This one is worth a hundred of that kind. I don't have that many of this kind to give you anyway. I was just teasing you. You're a fool to turn it down and ask for coins of that inferior kind. Well, if you sell me all that's left, I'll throw in an extra coin each of the kind you want."

Wen Ruoxu counted the remaining tangerines and sold all fifty-two of them to the man for no less than 156 coins bearing water-plant patterns. The man took the tangerines, basket and all, and tossed down another coin before tying the basket to the horse and, giving the horse a flick of his whip, went merrily on his way. Now that there were no more tangerines for sale, the crowd quickly dispersed.

With the crowd gone, Wen Ruoxu went back onto the boat and put a coin on a scale. It weighed a little more than eight maces and seven candareens.¹⁰ He weighed several more and got the same result each time. He counted the coins and, finding that he had about a thousand of them, gave two to the seamen as a reward (IC: *The way a man in fortune's favor does things.*) and packed the rest for himself. With a chuckle, he said, "How accurate the predictions of that blind fortune-teller!" (IC: *Nicely picking up an earlier thread.*) His heart filled with delight, he looked forward to the return of his fellow travelers and some good-humored banter with them.

Storyteller! You've got it wrong! If silver in that country is so worthless and business is done in that way, why don't seafaring merchants with their loads of silk sell them at higher prices? Wouldn't they have also made a hundredfold profit?

Dear audience, you may not be aware of this (MC: *The explanations must be rich in detail to be convincing.*), but people of that country apply the barter system for items like silk, and Chinese merchants make a profit only by bartering with them. When the people of that country pay in cash, especially when they pay with coins bearing patterns of dragons and phoenixes or human figures, they think they have paid dearly. But in fact those coins weigh no more than those bearing inferior patterns, and therefore the Chinese merchants gain no advantage. In Wen Ruoxu's case, the buyers considered edible items unworthy of high-grade silver coins, but Chinese merchants care only about the weight of the coins, which was why Wen made a nice profit.

But, storyteller, you've got it wrong again! If it was the way you put it, why don't the seafaring merchants deal exclusively in food items in exchange for their low-grade silver coins? Wouldn't that have been more profitable? Why bother to buy expensive items in the first place?

Dear audience, that's not the way to look at it either. It's just that our man happened to be destined for a windfall at this time, which is why he landed a good deal with the tangerines he had taken with him. If he were to do this a second time, he might have to wait for a sale in vain for three or five days in a row until the tangerines had all turned rotten. (MC: *A thoroughly thrashed-out argument.*) Wen Ruoxu's failed attempt to sell fans before his time had come is a case in point. If this can happen to fans, which store well, how much more likely is it for fruit? You are being contrarian, and that is no way to talk.

But I digress. Let us get on with our story. When Wen's fellow travelers took their middlemen to the boat for the delivery of their goods, Wen gave them an account of what had happened. "Lucky you!" they exclaimed, startled but delighted. "We came on the same boat, but you who had no capital are the first one to make a deal!"

Clapping his hands, Big Zhang said, "Everybody says he's the luckless one, but his luck must have turned!" (IC: *Exactly.*) To Wen Ruoxu, he said, "You won't be able to buy much stuff here with this kind of silver coin. Why don't you buy a few hundred taels worth of Chinese goods from us and barter them onshore for some local products that are exotic to the Chinese?"

That way, you'll be able to take home a hefty profit instead of hoarding some money that doesn't do anything for you."

"But I *am* a luckless one," insisted Wen Ruoxu. "I end up losing my capital every time I try my hand at business. Now, thanks to you all, I made a profit without investing any money. This is totally a matter of chance. With such a stroke of good luck, how can I still dream of chasing after more profit? If I fail again, would another good deal just fall into my lap?" (MC: *He who knows when to be content will be richly blessed in the future.*)

His fellow travelers replied, "Silver is what we need; merchandise we have galore. So wouldn't it be good for everyone if we trade what we have?"

"As they say, one snakebite gives you a three-year-long fear of ropes. All my confidence goes away at the mere mention of doing business. I'd rather hold on to the silver I have and take it home."

His fellow travelers exclaimed, clapping their hands, "He'd rather let go of a several-hundred-percent profit! Too bad! What a pity!"

Wen Ruoxu followed his travel companions ashore to the various shops, where they carried out their transactions. In the next fifteen days or so, Wen Ruoxu feasted his eyes on fancy objects, but, satisfied with what he had, he did not give them a second thought. After completing all necessary transactions, the men returned to the boat, burned offerings to the gods, drank some wine, and sailed out to sea.

After several days at sea, the weather suddenly changed. Behold:

*Dark clouds blot out the sun;
Black waves heave to the heavens.
Snakes and dragons rise dancing to the sky;
Fish and turtles dive in panic to the seabed.
Ships drift along like homeless jackdaws;
In the boat, passengers are tossed about
 like grains of rice in a washing pan;
Outside the boat, the sea churns
 like a boiling pot of rice.
The god of wind is so merciless,
Even the ablest oarsmen turn pale with horror.*

When the wind had first sprung up, the seamen had unfurled the sail to half-mast and let the ship drift along in whichever direction the wind blew. At the sight of a small island in the far distance, they took in the sails and

maneuvered the boat toward it. As they drew near, they saw that it was an uninhabited island. Behold!

*The trees soar into the sky;
The ground is overgrown with wild grass.
The wilderness bears only footprints of rabbits and foxes;
The gently rolling land can't be home to dragons and tigers.
In its pristine state, none knows
to which country it belongs.
From time immemorial, it has
never been trodden by human feet.*

The seamen cast anchor over the stern of the boat, drove in a wooden post next to the shore, and tied the boat to it. Then they turned to their passengers and said, "Just sit back and relax. Let's wait out the storm."

As for Wen Ruoxu, now that he was a richer man, how he wished he could grow a pair of wings and fly all the way home! Irritated that he was supposed to sit tight and wait out the storm, he declared, "I'm going onshore, just to have a look around the island."

"What's there to see on a deserted island?" asked his fellow passengers.

"What's the harm when I've got nothing else to do?"

Dizzy from the gusts of wind and yawning their heads off, the men had no interest in joining him. Wen Ruoxu braced himself and jumped ashore. This adventure on land was to bring out a supernatural power hidden in a decaying shell and deliver riches to a down-and-out man. If this storyteller had been born in the same year as he was and had grown up with him, and if I had the vision of a prophet, I would have followed him on his venture. Even if my feet had failed me and I had to support myself on a crutch, the trip would have been worthwhile.

To get on with our story: Since no one volunteered to join him, Wen Ruoxu, out of sheer contrariness, climbed up the rocks of the island by grabbing vines and kudzu, hand over hand, and managed to reach the highest point on the island. Luckily for him, the rocks were not very high, so it was not much of a struggle except that there was no path amid the sprawling wild grass. Once he found himself at the top, he looked all around him and was overwhelmed by the view. Feeling like a small leaf in this vast expanse of the universe, he broke down in tears of sorrow and said to himself, "For a man as smart as I am, I've been dogged by bad luck all my life. All my family

property is gone, leaving me nothing but this body to call my own. Even though I've made about a thousand silver coins on this trip by a lucky chance, who knows if they're meant for me or not? While I'm still on a deserted island, not on dry land, the Dragon King of the sea still has my life in his clutches!"

In the midst of his lamentations, he saw an object in the distance that stood taller than the grass. He went up to find out what it was and saw, much to his surprise, that it was an empty turtle shell as large as a bed. "I wouldn't have believed there was such a huge turtle in the whole wide world! Who has ever seen such a thing? And no one will ever believe me if I tell them! I haven't bought anything exotic on this trip, so why don't I take this and show it around as a rarity? Otherwise people will accuse me of being a lying Suzhou native if they just hear me talk about it without seeing it for themselves. And another thing: If it's sawed apart, the upper and the lower piece would each become a bed if four legs were added to it. Isn't that a novel idea?" (IC: *A novel idea indeed! One only a Suzhou native is capable of.*) So thinking, he took off his cloth puttees, joined them together, threaded this improvised rope through the shell, tied a knot (IC: *Ingenious.*), and began to tow it along.

When he returned to the boat, his fellow travelers laughed at the spectacle he presented and said, "So Mr. Wen is back, with something in tow!"

Wen Ruoxu replied, "For your information, everyone, this counts as the merchandise I acquired from overseas." His fellow passengers, after taking a closer look at what appeared to be a bed with no legs and a flat bottom, exclaimed in surprise, "It's a huge turtle shell! Why did you tow it all the way here? What are you going to do with it?"

"Isn't this something rare? I'm going to take it back home."

Amid general laughter, one man said, "Instead of buying something valuable, you took this thing! What use do you see for it?"

Another man observed, "Oh, it *can* be put to good use. If you have something that worries you, you can put the turtle shell on a fire and do a divination. Too bad such a large shell can't be used as medicine."

Yet another man weighed in, "Oh yes, it can! If physicians need to make turtle shell paste, they can break the shell and brew the small pieces. One such shell equals hundreds of small tortoise shells." (MC: *Even the jeers are funny.*)

Wen Ruoxu said, "I don't care if it's useful or not. I just think it's a rare thing, and it cost me nothing. So I'm going to take it home with me."

With that, he asked a seaman to help him carry the shell onto the deck. The shell that had looked huge enough on the desert island now appeared to

be even more of a monstrosity in the confined space of the boat. If it hadn't been an oceangoing boat, this outsize thing would not even have fitted on it. Everyone had a good laugh. Someone commented, "If people ask us about it when we arrive, we'll just say that Mr. Wen is a big turtle trader!"

"Don't laugh!" countered Wen Ruoxu. "I do have a use for it. It's definitely not something to throw away." Turning a deaf ear to the jeers, Wen Ruoxu cheerfully fetched some water, washed the shell clean inside and out, wiped it dry, put his money belt and all his other pieces of baggage into it, and tied up the two ends with a rope, turning it into a large trunk. All smiles, he said, "Now I've put it to good use, haven't I?"

Amid general laughter, his fellow travelers commented, "Good idea! Good idea! Mr. Wen is a clever man indeed!"

Nothing further happened that night.

The next day, the ship set sail after the wind subsided. A few days later, they arrived in Fujian. As soon as they had dropped anchor, a crowd of small-time middlemen who lived off seafaring merchants came up to greet them. They pulled at the new arrivals, each noisily claiming that his local contact was the best. But as soon as the travelers picked the one they had dealt with before, all the other middlemen gave up in resignation.

So Wen Ruoxu and his companions followed the man they had picked to a large store owned by a Persian merchant and sat down inside. On receiving word that he had visitors from overseas, the owner immediately took out some silver and told his kitchen staff to prepare a feast for dozens of tables. Only after he had finished with his instructions did he go to the hall. He was a Persian with the unusual Chinese name of Ma [the character for "agate"] Baoha. With goodness knows how many tens of thousands of taels of silver as capital, he traded only in valuable items of merchandise with seafarers. Wen Ruoxu was the only one in the company who did not know him. All the others were the Persian's repeat customers. Wen Ruoxu noticed that the man, having lived for so long in China, was not much different from a Chinese native in the way he dressed, talked, and moved. The only slightly unusual things about him were his trimmed eyebrows and beard, his sunken eyes, and the high bridge of his nose. After he exchanged greetings with his visitors, everyone sat down. Two cups of tea later, he stood up and led everyone to a grand hall where a feast had been beautifully laid out. According to tradition, the host was supposed to wine and dine visitors fresh off the boats before getting down to business.

Holding an enamel cup and saucer with chrysanthemum patterns, the Persian host said with a salute, "Please show me your lists of merchandise before I seat you."

Dear audience, you may wonder what he meant. The fact was that this Persian put profit above everything else. A customer with treasures worth tens of thousands of taels of silver would be given the most honored seat, and the others would then be seated according to the value of their goods. (MC: *In this world of ours, the Persian merchant is not the only one who does this.*) Age and rank were given no weight whatsoever. This had always been the way he seated his guests. Wen Ruoxu's fellow travelers, each knowing very well the value and amount of his own merchandise as well as those of his companions, took the wine cups offered to them and sat down in the order they thought proper, leaving Wen Ruoxu standing forlornly by himself. (IC: *Poor thing!*)

The host said, "I've never seen this gentleman before. This must be his first journey out to sea, and he therefore has few items to offer."

Wen's fellow travelers said to the host, "This is a good friend of ours, out to sea just for fun. He does have money with him, but he hasn't been willing to buy anything. We'll have to let him take the lowest-ranking seat."

Deeply embarrassed, Wen Ruoxu took the seat assigned to the lowest-ranking guest. The host sat down at one end of the table. In the midst of the drinking, as one man boasted of his stock of cat's-eyes and another of his emeralds in a game of one-upmanship, Wen Ruoxu sank into deeper silence. A little ruefully he said to himself, "I should have taken their advice and made some purchases. I do have a few hundred taels of silver in my baggage, but they don't count, so I can't get a word in." Then he heaved a sigh and thought, "For someone who started on the journey without any capital, I'm already in a lot of luck. I should be content." Absorbed in his own thoughts, he was in no mood for wine, while all the other men noisily played the finger-guessing game, drinking and stuffing themselves and making a mess of the tables. The host, being an experienced man of the world, noticed Wen Ruoxu's dejection. Feeling that he couldn't very well say it outright, he just refilled Wen Ruoxu's wine cup a few times out of politeness.

Then the visitors stood up and said, "We've had enough wine. Let's go back to the boat before it gets dark and deliver the goods tomorrow!" So saying, they took leave of their host and went off.

The Persian had the feast tables cleaned up and retired for the night. The following day, he rose bright and early and went straight to his visitors' boat.

As he boarded the boat, he caught sight of the bulky shell. In surprise, he asked, "Who owns this treasure? Nobody mentioned it yesterday at the dinner table. I assume that it's not for sale?"

The men laughed and said, pointing, "This piece of treasure belongs to our friend Mr. Wen."

One man added, joining in the merriment, "It will be quite a tough sell!"

Giving Wen Ruoxu a look, the Persian host reddened in anger and said reproachfully to the assembled company, "I've known you for so many years now. How can you play such tricks on me? Why did you make me offend a newcomer and unjustly give him the lowest-ranking seat?" With one quick movement, he held Wen Ruoxu and, turning to the other men, said, "Wait! Don't dispose of your goods until I've gone ashore with this gentleman and offered him an apology!"

None of the men had any idea what he was talking about. Intrigued, several who were closer to Wen Ruoxu plus a few busybodies followed the two all the way back to the Persian's store to see what was going to happen.

Before their very eyes, their host led Wen Ruoxu to a chair, put it in its proper place, and, ignoring the other men, made Wen Ruoxu sit down first, saying, "My apologies for what happened earlier! My apologies! Please be seated!"

Wen Ruoxu was also mystified. He thought, "Could that thing of mine be a treasure? Could I be in such good luck?"

The host disappeared into the interior of the house and soon reemerged to invite everyone to the same hall where they had been drinking the day before. Another feast had been laid out on several tables, the first of which displayed a finer spread than what had been served on the previous occasion. Wine vessel in hand, the host bowed to Wen Ruoxu and announced to the company, "This gentleman deserves a seat at the first table. Your entire boatful of goods is nowhere near as valuable as what he has brought. I apologize for my earlier lack of manners!"

Amused, mystified, and incredulous all at once, the men sat down around the tables.

After three cups of wine, the host said, addressing Wen Ruoxu, "May I ask you, sir, if you'd be willing to sell this treasure?"

Being a man of good sense, Wen Ruoxu replied, "Why not, if I can get a good price for it?"

Hearing that he was willing to sell, the host broke into radiant smiles, as if this was a blessing from Heaven. He rose and asked, "If you're indeed willing to sell, just quote me a price. I'm not one to pinch pennies!"

In fact, Wen Ruoxu had no idea of the turtle shell's value. If he asked for too little, he was afraid he would betray his ignorance, but if he asked for too much, he could become a laughingstock. Blushing furiously, he gave the matter much thought but could not come up with a price. At this point, Big Zhang gave him a meaningful glance, put his hand on the back of the chair, raised three fingers, and then, wagging a forefinger in the air, said, "Ask him for this much!"

Shaking his head, Wen Ruoxu raised one finger and said, "I can't even bring myself to ask for this much!"

The host saw him and asked, "How much?"

Big Zhang said, meaning mischief, "Judging from his gesture, I believe he's asking for ten thousand."

The host roared with laughter. "So you have no intention of selling. You're just pulling my leg. How can such a treasure be worth so little?"

Everyone was flabbergasted. They stood up and pulled Wen Ruoxu aside for consultation. "What a stroke of luck!" they said. "It must be worth a great deal. We honestly have no idea what price to quote. Mr. Wen, why don't you ask for a sky-high price and then take his counteroffer?"

Wen Ruoxu, however, shrank from doing so. Just as he was about to say the words, he checked himself. "Don't be shy!" said his companions, egging him on.

The host said, also urging him, "What's the harm in giving me a price?" Resigned, Wen Ruoxu asked for fifty thousand taels. Still, the host shook his head, saying, "No! No! What a thing to say!" Laying a hand on Big Zhang, the Persian merchant said to him in a subdued voice, "You're an experienced seafaring merchant, and everyone calls you 'Zhang the Judge of Quality.' How can you be unaware of the value of that object? He must have no intention of selling it and is making a fool of this humble store owner."

Big Zhang replied, "I'm not going to hide anything from you, but this is a good friend of mine, on this trip just for fun, which is why he didn't purchase any merchandise. As for that thing, he came by it quite accidentally on an island when we were waiting out a storm. He didn't pay anything for it, so nobody knows how much it's worth. If you indeed give him fifty thousand, you're going to make him a rich man for the rest of his life. He'll be content."

"In that case, I'd like you to be a guarantor. I'll see that you're amply rewarded. But don't ever go back on your word!" Having said that, the Persian merchant had a store clerk bring out the four treasures of the scholar's study.¹¹ He then folded a piece of cotton paper—of the kind used for legal documents—offered Big Zhang a writing brush, and said, "Please help me draft a contract so as to complete the deal."

Pointing to one of his fellow travelers, Big Zhang said, "This gentleman, Chu Zhongying, writes a good hand." So he handed the paper and writing brush to Mr. Chu. After grinding the ink until it achieved the right texture and smoothing out the paper, Mr. Chu picked up the writing brush and wrote the following:

Zhang Chengyun and his party bear witness to the following:

Wen Shi [Wen Ruoxu's official name] of Suzhou brought a large turtle shell from abroad to Persian merchant Mr. Ma Baoha's store and asked for a sale price of fifty thousand taels of silver. After the contract is drawn up, the selling party will deliver the item of merchandise and the purchasing party will make the payment. No reneging is allowed. The party who reneges on the deal will be fined an amount equal to the sales price plus one-tenth thereof. This serves as the contract of the transaction.

The contract was copied out, and both copies were dated, complete with the day, month, and year. On the left side of each copy of the contract was a list of the names of the witnesses, about ten in all, headed by Big Zhang. Mr. Chu, the drafter, signed his own name last. Then he folded the original copy vertically along the date line, put it next to the duplicate along the same date line, and wrote vertically across the junction the words "Contractual Agreement," followed by "Wen Shi the seller" and "Ma Baoha the buyer." Both men affixed their signatures to the contract. As the witnesses signed their names, beginning with the last one, Big Zhang said, "This deal will go through only if we witnesses are paid well!"

The host responded, smiling, "I wouldn't dare shortchange you! I wouldn't!"

With the contract completed, the host went inside and then came out with a box filled with silver. He said, "Let me make the payment to the witnesses first. Then I'll have something to say." As the men approached, he opened the box to reveal twenty packets of silver, fifty taels per packet—one thousand

taels in all. He passed the box to Big Zhang with both hands and said, "Please take this and distribute the money to your companions."

While the contract was being drawn up, the men had been drinking noisily and were just joining in the fun without really believing that it was at all serious. And now, at the sight of the glittering silver to be distributed as their commission, they realized that this was for real. Feeling as if he were intoxicated and in a dream, Wen Ruoxu stared vacantly at nothing, unable to get a word out. (IC: *A vivid description of one's first reaction to unexpected good news.*) Big Zhang tugged at him and said, "Brother Wen, you decide how to divide the commission for the witnesses."

Only then did Wen Ruoxu find his voice. "Shall we do this after the transaction is complete?"

Affably, the Persian host said to Wen, "There's one thing I need to consult you on, sir. The silver is now in the vault inside. It has all been weighed out, to the last penny. You need only have one or two of your companions go in to check one packet. There's no need to check every packet. But there's one problem: That's a lot of silver, and it's going to take some time to move all of it. And since you're all alone, how are you going to carry all the packets onto the boat? Your return journey over the sea will also be quite a challenge."

Wen Ruoxu replied after a moment of reflection, "You're right. What's to be done?"

"In my humble view, you can't very well go back at this time. I have a fabric shop here with capital of three thousand taels of silver and more than a hundred rooms of all sizes spread around the large compound. The real estate is valued at two thousand taels. It's half a *li* from here. I propose to sell that shop to you for five thousand taels, along with all the merchandise and the title deed, so that you can stay here and take over the business. You can then quietly transport your silver to the shop in separate batches without attracting attention. In the future, should you want to return home, you can entrust the business to a reliable employee and travel back and forth unencumbered. Otherwise, making the payment is easy enough for me, but transporting and storing that much silver will be a problem for you. That's how I see it."

Wen Ruoxu and Big Zhang were so impressed that they stamped their feet and exclaimed, "You have such good business sense! Everything you said is so convincing!"

Wen Ruoxu thought, "I'm not married, and my family fortune is gone. Even if I transport so much silver back, I won't know where to store it. Why

don't I do as he says and make this place my home? All the good things that have happened to me on this trip have been sent by Heaven. Let me follow my destiny. Even if the store and the houses are worth less than five thousand, I'll still come out ahead." Aloud, he said to the host, "What you said is indeed a surefire plan any way one looks at it. I'll be happy to oblige."

Just as he was about to take Wen Ruoxu to the vault, the Persian host turned to Zhang and Chu and said, "Why don't you come along? The others can sit here and wait for a while."

After the four of them had left, the rest of the men, looking awed, with heads leaning forward or sunk down between their shoulders, fell into a heated conversation. One said, "How extraordinary! What good luck! If I'd known this earlier, I'd have also taken a walk on the island when we were anchored there, and who knows! I might also have found some treasure!" (IC: *Hindsight of the vacant-headed.*)

Some said, "This is a huge blessing from Heaven that just fell into his lap. It's not something you can snatch up if it's not meant for you."

While they were thus marveling at Mr. Wen's good luck, Wen Ruoxu, Big Zhang, and Mr. Chu came out. "What happened inside?" asked everybody. Big Zhang said, "He took us to the vault where he keeps all his silver. We saw ten large barrels, four thousand taels each, and five boxes, one thousand taels each—forty-five thousand in total—and they're all sealed with strips bearing Brother Wen's name. They'll all be Brother Wen's as soon as the turtle shell is delivered." (IC: *He must be drooling.*)

At this point, the host came out and said, "The title deed and the ledgers for the fabric store are all here, and the total value is fifty thousand. Now, let's go to your boat to get the turtle shell." And so everyone proceeded to the boat.

On the way there, Wen Ruoxu said to his fellow travelers, "There are still many people on the boat. Please don't tell them everything. I'll have a nice reward for every one of you." The men, also afraid that those remaining on the boat would want to share the commission if they learned about it, understood his point.

After boarding the boat, Wen went first to retrieve his baggage roll from the turtle shell. Feeling the shell with his hand, he exclaimed to himself, "What a stroke of good luck!"

Then the Persian ordered two young employees from his store to carry the turtle shell and instructed, "Be careful and carry it inside. Don't leave it outside the store."

Watching them carry off the turtle shell, those on the boat commented to Wen Ruoxu, "It's good that this unsalable thing is off your hands now. How much did you sell it for?" Making no reply, Wen Ruoxu headed straight for the shore, his baggage roll in hand. The men who had just returned to the boat with him followed him back to the shore again, examined the turtle shell from one end to the other, peered into it, felt it with their hands, and, looking at one another blankly, said, "What's so good about it?"

The host took the group of ten or so back to his store and said, "Now, please join Mr. Wen and take a look at his residence and the fabric shop."

So the men went with the Persian to a big compound in a busy market area. The front shop was at the center, by the gate. Next to the shop was a small lane that led around a corner to a double-leaf stone gate. After going through the gate, they came to a large courtyard in which stood a grand hall. A board that hung above its door was inscribed with the words "Treasure Hall." On each side of the hall was a storage room, with shelves along three walls filled with all kinds of silk and satin. At the back were more houses and multistory structures. Wen Ruoxu said to himself, "I'll be living like a prince in this residence! Plus there's the fabric shop to live off of, with its endless flow of profit. Why don't I make this my permanent home? What's there to miss about my hometown?" To the host he said, "This is all very fine, but I'm single, so I'll need a few servants."

The host said, "That can easily be done. I'll take care of it."

His heart filled with delight, Wen Ruoxu joined the other men and returned to the Persian merchant's main store. After tea was served at his order, the host said, "Mr. Wen, you need not go back to the boat tonight. You can just stay in the fabric shop. There are already a few servants in the shop, but I'll put more at your disposal later on."

Wen's companions said, "Now that the transaction is complete, no more need be said about it. But we're still wondering what's so precious about that turtle shell. Please enlighten us."

Wen Ruoxu was of the same mind. "Yes, please!" said he.

Affably, the host said, "You gentlemen have traveled overseas so many times for nothing if you don't even know this. Haven't you heard that the Dragon King has nine sons and therefore nine branches of offspring? One of the nine branches is that of the drum dragon, whose skin, if used to cover drums, makes drumbeats that can be heard a hundred *li* away. When it's ten thousand years old, a drum dragon will shed its shell and become a regular dragon. This shell has twenty-four ribs, matching the twenty-four solar terms.

Within the joint of every rib is a large pearl. If the ribs are not fully grown, the drum dragon doesn't get to be a regular dragon, nor is it able to shed its shell. If it's captured at this time, the most valuable thing about it is its skin, for drumheads, since no pearls have formed in its ribs. You need to wait until all twenty-four ribs are fully grown, the pearls are fully formed, and the drum dragon sheds its shell and goes away as a dragon. A shell that's shed naturally in the ripeness of time with fully grown ribs is different from the immature shell of a captured drum dragon. That's why it's so large. We all know this fact, but we have no idea when the shell will be shed and where to wait for the right moment. The shell is worth nothing, but the luminous pearls are priceless. It's my good fortune to have stumbled onto it through no planning of my own."

The men were skeptical. The host went to the interior of the house, and after he reemerged, all smiles, he fished an object wrapped in a piece of Western-made cloth out of his sleeve. "Please take a look, everyone!" said he. The parcel was then unwrapped to reveal a large, dazzling pearl about one inch in diameter nestled on a cotton pad. He asked for a black lacquer tray, put the pearl on it, and set the tray in a dark spot. The pearl kept rolling, emitting a circle of light that extended for more than a foot around. Everyone stared, mouths agape, eyes popping and tongues protruding. The host turned around and thanked the men one by one, saying, "I'm much obliged to you all for having pulled off the deal. In my country, just one such pearl is worth the price I paid. The rest of them are all your gifts to me."

Everyone's heart pounded, but none of them could go back on his word. Observing the slight change of color on everyone's face, the Persian host took back the pearl, rushed inside, and had a trunk carried out. It was filled with lengths of silk. He gave each man, except Wen Ruoxu, two lengths of silk, saying, "As a small token of my gratitude to every one of you for your help, here's some silk that you can use to make a couple of robes." Then he produced more than ten strings of small pearls from his sleeves and, giving one string to each man, said, "This is a trifle, just enough for you to exchange for a cup of tea on your way home." Wen Ruoxu got four strings of larger pearls and eight bolts of silk, with which to make some clothes, as the host put it. Wen Ruoxu and the others thanked him in delight.

Accompanied by the men, the host took Wen Ruoxu to the fabric shop, assembled all the employees to introduce them to Wen, and said, "This is your new master." The host then took leave of everyone, saying, "I need to go attend to my store."

Soon, dozens of porters appeared, carrying the ten barrels and five boxes with Wen Ruoxu's seals. Wen Ruoxu had everything carried to a secluded bedchamber and then came out and said to his fellow travelers, "I'm ever so thankful to you all for taking me on a journey that has brought me this unexpected wealth." Having said that, he went in again and emptied the bag of silver coins that he had acquired by selling the Dongting tangerines. He then gave each man ten coins. Big Zhang and two or three other men got an extra ten each because they had helped him out with money before the boat set sail. "A token of my gratitude," said Wen. (MC: *Definitely not a mean person.*) By this time, this amount of money no longer meant much to him, but the recipients were delighted and thanked him profusely. Picking up another few dozen coins, he said to Big Zhang, "May I trouble you to give one to each of the people going back with you on the boat, just to buy a cup of tea? (MC: *This kindhearted man deserves his good fortune.*) After I've settled down, I'll go back to my hometown, but for now, I bid you farewell."

Big Zhang said, "What about the one-thousand-tael commission? You need to divide that among us so that there will be no cause for complaint."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that!" said Wen Ruoxu. After consulting everyone, he put aside one hundred taels for those on the boat, and the remaining nine hundred taels were divided equally among the people present plus two extra shares, one for Big Zhang as the leader and the other for Chu Zhongyin, who drafted the contract.

Everyone was immensely pleased. There was not a single word of complaint. One man said, "That Muslim got the best deal! Mr. Wen should think of a way to make him cough up more!"

"One should learn to be content," said Wen Ruoxu. "I was a luckless one. I lost everything in whatever business I turned my hand to. And then, when my time came, this windfall just landed in my lap. (MC: *He is not at all prone to greed.*) It's thus clear that everything is predestined in this life. Don't ask for the impossible. If our host had not recognized the turtle shell's value, I would have taken it as a worthless thing. I can't thank him enough for his guidance. How can I go against my conscience and squeeze him for more?"

Everyone said, "You're right, Mr. Wen. It's your kindness and honesty that earned you these riches." With profuse thanks, they put together their gifts and boarded the boat to attend to their own business.

Later, Wen Ruoxu became a rich merchant in the Fujian region, married, and started a family there. Once every few years, he took a trip to Suzhou to

see his old acquaintances before returning to Fujian. To this day, his family line thrives and enjoys immense wealth. Truly,

*When your luck goes, even gold glitters no more.
When your time comes, even iron takes on luster.
Don't talk about dreams with the deluded,
For they will try to find turtle shells overseas.*

Yao Dizhu Flees from Disgrace Only to Incur More Disgrace

Zheng Yue'e Uses a Mistake to Advance Her Own Interests

I N the words of a quatrain:

*No two hearts have ever been alike,
Just as is the case with faces.
But even when the faces look the same,
The hearts may well be worlds apart.*

It is said that the greatest difference among people is in their looks. Being born to different parents from different family lines, how in the world could they look exactly the same? Even in the case of birth brothers or twins, they may look identical at first glance, but on closer examination, one can always detect slight dissimilarities. And yet, strange as it may sound, two entirely unrelated people may just happen to look exactly alike and can easily pass themselves off as each other. It is recorded in official histories that Confucius was once assaulted by local people in the Kuang area [in the ancient state of Wei] because he was mistaken for Yang Hu, who had done them harm. This is a case of an evil man resembling a sage. But the reverse can also be true. As a *chuanqi* dramatic piece has it, Zhou Jian, a retainer serving Lord Zhao Shuo, saved his master by posing as him and killing himself.

This is a case of a lowly vassal resembling a nobleman. Why such resemblances occur is a mystery beyond anyone's comprehension.

According to *Supplement to Records of West Lake*, a look-alike impostor in the Song dynasty managed to enjoy more than ten years of riches and grandeur until her identity finally came to light. The story takes place in the reign of Jingkang [1126] when the capital city Bianliang fell to the Jurchens, and Emperor Qinzong and his father, Emperor Huizong, were both captured and taken as prisoners to the Jurchen territories in the north. Among their fellow prisoners were many imperial consorts and princesses, including Princess Roufu, daughter of Emperor Qinzong. Later, Prince Zhao Gou proclaimed himself emperor (Emperor Gaozong) after crossing the Yangzi River and changed the reign title to Jianyan [1127–30].

In the fourth year of this new reign period, a woman presented herself at court and asked for an audience with the emperor, claiming that she was none other than Princess Roufu, there at the court because she had managed to escape from the barbarians. Emperor Gaozong was skeptical. He wondered, "How could she have made her escape with her tiny bound feet, while none of the many officials in captivity have been able to do so?" Thereupon, he issued a decree, ordering those palace maids who knew the princess to check her identity.

Every one of them reported back, "This is indeed Her Highness." To all questions about past events in the old palace in Bianliang, the woman gave correct answers, and she even provided the names and backgrounds of several people who had served in the previous court. There was only one problem: her feet were much too big.

The maids commented, "Her Highness back then had such tiny feet, nothing like what she has now. That's the only difference."

After being thus informed, the emperor went to the reception room to see for himself, and, sure enough, he also became convinced of her identity as the princess. Nevertheless, he pressed her with one more question, "What happened to your feet?"

Bursting into sobs, the woman said, "Those stinking barbarians treated us like beasts of burden. After I slipped away at the first opportunity, I walked barefoot for almost ten thousand *li* until I arrived here. How can I be expected to keep my feet as tiny and delicate as before?" (MC: *Her tale of woe does sound convincing*.)

Saddened by her words, the emperor issued a special imperial edict, conferring on her the title First Princess of Fuguo, and married her, beneath her

status, to Gao Shiqi, who was thus promoted to commandant-escort. The edict was drafted by Wang Longxi, who included the following lines:

*In the confusion of defeat at Pengcheng,
Sadly, Luyuan was kicked out of her father's carriage.
When the court revived east of the Yangzi River,
Yishou was matched with a princess.*

“Luyuan” refers to Princess Luyuan, daughter of Emperor Gaodi of the Han dynasty [r. 206–195 BCE]. She had been lost in the confusion of the battle at Pengcheng but was found later. “Yishou” was the childhood courtesy name of Xie Hun [d. 412], who was married, above his status, to the daughter of Emperor Yuandi of the Jin dynasty [Emperor Xiaowu of the Jin dynasty (r. 373–96)] after the regime was reestablished southeast of the Yangzi River. These two cases closely resemble that of the royal couple of our story, who got to enjoy wealth and distinction, with more imperial favors showered on them than they could ever count.

Meanwhile, Emperor Gaozong's mother, Lady Wei, titled Virtuous Imperial Consort, remained a captive in the north. The emperor gave her the grand title Illustrious Benevolent Empress Dowager and paid exorbitant ransoms in gold and jewelry for her year after year. After a peace treaty was signed, the empress dowager was finally released and sent back in the twelfth year of the Shaoxing reign period [1142]. When she was told that Princess Roufu was about to pay her a visit, she was appalled. “What?” she cried. “Roufu died in captivity long ago. The suffering was too much for her, and I was there when she died. Where does this Roufu come from? She must be an impostor!” An edict was sent to the Department of Justice, directing it to interrogate the suspect under torture.

The Department of Justice complied. Unable to withstand the torture, the woman confessed: “I used to make a living practicing sorcery in Bianliang. When the city fell to the Jurchens, a palace maid who went into hiding among the commoners called me “Princess Roufu.” I was puzzled and asked her why she addressed me that way. She said that I looked exactly like the princess. That was when I got the idea. Every day, I asked her what life in the palace was like, and she told me something every day until I learned all the details by heart and had the temerity to pass myself off as the princess in order to live the life of royalty. I thought there would never be any witnesses against me. Who could have foreseen that the empress dowager would make

it back! So much for my good fortune! My number is up, but it has all been worthwhile.” She was duly found guilty.

On reading the confession, the emperor burst into angry words, calling her a vile woman guilty of *lèse-majesté*. She was immediately taken under guard to the marketplace and executed, and all her property was confiscated. The gifts she had received from the emperor were worth a total of 470,000 strings of cash. Although death overtook her, she had nevertheless managed to enjoy a life of luxury for more than ten years. Her resemblance to the real princess had fooled everyone, including the princess’s kith and kin. Had the empress dowager not returned, who would have suspected her of being an impostor? Even if she had died earlier, before the empress dowager’s return, she still would have lived a life that she was not entitled to. Since this was an evil deed that Heaven would not tolerate, its exposure was only to be expected.

I shall now tell another story of mistaken identity, a case that leads to a complicated and bizarre lawsuit. Verily:

*Only siblings are supposed to look alike,
But by chance, strangers may look alike, too.
Look at the identical faces of two Dizhus;
They differ only inside, in their hearts.*

Our story takes place in the reign of Emperor Wanli [r. 1573–1620] of this dynasty [Ming]. There lived in Suntian Village of Xiuning County in Huizhou Prefecture a Mr. Yao and his wife, whose daughter, named Dizhu [Silver Bead], was as pretty as a flower and as fair as jade. At sixteen years of age, she was the most beautiful girl in the area, and her wealthy and over-protective parents pampered and doted on her. She was married, through the mediation of a matchmaker, to a Pan Jia of Tunxi.

It seems that, of all the words spoken in this world of ours, those of a matchmaker should be given the least credit. If she wants to make someone out to be poor, even Shi Chong could be reduced to sheer poverty. If she means to present someone as rich, even Fan Dan could appear to be wallowing in luxury.¹ Indeed, whether one is rich or poor, handsome or ugly, all depends on how the matchmaker wags her well-oiled tongue. You can hardly expect anything that bears even a remote resemblance to the truth from her.

The Pans of Tunxi were an old family of distinguished lineage but had fallen on hard times. Their men had to leave home to make a living outside,

while the women needed to do all the domestic chores themselves, including fetching water from the well and husking rice with mortar and pestle. No one in the family could afford to stay idle. Although quite a decent man with passable good looks, Pan Jia had abandoned scholarly pursuits to engage in trade. In addition, both Mr. Pan Senior and his wife were ruthless and tyrannical, prone to throwing verbal abuses at their daughter-in-law upon the slightest provocation.

Dizhu's parents, giving full credit to the matchmaker's rhetoric, had taken the Pans to be a good family and married their beloved daughter into it. The bride and the groom turned out to be a loving couple, but now that she had seen how impoverished the family was, Dizhu began to feel distressed and shed many a furtive tear. Her anguish was not lost on Pan Jia, but he could do no more than comfort her with kind words to make her life a little easier.

Two months into the marriage, Mr. Pan Senior began to show his son the rough edge of his tongue: "The way you indulge yourselves in marital love! What do you think you're going to live on? Why can't you go out to do some trading?" In frustration, Pan Jia told Dizhu about this. The young couple dissolved into a flood of tears and talked the whole night through.

The very next day, Mr. Pan Senior drove his son out of the house. Left alone, Dizhu felt all the more listless and miserable. She who had enjoyed a sheltered life just could not get the hang of how to do chores in this new environment. And so she did everything wrong and then felt sorry for herself all day long. Displeased by her gloominess, her parents-in-law hurled insults at her every so often, saying, "That slut must be suffering from love-sickness for some lover of hers!" Dizhu's own parents had always cherished her like a priceless pearl in their palms. When had she ever been exposed to such abusive language? Not daring to talk back, she swallowed the humiliation each time and shed many a furtive tear.

One morning, Dizhu happened to rise a little too late to serve breakfast to her parents-in-law at the usual hour. Mr. Pan Senior lashed out, "That slut likes to eat but not to work! She sleeps in until the sun is way up in the sky. Only a prostitute can afford to lead such a carefree and leisurely life, selling her charms to her patrons. This is no way to run a decent home."

"I *am* from a decent family," said Dizhu. "Even if I've done something wrong, you don't have to insult me like this!" Then she burst into a violent fit of crying, but she found no sympathetic ear. Unable to sleep at night, she stayed awake in mounting anger. "That hateful old man! How can he be so

unfair to me? This is more than I can bear. Why don't I go back home to tell my parents about this? They can reason with him face-to-face about whether those words of his were called for or not. What's more, I'll get to stay with my parents longer and be spared this misery for a while." So she made up her mind.

She got up at daybreak the next morning and, without bothering to do a proper toilette, threw a silk scarf over her head and headed straight for the ferry. If this storyteller had been born in the same year and grown up with her and known that something untoward would happen to her, I would have seized her around the waist or yanked her back. That way, nothing would have happened.

The hour was still early, with very few people up and about. All was quiet at the ferry. Now, in that part of town, there was a depraved character always up to no good. His name was Wang Xi, nickname "Maggot in the Snow," meaning he was tough enough to withstand cold and hunger. It was Dizhu's misfortune to cross paths with him as he was poling his bamboo raft to the ferry. Catching sight of such a flower of a young woman standing alone on the bank with her hair disheveled and her cheeks tear-stained, he realized something must have happened to her.

"Do you want to cross the river, madam?" he asked, standing on the raft.

"Yes, I do," she said.

"In that case, please get on to my raft. Watch your step!" So saying, he reached out a hand to help her board.

Once she was on board, he poled the raft away and kept poling until they reached a secluded spot. "Madam, which family are you from? Where are you going all alone?" he asked.

"I'm going to my parents' home in Suntian Village," replied Dizhu. "You only need to take me across the river. I know my way home. Why ask me irrelevant questions?"

"The way I see it, if a young woman with messy hair, unwashed face, and teary eyes is traveling alone, there must be something going on. I'll ferry you across only if you tell me what it is."

Being in the middle of the river and anxious to go home, she had no choice but to tell him, through her sobs, how she had been badly treated while her husband was away. An idea came to Wang Xi as he listened. He turned around and said, "If that's the case, then I can't ferry you across. You must be up to something. If I let you go ashore, you'll either run away or kill yourself,

or you may be kidnapped. When they eventually find out that I'm the one who ferried you across, I'll be falsely charged for your disappearance."

"Nonsense!" said Dizhu. "I'm going to my parents. How can you say I'm running away? If I wanted to kill myself, why didn't I throw myself into the river earlier? Why would I have to wait until you ferry me across before I kill myself? I know my way to my parents' home. Nobody's going to kidnap me!"

"But I still don't believe you," said Wang Xi. "If you're really going to your parents, you can stay in my house nearby while I go to your parents and have them send someone over to pick you up. That way, both sides can be spared worry."

She agreed. "All right. That's just as well." Being a woman with little worldly knowledge and in such a helpless position, too, she stood no chance of winning the argument. Assuming that he was full of good intentions, she followed him.

They went ashore, and after many twists and turns, they reached a house. After walking through several gates, they arrived at a courtyard with charming, quiet halls. Behold:

*Bright windows and clean tables,
Brocade curtains and patterned carpets,
In the courtyard, potted flowers,
In the hallway, unadorned chairs.
On the walls, scrolls by artist Zhou Zhimian,
On the tables, ceramic teapots by Master Shi Dabin.²
Although a small dwelling, not a mansion of wealthy noblemen,
With its quiet and winding paths, it was no commoners' house.*

This place was one of Wang Xi's hideouts, to which he regularly spirited off women from decent families. Claiming that they were his relatives, he would lure licentious men to the house. The couples might spend brief moments of pleasure together, or if they became mutually infatuated, the place could serve as their love nest. All this meant piles of silver for Wang Xi.

As for women with no strong family connections, he would sell them to middlemen willing to pay a high price, who in turn would sell them to brothels. An old hand in this line of work, he had sensed Dizhu's vulnerability and therefore had conceived the evil idea of tricking her into entering the house.

Dizhu was from a respectable and well-to-do family accustomed to a quiet and leisurely lifestyle. With her parents-in-law as abusive as they were, she found it too much of a headache to devote her days to dealing with cooking oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar, not to mention heavier household chores such as starting a kitchen fire, cooking, and carrying water. (MC: *Poor thing!*) Not suspecting any lurking danger, she took a liking to this clean and exquisite house. Seeing that Dizhu was delighted instead of frightened, Wang Xi burned with irrepressible desire. He went up to her, knelt down, and asked for sexual favors.

“How dare you!” Her face fell. “I’m from a good family. You said that I could stay in your house while you go to my parents’ house to deliver a message. But in fact this is abduction, and you’re now trying to compromise me, and all this in broad daylight, too! If you keep pushing me, I’ll kill myself here and now!” So saying, she grabbed an iron pick used to light a lamp from the table and pointed it at her throat.

Horried, Wang Xi stopped her, saying, “Take it easy. I give up!” It turned out that Wang Xi, in his shady business, was more interested in profit than sex. He was afraid of letting a good transaction slip through his fingers if Dizhu did what she said she would do. So his sudden lustful urge vanished without a trace.

He went into a back room and, after a good while, reemerged with an old woman. “Mother Wang,” he said to the old woman, “please stay here to keep this young lady company while I go to her home to let her parents know where she is.”

Before he took off, Dizhu stopped him and gave him directions to her home as well as her parents’ names (IC: *Poor thing.*), adding, “Be sure to ask them to come as soon as possible. I’ll have a handsome reward for you.”

After Wang Xi left, the old woman brought in a basin of water and some toilet articles for Dizhu. While she was doing her toilette, the old woman kept staring at her before finally asking, “Young lady, whose wife are you? Why are you here?” Whereupon Dizhu gave her a detailed account of what had happened to her. After hearing the story, the old woman stamped her foot in a show of anger and said, “Those old scoundrels! They don’t know a good girl when they see one! They don’t deserve such a beautiful daughter-in-law. (IC: *She’s getting to her point.*) Instead of feeling unworthy, they have the nerve to heap insults on you. How could you live with such people for even one day?”

These words touched Dizhu in a sensitive spot, and her eyes misted over. The old woman continued, "Now where do you plan to go?"

"I'm going home to tell my parents about how they mistreat me," said Dizhu. "And then I'll stay with my parents until my husband returns."

"When will your husband come back home?"

Dizhu said tearfully, "He was yelled at and driven out only two months after the wedding day. Who knows when he'll come back? It's hard to say."

"This is outrageous! They make a grass widow of such a flower of a girl, and there's all that verbal abuse, too! (IC: *Another attempt to poison her mind.*) Young lady, don't blame me if I'm too intrusive, but it doesn't solve the problem if you stay at your parents' home temporarily. Eventually, you'll have to go back to your parents-in-law. Can you hide in your own parents' house for the rest of your life? Your troubles aren't going to end any time soon. What are you going to do about them?"

"That's my fate," said Dizhu in resignation. "There's nothing I can do."

"In my humble opinion," suggested the old woman, "there is a way for you to enjoy a happy life."

"And what might that be?" said Dizhu.

"I associate with wealthy and distinguished families who have a good supply of handsome and refined young gentlemen. You don't have to do the asking. All you need to do is pick one to your liking. After I talk the man into it, he'll cherish you like a treasure. Yours will be an easy and comfortable life, with food, clothing, and everything else provided, and all work will be done by maidservants. You won't have to do a thing. This is the kind of life worthy of a flower of a girl like you. It will be a million times better than that of an abused grass widow and maid rolled into one."

Being a young woman averse to undergoing hardships and without a mind of her own, Dizhu felt tempted as she recalled the many unpleasant-ries at her husband's home. (IC: *It's no surprise that she felt tempted. Pitiable.*) However, she said, "I'm afraid that won't work. What if this were to become known?" (IC: *She's giving in.*)

"No stranger would dare show up here," said the old woman. "This is a hush-hush place. Not a soul knows about it. After you stay here for a couple of days, you won't want to live anywhere else, not even in heaven."

"But I've already sent the raftsmen to my parents' home," said Dizhu.

"He's my adopted son," said the old woman. "How silly of him, delivering such a stupid message!"

At this point, a man suddenly walked in from outside. He grabbed the old woman and said, "Well, well! Coaxing a married woman into adultery, and in broad daylight, too! (IC: *Putting on a good show.*) I'll report you to the authorities!"

Dizhu was shocked, but on taking a closer look, she found the man to be none other than the raftsmen Wang Xi. "Did you deliver my message to my parents?" she asked him. (IC: *Poor thing!*)

"To hell with your message! I've been listening to your conversation all this time. Mother Wang's plan is perfect any way you look at it. It's good enough for your lifelong enjoyment. Think it over."

Dizhu heaved a sigh, saying, "Now that I've walked into a trap in my desperation, I have no other choice. I only hope you won't let me down." (IC: *She surrenders.*)

The old woman said, "As I said before, you're free to pick and choose a willing young man. How could I let you down?"

Feeling helpless, Dizhu found the old woman's eloquence quite convincing. Moreover, the rooms were exquisitely decorated, with nice bedding and drapes. In a surge of relief, she decided to stay on in this secluded place to, as a poem puts it,

*Enjoy moments of leisure in this floating life
While chatting with the hermit over the bamboo fence.*

The old woman and Wang Xi danced attendance on her and waited on her hand and foot, offering her tea, water, and whatnot, anxious lest she find their services wanting. Dizhu was so delighted that her unpleasant memories completely evaporated.

The next day, out on the streets, Wang Xi ran into a Wu Dalang [Big Fellow], an immensely wealthy man in the Shangshan area of the same county. A millionaire and a philanderer, Wu Dalang supported a network of hangers-on, Wang Xi among them.

"Have you discovered any new fun places lately?" asked Dalang.

"For your information, sir, one of my nieces was recently widowed. She's a ravishing beauty but has not found a new match yet. She's the right stuff for you, but the price may be a little high."

"May I have a look?" asked Dalang.

"Of course," replied Wang Xi. "The only thing is that she's shy because she's from a good family. Let me go back first, and when I'm talking with her

in the main hall, you can just come in unannounced and look your fill.” Dalang agreed.

When he returned, Wang Xi saw Dizhu sitting in her room, lost in thought. “Why don’t you go to the main hall, madam?” he asked. “Why stay holed up in your room?”

On hearing him, Mother Wang walked up from behind and said, “That’s right. Madam, come and take a seat outside.” As Dizhu obediently walked out into the main hall, Wang Xi surreptitiously bolted the door of her room.

Sitting down, Dizhu said, “Auntie, it would be better to let me go home.” (IC: *Too late now.*)

“Be patient, please,” said Mother Wang. “We ask you to stay here because we love your charming looks and personality, and we don’t have the heart to see you suffer hardships. (IC: *Sugar-coated words to pluck at her heart-strings.*) Just wait a little longer, and I’m sure you’ll meet a man after your own heart.”

While they were talking, a man burst in on them. How was he dressed? Behold:

He is wearing

*A roof-shaped hat made of bamboo strips
With a golden amber pendant on each side,
A blue velvet robe with a narrow collar and broad sleeves,
A pair of low-heeled shoes with low uppers of red silk.
If he does not look like Song Yu walking along the wall,
He must be Pan An in his carriage.³*

The man walked straight into the main hall and asked, “Is Little Wang home?”

Startled, Dizhu rose immediately to get out of the newcomer’s way, but not quickly enough to be out of his line of sight. She then rushed to the door leading to her own room, only to find it bolted—Wang Xi had bolted it stealthily when she first walked into the main hall. Thus cornered, she grew frantic.

Mother Wang, however, said with a smile, “Oh, it’s the venerable Squire Wu! (IC: *A typical smooth-talking procuress.*) Why did you come in unannounced?” Turning to Dizhu, she continued, “He’s a regular patron of ours. He’s all right.” Then she said to Wu Dalang, “Now come and meet this young lady.”

His hands folded before him, Wu Dalang greeted her with a deep bow. Dizhu could not do otherwise than return the greeting with a curtsy. Stealing a glance at him, she found him to be a handsome and attractive young man and instantly took more than a little liking to him. Wu Dalang, on the other hand, looked her over from head to toe and saw that her unadorned and unassuming natural beauty distinguished her from women of the pleasure quarters. A veteran in the world of love, he was quite a judge of women, and he was impressed. Melting with desire, he said, "Please take a seat, young lady."

Being from a respectable family after all, Dizhu felt embarrassed and turned to Mother Wang for help. "Let's go inside," said she.

"Don't be so bashful!" said Mother Wang as she walked Dizhu to her room. (IC: *How interesting that Dizhu no longer resists.*) She returned shortly thereafter and asked Wu Dalang, "How do you find her?"

"If you can bring this off for me, I'll never forget your kindness."

"You're rich enough," Mother Wang replied. "Why don't you take out a thousand taels and marry her?"

"She's not from a house of pleasure. Why is she so expensive?"

"That's not expensive at all," said Mother Wang. "Isn't such a charming young lady worth one thousand taels as a concubine?"

"Money isn't a problem," said Dalang. "But my wife is a holy terror and a bully. Not that I'm afraid of her (IC: *He's just afraid of her big mouth.*), but she may come down hard on a concubine. So I can't take her home."

"But that can easily be taken care of," said Mother Wang. "You can rent a house for her. Won't it be nice for you to have two wives in two separate houses? The other day, the Jiangs said that they would like to rent out a vacant house with a garden. I can ask them about it for you. What do you think?"

"Sounds good," said Dalang. "But if I rent a house, I'll need to hire new servants and maids and set up another kitchen. And this isn't the worst part compared with what will happen when, not if, the secret leaks out. My wife will make one scene after another demanding to share the new house. And that will be a disaster."

"I have another suggestion," said Mother Wang. "You pay the betrothal money and hold the wedding ceremony right here. Each month, you pay me a few taels of silver to cover the expenses, and I'll wait on her and keep her company. You can tell your wife that you have business to attend to and come here as often as you can manage. Everything will be hush-hush. Won't that be nice?"

"That will be wonderful!" Dalang burst out laughing.

They settled on eight hundred taels of silver as betrothal money. New clothes and jewelry to be purchased and delivered in due time came to about another thousand taels of silver. The monthly expenses and rent amounted to ten taels of silver, to be paid once a month. After accepting all these terms, Wu Dalang scurried off to get his money.

Mother Wang returned to Dizhu's room and asked her, "How do you like that gentleman's looks?"

It so happened that although she had been bashful at first and returned to her own room, her thoughts were still with him. Hiding herself in the shadows, she kept peeping out and got quite an eyeful of him. In the meantime, Wu Dalang was keeping an eye on Dizhu's door while talking with Mother Wang and, from time to time, caught sight of her half-hidden face. Had there been no one else around, and had they not been total strangers to each other, they would have been in each other's arms then and there. Now that Mother Wang was asking about her impression of him, Dizhu answered with a casual question, "What family is he from?"

"He's from the famous Wu clan of Shangshan in Huizhou Prefecture. He's none other than Squire Wu, or Millionaire Wu, the number one rich man of the Wu clan! He was quite smitten with you. He'd love to take you home as his wife, but he can't very well do that because of certain inconveniences. So he's planning to marry you and take up residence right here in this house. What do you say?"

Dizhu liked that nice, clean room to begin with. This, coupled with the fact that she was also smitten with Wu Dalang, made her feel as if she now had a home to call her own. Her heart filled with delight, she said, "Since I'm already here, I'm entirely at your disposal. I only hope everything will be done discreetly and no word of this will get out." (IC: *Important point.*)

"How would this ever get out?" said Mother Wang. "But you yourself must also keep mum about it! Even after you get to know each other well, you still shouldn't tell him the whole story. Otherwise, he'll look down on you. Just pretend to be my relative and enjoy him in privacy."

Soon, Wu Dalang arrived at Wang Xi's house in a sedan-chair, followed by two good-looking page boys, each holding a gift box in his hand. After delivering the payment in silver, Wu Dalang asked, "When will my wedding day be?"

"It's up to you, Squire," said Mother Wang. "You may choose an auspicious date, but you don't have to. It can be this very evening if you like."

"Staying here tonight would be imprudent of me because I didn't leave word with my family. I can come over tomorrow on the excuse that I need to take a trip to Hangzhou to make incense offerings and collect debts. Why even bother to choose a date?"

Wu Dalang the debaucher was too impatient to pick a date. But for an occasion as momentous as a wedding, consultation with the calendar is hardly dispensable. (IC: *This sarcastic commentary has a comic touch.*) His rash move must have offended some evil spirits, which was why their cohabitation came to an end in just a couple of years. But these events still lie ahead of us.

To get on with our story: His account settled, Wu Dalang took himself off, eagerly anticipating the pleasures of the next day. Mother Wang, after consulting Wang Xi, went up to Dizhu and said, "Congratulations, young lady! Mission accomplished!" She took out four hundred taels of silver (IC: *This is all that matters to her.*) and said, all smiles, "It's eight hundred taels altogether. Half of it goes to you, and the other half is divided equally into two shares for Wang Xi and me as our service fees." So saying, she laid out the glittering silver on the table, much to Dizhu's delight as well.

But, storyteller, you are quite mistaken! Procurers are as hungry for money as flies are for blood. How could these two be so fair-minded and generous as to give half of it to Dizhu?

Dear audience, let me explain. First of all, Mother Wang was trying to show off in order to impress Dizhu. Second, Dizhu's share of the silver remained in the house after all. It wouldn't go off on its own. She could easily coax the girl to give the silver back, bit by bit, until it was all back in her possession. If Dizhu didn't receive a share, she would most probably tell Wu Dalang the truth later on after they came to know each other well, and if Dalang should demand a refund, wouldn't the old woman be put in a bad light? You see, this procuress had ingenious tricks up her sleeve.

The next day, Wu Dalang, dressed in all his finery, came to Wang Xi's house for the wedding. In order to keep it sub rosa, he dispensed with attendants and musicians. He only had Wang Xi prepare a feast for two tables and asked Dizhu to dine with him before they entered the bedroom together.

Dizhu was so bashful at first that she refused to come out, but she gave in after repeated entreaties. She managed to remain seated at the table for a short while and then excused herself and went back to her bedroom. She blew out the lamp and went to bed by herself, leaving the door unbolted.

"She's still a shy little girl," said Mother Wang to Wu Dalang. "Let's humor her." Holding a lamp in her hand, she ushered Wu Dalang into the bedroom, lit the lamp there, went out, and closed the door behind her. Wu Dalang was a meticulous man. He bolted the door and carried the lamp to the bedside. When he pushed aside the bed curtain, he saw Dizhu sleeping with her face covered. So as not to disturb her, he quietly took off his clothes, blew out the lamp, and slid in under the quilt. (IC: *He is an old hand at this business.*)

Dizhu heaved a sigh, and curled herself up. (IC: *Vivid description.*) Whispering honeyed words in her ear, Wu Dalang gently turned her around and mounted her with agility. Quivering all over, she let him have his way.

The truth of the matter is that although Dizhu had been married for two months, she had never experienced such sensual pleasure, because her husband, Pan Jia, was no expert. Wu Dalang, in contrast, was an old hand in the world of love, and his affection and tenderness in bed need not be described here. Dizhu only wished that she had met him earlier, and the two continued their amorous sport until daybreak.

The next morning, Mother Wang and Wang Xi came to offer their congratulations, and Wu Dalang rewarded them both. Henceforth he spent most of his time in this place with Dizhu, wallowing in pleasure, and paid brief visits to his home only once every month or two. But we will say no more of this for the moment.

Storyteller! How could the Pans do nothing about their daughter-in-law's absence, thus effectively giving her license to enjoy herself with another man?

Dear audience, this story has two threads. I can't very well pursue both of them simultaneously, can I? Now let us turn to the Pan family. Early that morning, after Dizhu's departure, Mrs. Pan didn't see Dizhu preparing breakfast in the kitchen, as she was expected to do. Assuming that she had overslept again, Mrs. Pan went to her bedroom door and called out Dizhu's name in a loud, harsh voice. Not hearing any response, she walked into the room and pushed open the windows in the screen, only to find an empty bed.

"Where did that slut go?" she yelled and went out to tell Mr. Pan.

"She's up to some funny business again!" he said. "Maybe she's gone to her parents."

He hurried to the ferry crossing to make inquiries about her. Someone told him, "I saw a woman ferrying across the river very early this morning."

Another person who knew Dizhu said that the woman seen on the raft was indeed the Pan family's daughter-in-law.

"What a willful girl!" said Mr. Pan. "I gave her only a little lecture yesterday, and she had to fly off to tell her parents about it. Well, let her stay there with them. I'm not going to take her back. Let's see what she's going to do next!" In a huff, he returned to tell his wife about it.

About ten days later, the Yaos, who missed their daughter, prepared a few boxes of homemade pastries and had two servants, one male and the other female, carry them to the Pan family to inquire after Dizhu. Mr. Pan told them, "She went to your place about ten days ago. Why are you here, asking me about her?"

"What are you talking about?" The servants were quite taken aback. "It's been only two months since she came to your house, and we've never sent for her. How could she have returned home on her own? Her parents sent us here to ask about her because they're concerned. And now you're turning the tables on us!"

"The other day when I had a few harsh words for her, she got so angry that she left for her parents' home," said Mr. Pan. "Some people saw her at the ferry. Where else could she possibly have gone, if not to her parents' house?"

"But she didn't return home. Those people must have seen the wrong person at the ferry," said the servants.

Mr. Pan flared up. "She must have told her parents a pack of lies, and her parents want to seek a divorce and marry her to another man. Is this part of your scheme—coming to me and asking about her?"

"She disappeared from your house, but you blame us for it instead," said one of the servants. "There must be something fishy going on."

On hearing the words "something fishy," Mr. Pan flew into a rage. "You swine! I'll report this to the authorities, and let's see if you can back out of the marriage!"

Seeing that things were taking an ugly turn, the servants went back home quickly without delivering the food boxes.

Mr. and Mrs. Yao were shocked by the servants' report and both burst into loud sobs. "Could those scoundrels have driven our daughter to her death? We need to file a complaint against them and get our daughter back." Losing no time, they engaged legal counsel to prepare an official complaint.

Mr. and Mrs. Pan, in the meantime, fully convinced that the Yaos were hiding Dizhu, called their son back home. The two families lodged written complaints against each other, and the county court accepted the case.

When Magistrate Li of Xiuning County summoned both parties to court, each blamed the other for the missing woman. In a towering rage, Magistrate Li ordered that the squeezers be applied to Mr. Pan first. "Dizhu was seen taking a ferry across the river," explained Mr. Pan. "If she committed suicide by throwing herself into the river, her body should have been found by now. It's obvious that they've hidden their daughter and accused us."

"You're right," said the magistrate. "She's been missing for more than ten days. If she's dead, where's the corpse? She must be in hiding somewhere." So he had the squeezers transferred from Mr. Pan to Mr. Yao.

"My daughter has been living in their house for more than two months without returning even once," said Mr. Yao. "If she had come back home on her own, why in the past ten days or so hasn't Mr. Pan sent someone to our house to inquire after her? A human being is not that easily hidden. If we had hidden her, how could we marry her off to another man without anyone knowing about it? I submit all this to Your Honor for consideration."

After some reflection, the magistrate said, "You've also got a point. It's true that you can't hide her. Even if you could, what purpose would that serve? Most probably she eloped with a lover." (IC: *He's onto something.*)

Mr. Pan said, "My daughter-in-law may be lazy and spoiled, but I keep a strict household. I've never seen any signs of her carrying on an affair."

"If so," said the magistrate, "she may have been kidnapped (IC: *Bravo!*) or be in hiding at a relative's house, for all we know." Turning to Mr. Yao, he continued, "You failed to raise your daughter properly, and as her father, you should know where she is. You can't shirk your responsibility. You must look for her and report to the police once every five days." Mr. Pan and his son were released on bail, whereas Mr. Yao, with his arms trussed up, was taken out of the court under guard. (MC: *Mr. Pan should not be let go.*)

With his daughter missing, Mr. Yao was already in agony, and now that he was being treated so unfairly by the magistrate, he could call out to no one but heaven and earth for help. He had missing-person posters put up everywhere, offering handsome rewards to anyone with information. But all his efforts were of no avail. As for Pan Jia, who had lost his wife, he found himself unable to vent his frustration on anyone and went to the magistrate once every five days for an update. (IC: *He is an innocent victim.*) And each time he did so, Mr. Yao was punished with the bamboo rod. This caused quite a stir throughout Xiuning County, and the story gained wide circulation around the towns and villages. Mr. Yao's relatives, although sympathetic to him, could do nothing for him.

Let us turn our attention to another man, a certain Zhou Shaoxi, who was a close relative of Mrs. Yao's. While on a business trip, he was touring a street of ill fame in Quzhou, Zhejiang, when he saw a prostitute standing in front of a house wearing a coquettish smile on her face. She looked very much like someone he knew. He searched his memory and realized that she looked exactly like Dizhu. (MC: *Such a curious coincidence can be attributed only to karma.*) He said to himself, "The missing-person lawsuit has been dragging on back home for two years now, but here she is!" He was about to go up and ask her but changed his mind on second thought. "No. That won't work. She may not want to tell me the truth. If I confront her, she may be frightened into running away this very evening. A prostitute's life is a life on the road. How would I find her? (IC: *This is a sensible man.*) I'd better tell her family about it and let them come here to get her."

As a matter of fact, Huizhou borders on Quzhou, although the two prefectures are in two different provinces, Zhejiang and the Southern Metropolitan Area, respectively.⁴ Zhou Shaoxi arrived at Xiuning, Huizhou, just a few days later and gave Mr. Yao a detailed account of what he had seen in Quzhou. "She must have been abducted and sold to a brothel by some scoundrel," said Mr. Yao, so he told his son Yao Yi to take one hundred taels of silver and go secretly to Quzhou to redeem Dizhu. Then he added, "What if they refuse to settle in private?" (MC: *This man is as meticulous as Zhou Shaoxi.*) So he reported the matter to the magistrate of Xiuning County, greased a few palms, and obtained an official arrest warrant, so that Yao Yi could bring the case to the local authorities should anything go wrong. Yao Yi duly took the instructions. Mr. Yao then asked Zhou Shaoxi to join his son on the trip, and the two men set out for Quzhou.

In Quzhou, Zhou Shaoxi stayed with his old host and found a tavern for Yao Yi. After Yao Yi had deposited his baggage there, Zhou Shaoxi took him to the brothel, where the woman happened to be standing by the door at that time. To Yao Yi's eyes, she was indeed his sister, but when he called her childhood name several times, she just looked at him with a smile but did not respond to it. "She's definitely my sister," said Yao Yi to Zhou Shaoxi, "but she didn't respond when I called her again and again, as if she didn't know me at all. Can it be that she's too happy here to recognize her own brother?"

"The truth of the matter is that all brothel keepers are vicious and ruthless," explained Zhou Shaoxi. "Since your sister is someone of unknown background, the procuress must have warned her in advance. That's why she dares not recognize you openly."

"How do I pass a message to her?" asked Yao Yi.

"That's easy," said Zhou Shaoxi. (MC: *A resourceful man*.) "You can pretend to be a patron who's interested in her. You order a feast and send one tael of silver for her and a pack of copper coins for the sedan-chair carriers. When she's carried to your tavern, you can identify each other in secret and make plans for the future. If she's not your sister, sleep with her for the night and let her go the next morning."

"Good idea!" said Yao Yi.

Having traveled often to Quzhou, Zhou Shaoxi knew his way around the town. He hired an idler, gave him some silver, and in a trice a sedan-chair was carried up to Yao Yi's tavern. "If she's really his sister," said Zhou Shaoxi to himself, "it would be inappropriate for me to stay here with them." So he made an excuse and took himself off. (MC: *Circumspect in everything he does. A man well versed in the ways of the world*.) Yao Yi, thinking along the same lines, refrained from asking him to stay.

Lo and behold! There came into view a slender, delicate girl stepping down gracefully from the sedan-chair.

*One is eager to see his sister, his eyes fixed on her;
The other is expecting a patron, her face beaming with delight.
He wonders, "Why is she not coming up to call me 'brother'?"
She is puzzled. "Why doesn't he greet me and call me his darling?"*

Yao Yi stepped forward to take a close look at her and was positive that she was none other than his very own sister. But she, all smiles, only dropped a curtsy in an affected manner. Thinking it inappropriate to claim her as his sister at this point, he felt obliged to ask her to take a seat. He said, "May I ask what your name is? And where are you from?"

"My family name is Zheng, and my given name Yue'e [Moon Fairy]. I'm a native of this county," she replied, with a strong Quzhou accent and in a voice quite different from Dizhu's. Doubts began to cross Yao Yi's mind.

"Where are you from, sir?" Zheng Yue'e asked him.

"My family name is Yao, and I'm a native of Suntian Village, Xiuning County, in Huizhou Prefecture. My father is so-and-so and my mother so-and-so" He gave her detailed information about his parents and grandparents, including their places of ancestral origin, as if he was being cross-examined. That way, he thought, she would acknowledge him as her brother if she really was Dizhu.

Zheng Yue'e, for her part, found him too much of a talker. "I didn't ask you about your family background," said she with a smile. "Why bring up your ancestors?" (MC: *This is how sisters talk.*) His face aflame, he realized now that she was not Dizhu.

After the table was set, they drank two or three cups of wine together, face-to-face. Zheng Yue'e was puzzled when she noticed Yao Yi staring at her one moment and muttering to himself the next. "I've never met you before," she said. "But the day before yesterday, you walked back and forth in front of our house and pointed your finger at me. My sisters and I were all amused and laughed up our sleeves. Today I have the honor of being invited here to your place, but you still keep staring at me, as if something is bothering you. May I ask what it is?"

Hemming and hawing, Yao Yi gave evasive answers. Being a smart girl who had seen a great deal of life in her line of work, Zheng Yue'e felt sure that something was afoot. So she pressed him with more questions.

"It's a long story," said Yao Yi. "Let's talk about it in bed." So they got themselves ready and went to bed, where they naturally played a game of clouds and rain.⁵

Then Yue'e resumed her questioning, and this time, Yao Yi saw nothing for it but to give her a detailed account of what had happened back at home. "Because you look so much like her, I pretended to be your client and invited you here in order to make an identification. But now I know that you're not my sister."

"Do I really look like her?" asked Yue'e.

"You're exactly like her in appearance and in the way you carry yourself. But there's a slight difference in expression that can be picked up only by the closest family members, and only if they try hard to look for it. The resemblance is indeed striking. I myself almost took you for my sister, if it hadn't been for your accent."

"Since I look so much like her," she said, "let me be your sister." (MC: *An extraordinary idea from an extraordinary woman.*)

"You must be joking," said Yao Yi.

"I'm not joking," she said. "We need to have a good talk about this. You lost your sister, and the lawsuit will drag on until your sister shows up at the court. I'm the daughter of a local decent family and was married to Scholar Jiang as a concubine. But his wife refused to accept me. Later, even Scholar Jiang himself hardened his heart against me and sold me to Madam Zheng's brothel for profit. The madam and her husband beat me so often that I can't

put up with the abuse anymore and have just been thinking of a way to get out. Now, if you stick to your story that I'm your sister, and I insist that you're my brother, the two of us can go together to the court so they can close the case and order that I return to your family. That way I'll get my freedom and avenge myself, and your legal troubles will be over once I'm in your home as your sister. Won't that be wonderful for everyone?"

"Good idea," said Yao Yi. "The only thing is that you don't sound like my sister at all. What's more, if you join our household, you need to know everything about all our relatives in order to pass yourself off as my sister. But that will be very hard to do."

"What matters is appearance," said Yue'e. "Voices and accents can change and shouldn't be something to go by. (MC: *How true!*) If your sister had really been here in Quzhou for the past two years, she would probably have picked up the local accent. As for your relatives, you can tell me everything about them. And also, since it may take a long time for you to go through all the procedures and wait for the court's decision, we'll be able to stay together long enough for me to learn your dialect. You can also tell me about your household. What's there to worry about?"

Anxious to bring the lawsuit to a conclusion, Yao Yi gave Yue'e's plan some thought and found it quite feasible. "I have an arrest warrant with me," he told her. "If I take it to the authorities for arbitration, their ruling will most likely be in my favor. But you'll have to stick to your story all the way. No slips of the tongue, mind you!"

"This is an opportunity for me to get out of this place. (IC: *Good planning.*) Why would I go back on my word?" she replied. "There's only one thing. What kind of man is your brother-in-law? Will I be able to get along with him?" (IC: *An important point.*)

"He's a traveling merchant and a well-behaved young man. Throwing in your lot with him will do you good." (IC: *He is being heartless and unfeeling.*)

"Whatever happens, it's better to be a married woman than a prostitute," said Yue'e. "Besides, I'll be his one and only wife, not a concubine as I was before. I'll be taken care of."

Then they took an oath together: "The two of us are in this together. (IC: *Important.*) Neither shall betray the other. The one who breaks this oath will be put to death by the gods." With that, they felt even closer to each other and resumed their amorous sport, after which they slept in each other's arms until daybreak. (MC: *Moments of joy amid the stress of all that planning.*)

Yao Yi got up and went straight to Zhou Shaoxi without even bothering to comb his hair. Concealing the truth even from Zhou, he said, "She's indeed my sister. Now, what's to be done next?"

Zhou Shaoxi said, "Brothel owners are a bad lot. The madam will surely turn you down if you try to redeem your sister in private. Let me call together the ten or so Huizhou natives who happen to be staying here, and together we'll submit a petition to the prefect. There's justice in numbers. Besides, you have the arrest warrant from our county with you. The prefect will surely order that she be returned to you. But you need to send a few more taels of silver to the madam and tell her that you'd like to keep the girl for a few more days at your place, so as not to arouse her suspicions while we make preparations."

Yao Yi agreed. Zhou Shaoxi and the group of Huizhou natives whom he had assembled went together with Yao Yi to see the prefect. They stated their case, and Yao Yi presented the Xiuning County arrest warrant to the prefect. After reading it, the prefect immediately issued a summons to bring Madam Zheng and her husband to court. Zheng Yue'e also made an appearance. She claimed that Yao Yi was her brother, and he claimed that she was his sister. Along with Zhou Shaoxi, there were a few other Huizhou natives who also knew Dizhu, and they said in unison, "She is Dizhu!"

Not knowing why he had been summoned all of a sudden, the procurer shouted in protest. "Slap him in the face!" ordered the prefect.

When asked where he had kidnapped the girl from, the brothel owner did not dare hold anything back. "She was a concubine of Scholar Jiang's," he confessed. "She wasn't kidnapped but was bought for eighty taels of silver."

The prefect then sent for Scholar Jiang, but the scholar, with his guilty conscience, had gone into hiding to evade the legal proceedings.

The prefect then ruled that Yao Yi pay the procurer forty taels of silver as ransom money and take his sister back home. The brothel owner was duly punished for having forced a decent girl into prostitution, and Scholar Jiang was stripped of his scholar status. Thus, Zheng Yue'e was fully vindicated. (IC: *Sheer delight!*)

Jubilantly, Yao Yi took Zheng Yue'e back to his tavern, where they stayed a few more days until the documents were properly filed at the yamen, the ransom money was delivered through the prefectual treasury, and all miscellaneous fees were paid. They then set out on their trip to Huizhou.

During the journey, Yao Yi slept with Zheng Yue'e every night. (IC: *Sheer delight!*) To others, they claimed to be brother and sister, but in private, they

thought of themselves as husband and wife. Their pillow talk turned out to be training sessions, during which she learned everything she needed to know about what to say and how to behave once they got home.

A few days later, when they were approaching Suntain Village, people who saw them clapped their hands, exclaiming, "Good! The lawsuit is finally over!"

Someone rushed back to inform the Yao family, and both parents came out through the gate to greet them. Pretending to know them well, Yue'e went up confidently and addressed them in the way Yao Yi had coached her to do. As an experienced prostitute, Yue'e was a quick learner, capable of adapting herself to different circumstances. Small wonder she managed to deliver a perfect performance.

"My child," Mr. Yao cried, "where have you been these past two years? You have no idea what your poor father has been through!"

Yue'e made a show of choking with sobs. Then, feeling obliged to say something, she asked, "Have Dad and Mom been well these years?"

Hearing that, Mr. Yao said, "Your voice has changed in two years."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Yao grabbed her hand and caressed it, saying, "You didn't have such beautiful long fingernails before you left."

Everyone broke down in tears. Only Yao Yi and Yue'e knew what was afoot. Exhausted by the two-year-long lawsuit, Mr. Yao was so relieved to have his daughter back home that he didn't even bother to look closely at her. The girl bore such a strong resemblance to Dizhu that not a doubt crossed his mind. (IC: *Convincing details*.) As for what she had been doing during the past two years, he felt it would be awkward to ask her for more details, knowing that she had just been ransomed from a brothel. As soon as the much-awaited daybreak came, he sent Yao Yi and the girl to see the county magistrate.

After calling the court session to order and listening to a statement of the case, the magistrate who had been entangled in this case over the past two years immediately caught on. "Who kidnapped you?" he asked the girl.

"I don't know his name. He sold me to Scholar Jiang in Quzhou over my protests, and Scholar Jiang in turn sold me to the brothel. I have no idea where the kidnapper is."

The magistrate knew very well that because Quzhou was administered by another province, it would be difficult to conduct an investigation there. Eager to close the case, he decided not to dig deep. (IC: *He does have a point*.) So he ordered that Pan Jia and his parents be brought to court to claim the girl.

When they arrived and saw her, Mr. and Mrs. Pan exclaimed, "What a good daughter-in-law you've been, staying away from us for so long!"

Pan Jia said, "Lucky me! I finally get to see you!"

And so the girl was accepted as Dizhu by everyone and was taken back home. At the county court gate, the parents of both families apologized to each other in acceptance of their own bad luck. All believed that the case was over, once and for all.

The next morning, when Magistrate Li opened his court session and was about to put the files of the case into the archives, Pan Jia appeared again, saying, "The woman I took home yesterday is not my wife."

The magistrate was furious. "You lowlife! Haven't you had enough of involving your father-in-law in this mess? Why can't you stop making trouble?" He ordered the lictors to drag him down and give him ten strokes of the bamboo rod, (IC: *How unjust!*) but Pan Jia kept crying out in protest. The magistrate said, "The document from Quzhou Prefecture clearly establishes her identity, and it was your brother-in-law who brought her back. Her parents recognized her as their daughter, and you and your parents also made an identification right here in the court and took her home. Why are you singing a different tune now?"

"I filed the lawsuit in order to get *my* wife back, not someone else's wife," said Pan Jia. (IC: *Right!*) "That woman is all too clearly not my wife. I can't take her, and Your Honor can't force me to. If you force me into an act of deception, I'd rather not have a wife."

"How can you be so sure she's not your wife?" asked the magistrate.

"She does look exactly like my wife," said Pan Jia, "but during intimacy, I found her quite different."

"Don't be silly," said the magistrate. "Maybe she's changed because of her brothel experience."

"Not at all, Your Honor," said Pan Jia. "She knows none of the secret little phrases that my wife and I shared, and her body is slightly different in ways that I know but can't describe to Your Honor. If she were really my wife, I'd be only too eager to see her since we were separated just two months after our wedding day. Why would I come here to create trouble out of nothing? I trust that, in your wisdom, Your Honor will surely make a just and fair judgment."

The magistrate was astonished to hear this convincing argument but was loath to admit his own mistake. "Stay calm and be patient," he instructed Pan Jia in a subdued voice. "Keep this a secret and don't let

anyone else in on it, not even your own parents and relatives. (IC: *Wonderful!*) Let me handle this.”

On Magistrate Li's instructions, notices were posted everywhere, stating, “Yao Dizhu was found on a certain day of a certain month. (IC: *Ingenious!*) Both the Pan family and the Yao family voluntarily dropped the lawsuit, and neither will lodge any more complaints on this matter.” Meanwhile, he secretly offered a hefty reward for the capture of the offender and had more than ten lictors keep a close watch on those who read the notices. If anything unusual happened, they were to report back to him immediately.

Now let us put the detective work aside and turn back to Dizhu and Wu Dalang, who had been living together for two years now. Gradually, his wife got wind of something and refused to let him leave the house without a good reason. As a result, his visits to Dizhu became few and far between. Dizhu had once asked Wu Dalang for a maidservant, and Wu Dalang in turn asked Wang Xi to take care of it. But Wang Xi, who was an old hand at abducting girls, was certainly not going to spend any money on a maidservant. Instead, he planned to abduct one when the opportunity presented itself. Recently he had often seen one of Mr. Wang Ruluan's maidservants washing clothes by the river in She County. He made a mental note of it.

One day, when he was out for a walk, he got word that Dizhu had been found, as stated in the county government's notice. He rushed back to Mother Wang and said, “Someone has filled the vacancy for us. This article of ours is now definitely our property.”

Not believing what he had said, Mother Wang wanted to see the notice with her own eyes. So the two went together to the county court to read the notice. As Wang Xi read the notice aloud for Mother Wang, gesticulating with his hands, they caught the eye of a lictor on duty, who then followed them as they left. (MC: *Sure enough, Wang falls for the scheme.*) When they reached a secluded spot, he heard them say, “This is wonderful. We can sleep tight now!”

The lictor pounced on them. “A fine thing you did!” he roared. “Now that the truth is out, where do you think you're going?”

Seized with panic, Wang Xi said, “You frightened me! Why don't we go to a restaurant and sit down?” So they invited the lictor to a restaurant and sat down upstairs. Then, pretending he was going to order food and drink, Wang Xi slipped away.

After Mother Wang and the lictor had sat at the table for quite a while without being served, they went downstairs, only to realize that Wang Xi

had long disappeared. The lictor tied up Mother Wang and said, "I'm taking you to the county court."

"Please spare my life," she pleaded on her knees. "Come with me to my house, and I'll thank you with a gift of money."

In fact, the lictor had been bluffing, just because their behavior had aroused his suspicions. He had no idea what they were guilty of, but they had given themselves away with their guilty consciences. Now, expecting something promising, the lictor followed her to Wang Xi's house and knocked at the door. When he laid eyes on the woman who opened the door for them, he gave a start. "Isn't this the woman taken under guard from Quzhou the other day?" he said to himself. Then it suddenly occurred to him that she must be the real Dizhu. However, he chose to say nothing but just drank the tea, took the money from Mother Wang, and left. Believing that she was off the hook, Mother Wang set her mind at rest.

The next day, the lictor went to the county court to report his findings. The magistrate ordered him, together with another ten or so men, to arrest Mother Wang and Dizhu immediately. The lictors, as fierce as wolves and tigers, forced their way into Wang Xi's house with a cry. Mother Wang was so frightened that she hanged herself from a beam. Dizhu was taken to the court.

When he saw her, the magistrate said, "This is the one they wanted the other day." He then tossed a bamboo slip and ordered that Pan Jia and his wife be sent for. When the fake Dizhu arrived, the two women were seen to be exactly alike. Unable to tell them apart, the magistrate asked Pan Jia to identify his wife. Pan Jia of course knew which one was his wife. He talked with her in their own secret language. To the magistrate's questions, the real Dizhu answered with a full account of how she had been tricked by Wang Xi.

"Did anyone seduce you through Wang's services?" asked the magistrate. Still tenderly attached to Wu Dalang, Dizhu didn't want to name him. Instead, she said that she didn't know the seducer's name.

Then the magistrate questioned the fake Dizhu. She made a total confession: "My name is Zheng Yue'e. Because I wanted to avenge myself and Yao Yi wanted to bring the lawsuit to a quick end and told me I looked like his sister, we worked out this scheme together." Thereupon, the magistrate ordered that Wang Xi be arrested immediately, but he was already on the run. Then the magistrate wrote a report on the case and sent it, along with all the suspects, to the prefectural government.

Now let us turn to Wang Xi. After fleeing from the restaurant, he ran into Cheng Jin, one of his accomplices, and they went together to She County. When they arrived there, they saw Mr. Wang Ruluan's maidservant washing foot-binding bandages at the riverside. Grabbing her with one wrench of his hand, Wang Xi shouted, "Aren't you my runaway maidservant? So this is where you ended up!" So saying, he snatched a bandage, tied her with it, and tried to drag her to the bamboo raft. She screamed for help, and Wang Xi quickly covered her mouth with his sleeve, but she continued to utter muffled cries. Cheng Jin seized her by the throat, but because he applied too much force and she was gagged, she died instantly. Witnesses surrounded the two men and took them to the county court.

Magistrate Fang of She County sentenced Cheng Jin to death by hanging and Wang Xi to military exile. When they were brought to the prefectural court, it so happened that the real Dizhu and the fake Dizhu had also arrived there under escort. As all four of them appeared in the courtroom, the real Dizhu shouted, "Isn't that Wang Xi?"

Prefect Liang was a highly principled official. He flew into a rage when he found Wang Xi's name in both files. "Wang Xi is the principal culprit in both cases," said he. "How can he be sentenced only to military exile?" Whereupon he ordered his lictors to give Wang Xi sixty strokes of the bamboo rod, which killed him on the spot. The real Dizhu was to be reunited with her husband, and the fake one sold by the government. Yao Yi was sentenced to military exile because he had used the government's warrant to commit fraud. Only Wu Dalang was spared punishment because his name was not in the file and also because, being well connected, he had bribed high and low after hearing about the lawsuit.

Pan Jia took Dizhu home for a happy reunion. Yao Yi was to be deported to a designated garrison in a remote region for penal servitude. Wives of convicts were allowed to be with them, but Yao Yi was not married. Zheng Yue'e wept her heart out when she learned about it. "It's because I wanted to get my freedom and avenge myself that he and I worked out this scheme. Who would have thought that it would ruin him? I'll go with him, dead or alive. Then this scandal will have been worth it." (MC: *What a fine woman!*)

Mr. Yao could not bear the thought of letting his son leave home alone. When he heard about Zheng Yue'e's words, he bought her out under a false name. Then he changed her name and let her follow his son into exile as his wife. (IC: *It's just as well.*) Later, they returned home after a general amnesty was proclaimed and became bona fide husband and wife. This shows us the

goodness of Zheng Yue'e's heart. That the two sisters-in-law, Yao Dizhu and Zheng Yue'e, looked so much alike makes a delightful story that is still going around in the Huizhou region, as is attested in a poem:

*Both had been decent girls gone astray;
Both started life afresh as good wives.
No wonder they looked so much alike;
They did share a similar fate in life.*

Liu Dongshan Brags about His Prowess at the City Gate

Eighteenth Brother Leaves His Mark in the Village Tavern

A poem says:

*If the weak are crushed by the strong,
It is not because of the size of their bodies.
The centipede that feeds on pythons
Is not endowed with extra-long fangs.*

It is said that in this world of ours, every creature has its nemesis. This is why one must never toot one's own horn and flaunt one's prowess. As for the centipedes and pythons mentioned in the above poem, well, the region south of the Five Ridges [covering Guangdong and Guangxi] is infested with hundred-foot-long pythons that prey on humans. Therefore, every local household raises red-legged centipedes that can grow to be more than a foot long and keeps them by the pillows. When it senses a python approaching, the centipede begins to make noises, and once released, it arches over and, joining its head and tail, jumps to a height of about ten feet, lands on the python at the lethal spot about seven inches from the python's head, grips the python with its pair of ironlike fangs, and sucks the python's blood until it dies. A hundred-foot-long creature done in by a mere foot-long and

finger-thin insect—this is what gave rise to the saying “Centipedes feeding on pythons: There’s no accounting for tastes.”

In the third year of the Yanhe [or Zhenghe] reign period [92–88 BCE] under Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty, the state of Yuezhi [in the Qilian Mountains region in northwestern China] offered as tribute to Emperor Wudi something that it claimed was a beast of prey. Looking like a fifty- to sixty-day-old puppy, it was about the size of a leopard cat. When the messenger from Yuezhi entered the presence of Emperor Wudi carrying the brown-tailed animal in his arms, the emperor was not impressed with its looks. He asked with a smile, “How does this little thing qualify as ‘a beast of prey’?”

The messenger replied, “Dominance in the world of birds and beasts is not necessarily determined by size. The divine *kylin*, lord of the elephants, and the phoenix, lord of the rocs, are cases in point.”

Unconvinced, the emperor said to the messenger, “We would like to hear it make a sound.”

As soon as the messenger pointed a finger at it, the beast licked its lips, shook its head from side to side, and then, with two shafts of bright light shooting out of its eyes, gave a mighty roar that sounded like a thunderbolt out of the blue. His hands covering his ears, Emperor Wudi was jolted out of his golden throne, trembling uncontrollably. His attendants and the guards of honor all lost their grip on whatever they had been holding in their hands. Irritated, the emperor ordered that the beast be sent to the Imperial Park to feed the tigers. As instructed, it was duly deposited by the tigers’ cage, but the tigers cowered and sank to their knees as soon as they laid eyes on it. On hearing this report from the Imperial Park, the emperor flew into a rage and ordered that it be killed. The very next day, both the messenger and the beast disappeared without a trace. Consider this: Even ferocious tigers were afraid of that little thing! This applies to the human world as well: There is just no limit to the pecking order in terms of physical strength and mental power. Indeed, for every smart one, there is someone smarter. One would be well advised not to indulge in self-glorification.

In the Tang dynasty, there lived a certain candidate for the imperial examinations whose name and native place have escaped my memory. Endowed with great physical prowess, he was a master of martial arts and a man of heroic caliber much given to deeds of honor. Whenever he saw injustice being done, he would literally draw his sword and fight for the wronged side. When he was ready to travel to the capital for the examinations, he chose not to

take any servants with him. Made presumptuous by his kung fu skills, he set out all by himself with just a bow and some arrows on his back and a sword strapped to his waist. (MC: *The way a mighty hero is supposed to look.*) As he rode along on a fine horse, he hunted pheasants and hares and had their meat prepared for him at his lodgings and washed it down with wine.

One day, somewhere in Shandong, his horse galloped so fast that he missed the inn where he had planned to stay. Afternoon had dimmed into evening when he reached a village. Thinking he should not go any farther, he saw a house with light streaming through its open gate. Our examination candidate got off his horse and went in, leading his horse by one hand. He found himself in a spacious yard with a pile of three or four porous rocks from Lake Tai. Facing the gate stood a row of three rooms, on either end of which was a side room. An old woman was seated in the middle, spinning hemp into yarn. On hearing horse hooves in the yard, she rose to ask who was there. Our candidate said at the top of his voice, "Madam, I'm a traveler on the road. I've lost my way and would like to stay here for the night."

"I'm afraid you can't, sir. I don't have any say around here."

Feeling somewhat intrigued when he detected an edge of sadness in her voice, the candidate asked, "Madam, where are the men of the house? Why are you left here alone?"

"I've been a widow for many years. My only son is away on business."

"Do you have a daughter-in-law?"

With a frown, the old woman replied, "Yes, I do. She's the equal of any man and makes enough to support the family. But she's so strong, so fierce, and so impatient that hearing one word she doesn't like raises her hackles, and one poke of her finger is enough to knock you to the ground. So I always try to be as humble as possible around her and take my cue from her in everything. But she still finds fault with me all the time and walks all over me. That's why I dare not take it upon myself to put you up for the night." So saying, she burst into tears.

His eyebrows flying up, his eyes popping wide open, our candidate said, "How can there be such injustice in the world! Where is that evil woman? Let me get rid of her for you!" He tied his horse to the rockery and drew out his sword.

"Sir!" said the old woman. "You'll only be asking for trouble! She's not one to be trifled with! She does no needlework but goes hunting all by herself in the mountains after lunch every day and brings back deer or rabbits. Then

she preserves them in salt and sells them for a few strings of coins. She doesn't get home until evening. She's the one who puts food on the table, so I don't want to ruffle her feathers."

The candidate put his sword back into its sheath and said, "I'm always hard on the bullies and soft on the weak, and I always take the side of the bullied. How much of a bully can a woman be? But since you depend on her for a living, I'll spare her life. (MC: *Good man*.) I'll just beat her up and give her a good lecture so that she'll mend her ways."

"She's coming home soon. Please don't make trouble, sir!"

And so our candidate waited in righteous indignation for the woman's return.

Lo and behold! A hulk of a dark figure entered through the gate, threw a sacklike object into the yard, and shouted, "Old ma! Bring a light and take care of this!"

The old woman said, trembling, "What fancy stuff is it?"

As she brought over a lamp, she gave a start. It was a dead tiger. In less time than it takes to narrate, our candidate's horse jumped in fear at the sight of the dead tiger. The new arrival asked, "Where did this horse come from?"

From where he stood in the dark, our candidate saw that it was a tall, dark-complexioned woman. Impressed by her appearance and her trophy, he said to himself, "This is quite a woman!" And a slight fear crept into him. He rushed over, led the horse away, tied it securely, and, walking up to the woman, said, "I'm a candidate for the examinations, here because I missed the inn where I was supposed to stay tonight. Luckily, I came to your worthy estate, and since the gate was open, I humbly asked to be put up for the night."

Affably the woman said, "That old one has no sense! How could she have let such a distinguished guest remain standing out in the open at such a late hour!" Pointing to the dead tiger, she continued, "I came back late because I spent a lot of time dealing with this cursed thing in the mountains. Please forgive me, sir, for not being a good hostess."

Taking note of her straightforward speech and politeness, the candidate thought, "She's not a hopeless case, after all." Aloud he said over and over again, "I wouldn't presume! I wouldn't presume!"

The woman went into the main hall and came out again, carrying a chair. She said, "I should have invited you into the hall, but since there's only me and my mother-in-law in the house and it's not proper for men and women

to be in the same hall without the presence of the master of the house, I'll have to ask you to settle for less and sit here on the porch instead." She also brought a table to him and lit a lamp. Then she went and picked up the dead tiger with both hands and headed for the kitchen.

Before long, she brought out a flask of heated wine, a large tray filled with steaming-hot tiger meat, dried deer meat, and five or six plates of salted meat of pheasant, rabbit, and such, and said, "Sir, I hope you won't find the food too unpalatable."

Pleased by her attentiveness, our candidate took the flask and dishes and helped himself to the wine and food. After finishing his meal, he said with his hands respectfully folded in front of his chest, "Thank you so much for your hospitality!"

"This is an honor for me!" said the woman as she brought a tray for clearing the table.

While she was thus engaged, our candidate asked, "Madam, you're such a good hostess and such a heroic woman, but why do I get the feeling that your respect for the elderly leaves something to be desired?"

The woman stopped short. She put the tray down vehemently on the table and said, her eyes flashing fire, "What lies did that old thing tell you?"

The candidate hastened to say, "No, she didn't say anything! It's just that, from the way you addressed your mother-in-law, I detected a lack of the respect due someone of her status. But I was quite impressed by the way you treat a guest, and for someone with your outstanding abilities, surely you're amenable to reason. It was with the best intentions that I brought this up." (MC: *By the look of things, the woman is not at fault. It's just that her mother-in-law fails to recognize the makings of a great heroine in her. Our candidate's tongue overruns his discretion.*)

With one swift movement, the woman seized him by his sleeve and, holding the lamp in her other hand, dragged him to the rockery and said, "Now let me present my case."

Unable to struggle free from the woman's grip, the man said to himself, "If she says anything outrageous, I'll think of a way to give her a good beating."

Leaning against the rockery, the woman tapped it with a hand and told about such and such a thing that happened on such and such a day. She concluded with a question, "Was it my fault or hers?" With that, she ran her forefinger down the rock and said, "First case." Lo and behold! A vertical groove one inch deep appeared in the rock. She told of three incidents in

total, and three grooves appeared, as if the character 川 [river], or 三 [three] when seen sideways, had been chiseled into the Taihu rocks. Each line was easily one inch deep, as if chiseled with an iron tool.

Our candidate broke into a sweat. His face flaming red, he said emphatically, "You, madam, were right all three times!" His fiery ardor to set things right had vanished as if extinguished by a bucketful of snow. He hardly even ventured to breathe!

Having presented her cases, the woman brought a bed to the candidate, fed his horse for him, went in, closed the door for the old woman, put out the lamp, and went to sleep. Our candidate, however, passed the whole night without a single wink of sleep. He thought, "I never imagined that there could be a person with such extraordinary strength. Luckily, I didn't raise my hand against her. Otherwise, I would have been a dead man!" When dawn finally came, he got his horse ready, thanked his hostess, and left quietly without an undue word. From then on, he stopped throwing his weight around and poking his nose into what did not concern him for fear of losing out to another bully.

This brings me to another story of how a boastful man, albeit an able one, was one day given the shock of his life and became a much-talked-about figure of fun. Truly,

*The tiger is the lord of all animals;
They cower in fear when in its presence.
But at the roar of the lion,
The tiger loses all its might.*

The story takes place in Jiaohe County, Hejian Prefecture, in the Northern Metropolitan Area, during the Jiajing reign period [1522–66].¹ A man named Liu Qin, sobriquet Dongshan [East Hill], working as police chief in the Beijing Inspectorate, was a master of kung fu and a skillful archer and rider. Because his arrows never missed a target, he was called by all and sundry "Rapid-Fire Shooter." The most vicious criminals fell easy prey to him. And so he managed to put aside quite a tidy family fortune. When he was in his thirties, he grew tired of the profession. He submitted his resignation and went looking for another line of work in his native county.

One day toward the end of winter, he herded more than ten donkeys and horses to Beijing and sold them for about a hundred taels of silver. After the

deal was concluded, he went to Shuncheng Gate (IC: *Xuanwu Gate*) to hire a mule for his journey home. In the mule owner's shop, he ran into a neighbor, Zhang Erlang, who happened to be there. After they had ordered their food, Erlang asked, "Where are you off to, Dongshan?"

Dongshan gave an account of what had happened and added, "I'm here to hire a mule. I'm spending the night here and leaving tomorrow."

Erlang said, "These are tough times for travelers on the road. Liangxiang and Maozhou are infested with bandits. They rob even in broad daylight. With so much silver on you and you all alone with no traveling companion, you need to watch out so that you don't become their next victim!"

A huge grin split Dongshan's face. His eyebrows flew up; his teeth showed. With his hands clenched into fists, his arms assuming the position of an archer drawing a bow (MC: *The posture of a mighty hero.*), he burst into hearty laughter and said, "For twenty years, my bow has served me unfailingly in my police work. I've never missed a target, and I've never met anyone who's my equal. I won't come out of this business trip badly!"

Everyone in the shop turned around to find the source of the thundering voice. Some asked who he was and, on learning his name, were impressed and said, "Ah, a name long known to us!"

Erlang regretted that he had spoken out of turn. (IC: *No, not necessarily.*) He bid everyone farewell and took himself off.

Dongshan slept until dawn. He rose, washed, did his hair, stuffed his silver tightly into his money belt, and tied the belt around his waist. He slung his bow across his shoulders, put on his sword, and inserted twenty arrows into his boots. Then he picked a big, strong mule, leaped onto it, and, giving it the whip, rode off. About thirty to forty *li* later, he came to Liangxiang. At this point, a man on horseback came galloping up behind him. On drawing level with Dongshan's mule, the man pulled on his reins and came to a halt. Dongshan saw that the rider was a handsome, well-dressed young man about twenty years old. Behold! He had

*A yellow shirt, a felt hat,
A short sword, a long bow;
About twenty new arrows in his quiver,
Large red tassels on his horse's head,
A glittering bejeweled belt around his waist.
He was a fair-complexioned gentleman.*

*With its master pulling the reins,
The mighty horse neighed in rage.*

While Dongshan was looking him up and down, the young man shouted, "Why don't we go together?" Then he saluted Dongshan with both hands clasped respectfully across his chest and continued, "Sorry for imposing myself on you like this. May I ask your honorable name?"

"My humble name is Liu Qin, but everyone calls me 'Dongshan,' my sobriquet."

"Your famous name has long thundered in my ears! I'm really fortunate to be able to meet you. Now where are you headed, sir?"

"I'm going back to my native place—Jiaohe County."

"What a coincidence!" exclaimed the young man. "I live in Linzi [present-day Zibo, Shandong]. I'm from a family of long standing. I began my schooling very early on, but later, in my fondness for archery and the martial arts, I gave up my studies. Three years ago, I took some money to Beijing to look for business opportunities and made some decent profits. It just so happens that I'm now on my way back home to get married. Why don't we travel together since we're heading in the same direction? I'll feel safer that way. We can part ways when we get to the prefectural capital. May I have the honor?"

Impressed by the young man's bulging money belt, polite speech, and refined appearance, Dongshan decided that he posed no danger, and he was of small build after all. Pleased to gain a companion to relieve the boredom of the journey along the way, Dongshan said, "I'll be happy to travel with you."

That very evening, they went to an inn and ate at the same table before retiring for the night. They got along so well that they might as well have been brothers.

The next day, they left Zhuzhou, riding abreast. From horseback, the young man asked, "I've long heard about your fame as a police chief. How many criminals have you arrested in your entire career? Have you run into anyone with skills worthy of yours?"

Dongshan had been itching to brag about his prowess. (IC: *His vanity leads only to his humiliation.*) This question was right up his alley. Taking the young man to be easy game, he said boastfully, "With my bare hands and my one bow, I've subdued more outlaws than I can count. I have yet to meet my

match. I don't even care to waste my breath on those small-time thugs. I gave up my profession only because I got tired of it now that I've reached middle age. Should we run into some such men along the way, I'll show you what I'm made of."

With an ever-so-slight hint of scorn in his smile (MC: *An unfathomable smile.*), the young man said, "I see!" Reaching a hand over to Dongshan, he asked, "May I have a look at your precious bow?"

From his saddle on the mule, Dongshan took the bow from his shoulders and handed it to the young man. The young man held it in his left hand and, giving it a little pluck, stretched it and the string into a full moon. He did it a few more times, each time as effortlessly as if playing with a soft silk ribbon. A flabbergasted Dongshan asked for a look at the young man's bow. It weighed about twenty catties. Dongshan pulled at it but, for the life of him, could not even get it into the shape of a half moon, let alone a full one. His face red all the way to the very tips of his ears, he said in mortification, sticking out his tongue, "What a strong bow this is!" Turning to the young man, he said, "What divine power you have, my brother! This is far beyond what I've ever aspired to!"

"How can I make any claim to having divine power! It's just that your bow, sir, is a little on the soft side."

The young man responded to Dongshan's repeated words of admiration with exaggerated modesty. That night, they again stayed together under the same roof.

The next day, they resumed their journey. At dusk, as they were passing Xiong County, the young man gave his horse a slap, and the horse raced ahead like a flying cloud. Dongshan looked out into the distance and realized that the young man was gone. Being an experienced police chief familiar with the ways of robbers, he felt a wave of panic. But then he said to himself, "My loss of face is a blessing in disguise, because if he's not a decent sort, how would I have been his match? With his kind of divine strength, I would have been a dead man!" His heart pounding violently as if there were fifteen clanging buckets going up and down in the same well, he continued slowly on his way.

After he had covered about ten to twenty *li*, he saw that young man appear about a hundred paces ahead of him. His bow in the full-moon position, his arrow aimed at Dongshan, the young man said, "I've long heard that you're matchless. Now please enjoy the swishing sound of my arrow!"

Before the young man had quite finished speaking, Dongshan heard a whiz by his ear, as if a little bird had just flown by. (MC: *A comic touch.*) But he was not hurt. The young man reloaded his bow, stretched it again to the full-moon position, and, aiming the arrow straight at Dongshan's face, he gave a peal of laughter and said, "Dongshan, you're a sensible man, aren't you? Now, take off your waistband and give me the money you got for your mules and horses, and don't make a foolish move."

Knowing he was no match for the young man, Dongshan panicked. He saw nothing for it but to dismount and take off his money belt. Then, with both hands holding the belt, he moved toward the young man on his knees and said with a kowtow, "Here's the silver for you, mighty hero. But please spare my life." (IC: *How pathetic! How shameful!*)

The young man on horseback picked up the belt and roared, "Why would I want your life? Get out of my sight! I have other things to attend to, so I'm not going to keep you company, my son!" (IC: *This is hilarious!*) So saying, he turned his horse around and galloped off in a northerly direction; in a trice, he vanished in a cloud of yellow dust.

Dongshan remained on his knees, stupefied. It was a long time before he stood up. Pounding his chest and stamping his feet, he said to himself, "The loss of the silver is not all that bad, but how am I going to hold my head up again? (IC: *Said like a hero.*) My good name of a lifetime has been ruined. It's like the exorcist losing out to the ghost! This is outrageous!"

With his head sunk upon his chest, he listlessly continued with his journey home, empty-handed. When he arrived home, he told his wife about his experience, and she commiserated with him in his gloomy mood. They talked things over and decided to put together some money and open a village tavern to make a living, so that he would not have to pick up a bow ever again. Afraid that his recent adventure would become known and thus tarnish his name, he refrained from bringing it up to anyone and put the matter behind him. (IC: *His name means everything to him. Pathetic!*)

Three years passed. One wintry day, as attested to by a *ci* poem:

*With frost-paved roof tiles and wind-blown fancy curtains,
Winter is here, earlier than usual.
The bright windows are fortified with nails;
The red gates are only slightly open;
Do not invite more guests than necessary.
With the sky darkened by clouds and snow,*

Tuck the blue felt curtains tightly

And draw the red canopy closely around you.

(This is the first stanza of a poem to the tune of "Divine Fragrance.")

To return to our story: That wintry day, Dongshan and his wife were tending to their business when eleven men on horseback came to their tavern, all riding big, strong horses with specially designed fancy saddles and caparisons. Each man wore a tight jacket with a bow, arrows, and a sword strapped to his middle. One by one, they dismounted, entered the tavern, and relieved the horses of the saddles and caparisons.

Liu Dongshan greeted them and led the horses to the trough, while a waiter went to cut hay and prepare fodder for the horses, but that is not part of our story.

One of the guests, an eight-span-tall fifteen- or sixteen-year-old, did not dismount. To the rest of the men, he announced, "I, the Eighteenth, will be staying the night at the inn right across from here."

The men responded, "We'll go over soon to wait on you."

After the young man took himself off, the remaining ten men fell to drinking. The host served chicken, pork, beef, and mutton to go with the wine. They attacked the food like ravening wolves and tigers and, in the twinkling of an eye, packed away sixty to seventy catties of meat and downed six or seven jugs of wine. Then they ordered wine and food to be delivered to the young man in the inn across the street. After they had polished off everything Dongshan had to offer, they still clamored that they had room for more. So they opened their own leather bags and took out deer legs, pheasants, and roast rabbits, saying joyfully, "This is our treat. Let's have our host join us!"

It was only after the usual obligatory words of demurral that Dongshan sat down at the table. As his eyes swept over the guests, he noticed a man who, sitting to his left on the northern side of the table, had his lowered head covered by his felt hat. But then the man suddenly raised his head. After taking a close look, Dongshan was shocked out of his senses and let out an inaudible groan. You may very well ask, who might that man be? Well, he was none other than the young man who had robbed Dongshan of his money in Xiong County. (MC: *A misfortune can be a blessing in disguise.*) Dongshan said to himself, "This time, I'm a real goner! With what little I have, he's going to bleed me dry! What's worse, I didn't dare stand up against him last time when he was alone. And now, with so many of his men here and each as much of

a warrior as he is, what am I going to do?" His heart pounding violently, he fixed his eyes on his wine cup without daring to let out a peep.

In the meantime, his customers stood up to urge wine on him. After a while, the young man seated to his left on the northern side of the table took off his felt hat and addressed him: "Dongshan! Have you been well since we parted last time? (MC: *Funny*.) I still remember fondly those days I spent traveling with you."

Involuntarily, Dongshan fell to his knees, his face drained of all color, and said, "Please forgive me, mighty hero!" (IC: *Poor thing*.)

The young man leaped from his seat, dropped to his knees, and raised Dongshan up. Holding Dongshan's hand, he said, "Don't do this! Don't do this! You're embarrassing me! A few years ago, my brothers and I were at an inn at Shuncheng Gate when we heard you boast that your martial arts skills were unrivaled anywhere under the sun. They were outraged and told me to do the naughty thing I did to you while I was traveling with you. It was just for the fun of it. But I went back on our agreement that we part at Hejian. I still dream about riding abreast with you on the road. Out of gratitude for your kindness, I now give you something that's worth ten times what I took from you." So saying, he produced a thousand taels of silver and, putting the silver on the table, said to Dongshan, "Just take this as a gift from a long-absent friend. Please put it away. Come on!" (IC: *In fact, he is doing this not out of any friendship formed during the journey but out of his appreciation for a like-minded respectable man*.)

Dongshan froze as if in a trance. Afraid that this was another practical joke, he dared not respond. (IC: *He is traumatized*.) As he hesitated, the young man clapped his hands and said, "How could a man of honor like me play tricks on people? I thought you were a respectable man, Dongshan! Why are you so cowardly! Do you think my brothers and I would really stoop so low as to rob you of your money? Take the silver, and be quick about it!"

Convinced by the sincerity of the young man's tone, Dongshan felt as if he were awakening from the dreams of a wine-induced sleep. Thinking it improper to decline the offer, he went to the living quarters of the tavern and brought his wife out. Together, they carried the silver to the interior of the house.

After the silver had been stored away, Dongshan and his wife consulted each other about what to do: "We mustn't be disrespectful to such heroes. We owe them so much. We should slaughter more animals and bring out

more wine, and we might as well keep them here for a few more days of fun.”

So Dongshan went out to thank the young man and told him about his plan. The young man, in turn, relayed the invitation to all the other men. They said, “Since he’s an old friend of yours by now, why not? But we do need to clear it with Eighteenth Brother.”

They went together across the street to speak with the youth. Dongshan followed them and was impressed by the men’s respectfulness to him and his graciousness toward them. After they told the boy that the host had asked them to stay for a few days of fun, the boy said, “Good. No harm in doing that. But remember not to oversleep after you’ve had your fill of wine and food, so as not to disappoint the master of the house. If anything untoward happens, the two swords hanging from my waist will be hungry for blood.”

“Yes, we understand that,” said the men. Dongshan was all the more confused.

The men returned to the tavern and fell to another round of hearty drinking. They then took wine over to the boy across the street but dared not stay on. Eighteenth Brother drank all by himself. The wine and meat to which he alone did justice equaled what had been consumed by five of the men. After Eighteenth Brother finished the meat, he took out a silver strainer from his bag, got a charcoal fire going, and made pancakes for himself. After finishing about a hundred of them, he cleaned things up and went outdoors with large strides, none knew whither.

He did not return until evening had fallen, and when he came back, he went directly to the inn across the street without paying a visit to Liu Dongshan’s house, where the rest of the men were eating and enjoying themselves. When they went across the street to visit him, Eighteenth Brother did not engage in any banter with them but remained haughtily aloof. Full of apprehension, Dongshan tugged furtively at the young man who had been his travel companion and asked, “What kind of person is Eighteenth Brother?”

Instead of answering his question, the young man repeated his question to the other men, and they all burst into peals of laughter. Without revealing Eighteenth Brother’s true identity, the young man intoned these lines at the top of his voice:

*When willows turn green and peach blossoms bloom,
No one knows where the spring breezes blow.*

With that, they burst out laughing again.

Three days later, the men were ready to take their leave. They packed their luggage and mounted the horses. With Eighteenth Brother leading the way, they quickly rode off. Dongshan still had not figured out what kind of people they were. Now that he was suddenly richer by a thousand taels of silver, he grew afraid of incurring other unpleasant incidents and moved into the city proper to pursue another line of business. (IC: *Still haunted by his traumatic experience.*) Later, when he told people about what had happened, someone with more insight said, “The two lines intoned seem to be hinting at ‘plum’ [李*lǐ*], and the boy was called Eighteenth [十八*Shiba*] Brother. [十 and 八 make the upper radical 木 of 李.] My guess is that the boy’s surname is Li 李 and he was their ringleader. Judging from what he told the other men, I believe he was warning against any trap that may have been set for them. And that’s why he stayed at a different place, so that they could watch out for each other. He didn’t keep the men company and ate separately from them for reasons of status. His outing during the night must have been for some wicked purpose, but we have no way of verifying that.”

Liu Dongshan, a hero up to that point in his life, henceforth dared not say another word about martial arts. He put away his bow, broke his arrows, and passed his days plying his trade and keeping to his station in life. Eventually, he died a peaceful natural death. It can thus be concluded that one must not brag about one’s own skills. He who does hasn’t yet met the real master. The following quatrain is about Liu Dongshan:

*His bow and arrows served him well throughout his life
Until he met someone more than his equal.
Never boast about your skills in this human world;
Even the Hegemon King one day had to sing his sad songs.*

A quatrain about the young man says,

*Heroes have always been known for their largesse;
Bandits, when generous, are also worthy of praise.
Happily he gave a thousand taels for a hundred,
For he had made a good friend on the road.*

Cheng Yuanyu Pays for a Meal at a Restaurant

Lady Eleventh Explains Swordsmanship on Mount Cloud

I N the words of an ode,

*Red Thread in her reincarnation
Sought immortality after her masterstroke.
Lady Invisible rode a donkey of Wei
That faded away after each use.
Fragrant Pellet wielded her blade
Through curling wisps of incense.
Mr. Cui's woman, wrapped in white silk,
Disappeared in the middle of the night.
The old lady knight-errant with armbands
Hid her protégées in a statue's ear.
The merchant's wife took her son's life
To end the pain of separation.
Xie Xun, when taking a new wife,
Used her funds for the journey by land and water.
Sanhuan, retrieving lost rosary beads,
Was undeterred by rightly closed pagoda gates.
The woman from the chariot
Took a prisoner through a one-foot hole.*

The above poem gives a list of women knights-errant of olden times. They were among the legions of disciples, male and female, of their school of martial arts, which has been in existence since time immemorial. Even though it is not the most orthodox school, its practitioners devote themselves to rooting out evil and fostering virtue. Those with consummate mastery of the skills earn immortality. Some busybody compiled a collection of their stories, titled *Biographies of Knights-Errant*. Stories about female masters of martial arts were put together in a separate volume titled *Biographies of Women Knights-Errant*.

Of the women listed in the above poem, Red Thread was a maidservant in the employ of Regional Commander Xue Song of Luzhou [present-day southern Shanxi]. After learning that Regional Commander Tian Chengsi of Weibo [in present-day Hebei], with his three-thousand-strong private army, was bent on annexing Luzhou, Commander Xue Song brooded over the news day and night. When she found out the reason for his dejection, Red Thread showed her true colors as a master of martial arts. She flew to Weibo in the middle of the night over a distance of 350 *li*, took the gold box next to Commander Tian's pillow, and brought it to Commander Xue's residence. The next day, while a search for the gold box was under way in Weibo, sending waves of fear throughout the army, Commander Xue dispatched a messenger to return the box to Commander Tian. The latter was appalled, for he knew this must have been the work of a knight-errant. Afraid that his own head would be the next missing object, he abandoned his evil plot. Later, Red Thread explained that she had been a man in a previous incarnation and was made a woman in this incarnation as punishment for unintentionally taking a life by prescribing the wrong medicine. Now that she had redeemed herself, she left to seek immortality. So much for the reference to Red Thread in the poem.

Lady Invisible, surname Nie, was the daughter of the great general Nie Feng of Weibo. Early in her childhood, she ran into a mendicant old nun, who whisked her off and taught her magic powers. After she grew up and married, she and her husband each rode a lame donkey, one black and one white. Since the donkeys were native to Wei [in present-day Henan], they were also known as the donkeys of Wei. Whenever they were not being ridden, they disappeared from view because they were made of paper. Commander Nie of Weibo, whom Lady Invisible and her husband served as personal guards, had a falling-out with Regional Commander Liu Changyi of Chenxu [in present-day Henan] and ordered Lady Invisible to kill him. As it turned

out, Commander Liu, quite the fortune-teller, anticipated the arrival of Lady Invisible and her husband. He told a general to go to the north gate of the city to wait for them, adding, "That couple will be riding donkeys—one black, one white. As soon as you see them, pass down my orders and have your men greet them with respect."

When she arrived, Lady Invisible was so impressed by Commander Liu's divine foresight that she switched sides and entered Liu's service instead. The commander of Weibo, on learning of her change of allegiance, dispatched a certain Jingjing'er to kill her, but she made short work of the assassin. Then a grand master of kung fu, a certain Kongkong'er, was dispatched. Lady Invisible changed herself into a tiny bug, flew into Commander Liu's mouth, and told him to put a Hetian jade necklace around his neck. When Kongkong'er arrived at the third watch of the night and tried to slash Commander Liu's throat with a dagger, the dagger made a clanking sound against the necklace but failed to cut through it. Kongkong'er was so mortified that he took himself to a place a thousand *li* away and never returned, leaving Commander Liu and Lady Invisible unscathed. So much for the reference to Lady Invisible.

Let us now turn to Fragrant Pellet, who lived with her maid on Guanyin Lane. A scholar taking a leisurely walk happened to lay eyes on her, and her beauty raised a flutter in his heart. But several delinquent youths hanging around him spoke ill of her, making her out to be a woman of easy virtue. These malicious words filled the scholar with disdain for her. When he returned home and told his wife about what he had heard, his wife told him that the woman was in fact a member of her clan and was a noble-spirited and eccentric woman who was regarded with awe and veneration by all the other members of the clan. The scholar was seized with righteous anger and wanted to seek revenge on these youths on the woman's behalf. Before he had an opportunity to do so, Fragrant Pellet's maid came to thank him, saying, "Even though you have not yet put your wish into action, my mistress is profoundly grateful to you for your kind intentions." She then invited him to her mistress's house for a drink. As he sat drinking all by himself, the maid approached him, carrying a leather bag on her back. "This is a gift from my mistress," said she.

Opening the bag, what did the scholar see but three or four human heads, still looking quite alive? They belonged to men who had previously done the scholar harm. The scholar gave a violent start. Afraid of being implicated, he hastened to flee, but the maid stopped him. "Don't be afraid!" said she as

she retrieved a packet containing a shining white powder from her bosom. She picked some up with the nail of her little finger and flicked the powder onto the cuts on the heads. Before their very eyes, the heads began to shrink until they were reduced to the size of plums. The maid ate them one by one, spitting out the pits as she did so. After she finished eating the last one, she said to the scholar, "My mistress wants you, sir, to avenge her and kill those delinquent youths."

The scholar thanked her before saying, "How could I be capable of such a thing?"

The maid said, while presenting him with a fragrant incense pellet, "You don't have to do anything. You need only sweep the study clean, light this incense pellet in the incense burner, and go where the strand of incense smoke is blown, and it will be done." Then she gave him that leather bag and continued, "Take this bag for collecting human heads. Just follow the strand of incense smoke, and it will lead you home. There's nothing to be afraid of."

The scholar did as he was told. Wherever the curling incense smoke went, there was light, and the walls yielded to him. Every time he encountered one of those delinquent youths, the strand of smoke went around the youth's neck three times and the head would fall. No one in the youth's family was any the wiser. The scholar then deposited the head in the bag. After the same scenario repeated several times, our scholar followed the curling incense smoke all the way back. He arrived home before the drum had sounded the third watch, feeling as if it had all been but a dream.

Now that his mission had been accomplished, the fragrant incense pellet flew off, and the maid appeared. As before, she took the heads, flicked powder on them, and ate them. To the scholar, she said, "My mistress has a message for you, sir. This is the Fear Test. Once you pass the test, you can just pack for your journey to the realm of the immortals." No one knew where the scholar went thereafter, nor did anyone learn the names of the woman and the scholar. *Record of the Fragrant Incense Pellet* is the only extant reminder of the event.

Let us come to Mr. Cui's woman. In the Zhenyuan reign period [785–805] of the Tang dynasty, a Mr. Cui Shensi of Boling [in present-day Hebei] went to the capital to sit for the national civil-service examination and rented a house from a beautiful unmarried woman in her early thirties. Cui Shensi engaged a matchmaker and proposed marriage, but the woman turned him down, saying to the matchmaker, "I'm not from an official's family, so it would be a mismatch in family status. He'll regret it in the future. I can only

be his concubine." Whereupon she moved in with him. After two years, a son was born. During all this time, she never answered questions as to her surname.

One night, Cui Shensi woke up in the wee hours of the morning and realized that she was missing from their bed. Suspecting infidelity on her part, he walked into the main hall and paced to and fro in anger. Suddenly, the woman, wrapped in white, came down from the roof, carrying a dagger in her right hand and a human head in her left hand. She said to Mr. Cui, "My father was killed unjustly at the county magistrate's order some years ago. I've been seeking revenge without success, until now. My mission is accomplished, so I mustn't stay any longer." After telling Mr. Cui that she bequeathed the house to him, she scaled the wall and was gone. Mr. Cui was aghast. But she returned a few moments later, saying she wanted to breast-feed the baby one more time. In the twinkling of an eye, she reemerged and said to Mr. Cui, "We'll never meet again." With that, she disappeared from view. When he went back into the house, Mr. Cui found their son dead. She had done this to spare herself the pain of longing for the child. So much for "Mr. Cui's woman, wrapped in white silk."

The story about the old lady knight-errant was told by Xiurong, concubine of Yuan Yong. In her childhood, when her neighborhood became overrun by bandits, an old lady came to her mother and said, "Your family has accumulated much credit for your kind deeds, so you have nothing to fear from the bandits. I'll surely hide you in a safe place." She withdrew two feet of black satin from her sleeves, tore it into strips, told them to wear one on an arm, and said, "Follow me."

After she took Xiurong and her mother into a Daoist temple, she pointed at the statue of a god and said, "You can hide in his ear." She told Xiurong and her mother to close their eyes while she put them on her back and then into the statue's ear. It was a small statue, but the mother and daughter found the ear to be as large as a room and did not feel cramped in the least. The old lady came to see them twice every day and brought them food and beverages. The ear hole was only the size of a finger, but it grew large as soon as food and beverages were delivered. Later, after order was restored in the neighborhood, the old lady put them on her back as before and delivered them to their home. Xiurong asked to be taken on as an apprentice of the old lady's and vowed to live a life of self-denial and mortification of the flesh in order to repay the old lady's kindness, but the old lady declined her request, saying, "You're not yet ready for the cultivation of celestial qualities." Later,

the old lady went away, none knew whither. So much for the old lady knight-errant and the ear of the deity's statue.

The story about the merchant's wife is similar to the one about Cui Shensi's woman. Wang Li, sheriff of Yugan County, met a beautiful woman at a moment when his term of office had expired and his new appointment was still pending. Claiming that she had been a widow for ten years and that her deceased husband, a merchant, had left her quite a sizable fortune, she married Wang Li and later had a son. As in the story about Cui's wife, she also came home one day carrying a human head, saying that she had avenged herself and must leave the capital city at once. She took her leave but soon came back to, in her own words, "breastfeed the baby and end the pain of separation." She left after spending some time with the baby. When Wang Li returned and lit a lamp, he found the baby dead. Cui's woman had done the same thing the merchant's wife did.

Xie Xun, a military officer of the Song dynasty, was stranded in the north during the Jingkang Incident [1126].¹ His clansmen took pity on him in his forlornness and made a match for him with a woman who had enough dowry to support him. When the Double Ninth Festival came around, he thought of his ex-wife and shed tears.² Upon inquiry, his new wife learned that he wished to return to the Song territory in the south, so she used her funds for their journey south by land and by water. All along the way, she took care of all matters related to their lodging and protection. Upon arrival, he was overjoyed to meet his brother, Xie Qian, whose military exploits had won him the post of grand marshal. His brother gave him four maidservants by way of a gift. Xie Xun was so taken with them that he gradually distanced himself from his wife. One day, she asked him reproachfully at the dinner table, "Have you forgotten how you had begged for food in the north? If it had not been for me, you would have starved to death. Now that things are going well for you, you forget everything I've done for you. This is not the behavior of a worthy man."

Tipsy from the wine, Xie Xun flew into a rage on hearing these words. His fists rained down on the woman. She put up with him, all the while wearing a scornful smile on her lips. As Xie Xun continued to yell at her and spit on her, she suddenly rose to her feet. The lights dimmed, and a chill filled the air. The four concubines prostrated themselves on the floor in panic. They rose a moment later when the candles flickered back into flames, only to find Xie Xun lying on the floor dead, minus his head. The wife and all the objects in the room had vanished without a trace. Xie Qian, on hearing the

news, sent three thousand men on a massive search, but all to no avail. So much for “Xie Xun taking a new wife.”

Now, about Sanhuan. A general by the name of Pan lost his string of rosary beads, and his searches for it turned up nothing. The fact was that in a game with some friends, Sanhuan had tossed it onto the wheel of dharma atop the pagoda of Mercy Temple. After the Pan family offered a hefty reward for the retrieval of the string, her uncle Wang Chao asked her if she would undertake the job. She agreed. When she reached the temple, the gate had just been opened, but the pagoda door remained locked. Like a bird on the wing, she flew up to the top of the pagoda, waved to her uncle, picked up the string of rosaries, and came down. Wang Chao took it, presented it to the general, and claimed the reward for himself. The next day, the woman was gone.

What about the woman from the chariot? Well, a scholar from Wu County went to the capital to take the imperial examinations. Two young men ushered him into his lodging. Soon after he sat down, a chariot drove through the gate into the courtyard. A woman alighted from it and asked the candidate for the examinations to show everyone his skills. Our candidate could do no more than take a few steps on the wall in his boots. The woman then turned to the young men and asked them to demonstrate their prowess. One walked on the wall, and the other moved along the roof of the house by holding on to the rafters—both with the lightness and agility of birds. Our candidate was overcome with awe and admiration. The woman and the young men then took their leave.

After a few days, the two young men came back and asked our candidate to loan them his horse, a request that our candidate found impossible to decline. The next day it was announced that the imperial palace had been burglarized and that only the horse carrying the stolen objects had been tracked down. When our candidate was found to be the owner of the horse, he was taken to the Imperial Household Department for interrogation. After he was led through a small gate, an officer behind him pushed him into a seventy- or eighty-foot-deep pit. The only light came from the opening at the top, which was less than two feet wide. In his misery, our candidate suddenly saw a birdlike object flying down to him. It turned out to be none other than the woman from the chariot. She tied one end of a silk ribbon to the candidate’s arm and the other end to herself and flew out of the pit to a place dozens of *li* beyond the city gate. There, she deposited him on the ground and said, “Go home, sir. This is no place for you.” Our candidate begged his way to his hometown in the Wu region.

This woman from the chariot is something of a thief and a robber, as is Sanhuan, quite unlike the other women listed in the poem. The right way to achieve immortality is to redress wrongs and deliver people from distress and danger. But one needs to know that such people do exist in this world of ours, which is why they are recorded in history and surely not made up by this storyteller.

And now let me tell of another female master of martial arts who rescued a gentleman in distress and delivered a brilliant speech on swordsmanship that had not been heard from the dawn of history. There is a quatrain in testimony:

Retrieving the beads was but child's play;

The chariot lady caused only woe.

Listen to what Lady Wei has to say:

Honesty is the only way to go.

Our story proper is about a merchant in Huizhou Prefecture [in Anhui], Cheng Deyu, courtesy name Yuanyu. Honest and prudent, he was a man of few words and averse to frivolity. He plied his trade in the Sichuan and Shaanxi regions and made sizable profits from the business. One day, he put together what he had made and packed for his journey home with his servant. We need hardly say that his horse and his servant's beast of burden were both heavily laden. When they reached an area between Wenzhou and Jiezhou [in present-day Gansu], they stopped to buy wine and food at a restaurant where other patrons were also seated.

As Chen Yuanyu and his servant were engaged with their meals, a woman dismounted from her donkey at the door and entered the restaurant. Cheng Yuanyu raised his head and saw that the newcomer was about thirty years old, with well-formed facial features but a little formidable in her attire and her martial posture. The other patrons in the restaurant wagged their heads, gawked at her, and talked about her, all the while making wild conjectures. Cheng Yuanyu was the only exception. He remained sitting properly in his seat and turned his eyes away from the woman after the first glance. This fact was not lost on her. After she finished her meal, she raised her hands, shook her sleeves, and said, "I forgot to bring money. What am I going to do now that I've already taken advantage of the restaurant owner's generosity?"

Those who had been gawking at her burst into laughter. One said, "So, she's here for a free meal!" Another said, "Maybe she really forgot to bring

money." Still another said, "She looks like someone who belongs to a gang. Definitely not a law-abiding woman. (MC: *Too many people judge others by their looks.*) What's so surprising about her trying to get a free meal?"

On hearing that she had no money, a young waiter seized her and would not let go. The owner said furiously, "In these times of peace and order, how can anyone eat without paying?"

The woman said only "I didn't bring money. I'll repay you next time."

"But who will recognize you the next time you come?" said the owner.

In the midst of the commotion, Cheng Yuanyu walked up and said, "This lady does not look like someone to whom a few pennies would make a difference. I believe she did forget to bring money with her. Why make things so difficult for her?" (MC: *A soul mate.*) Producing a string of coins from his waist pocket, he continued, "Her meal is on me."

Only then did the waiter release her. He added up the items in her order and took the money.

The woman approached Cheng Yuanyu and said with one bow after another, "You, sir, are a real gentleman. May I ask your honorable name, so that I can repay you twice as much?"

Cheng Yuanyu replied, "Such a trifling matter is not even worth mentioning! You need not repay me, nor is it necessary to know my name." (MC: *Yes, a real gentleman.*)

"Don't say that! You're in for a little shock on the road ahead. I'll be doing something to repay you for your kindness. That's why I ask your name. Please don't conceal it from me. If you want to know mine, just remember that I'm Lady Wei the Eleventh."

Finding her words somewhat enigmatic, Cheng Yuanyu obliged and told her his name.

The woman said, "I'm going to the western part of the city to see a relative and will be back in the eastern part soon enough." So saying, she mounted her donkey, flicked it with her whip, and rode off with the speed of the wind.

After leaving the restaurant on horseback with his servant, Cheng Yuanyu kept wondering about the woman's enigmatic words. Then he said to himself, "But why should I take a woman's words so seriously? What's more, if she couldn't even pay for a meal, how can I expect such a person to come to my aid when something happens to me?"

When he had gone several *li* in this frame of mind, he began to notice a man who constantly entered his line of vision, sometimes appearing before him and sometimes lagging behind him. Wearing a felt hat on his head and

bearing a leather bag on his back, the man had the look of a seasoned long-distance traveler. From horseback, Cheng Yuanyu asked him, "Where can I find lodging down the road?"

The man replied, "Sixty *li* from here there's a Yangsong Town with lodgings for traveling merchants. There's nothing nearer than that."

Cheng Yuanyu had heard of Yangsong Town, so he said, "It's kind of late now. Can I make it before it gets dark?"

Raising his head, the man looked at the sun before replying, "I can, but you can't."

"Surely you jest!" said Cheng Yuanyu. "I'm on a horse. Why can you, traveling on foot, make it and I can't? What do you mean?"

The man explained with a smile, "There's a shortcut that goes diagonally to the bay for about twenty *li*. Another twenty *li*, and you'll be there in the town. But if you take the zigzagging high road, you'll be traveling twenty extra *li*, which is why I say you won't be able to make it."

Cheng Yuanyu said, "May I trouble you to take me to the shortcut? We can travel together. I'll treat you to wine when we get to the town."

The man went merrily ahead of Cheng Yuanyu and said, "All right, follow me!"

Lured by the mention of a shortcut and feeling safe with someone who looked like an experienced hiker, Cheng Yuanyu forgot all about the woman's warning. (MC: *Those lured by petty gains will suffer major losses.*) He and his servant, riding on their animals, followed the man to the supposed shortcut. It began as a smooth path, easy to ride on, but after more than one *li*, it began to get rocky and posed quite a challenge to the animals. A little farther on, a tall hill loomed before them, blocking their way. They went around the hill, only to enter a dense forest that shut out the sky. Both Cheng Yuanyu and his servant panicked. Reproachfully, Cheng Yuanyu said to the man, "Why did you take us on this path?"

Affably the man said, "It will get smooth up ahead!"

Much against his will, Cheng Yuanyu continued to follow him. After going around another hill, the terrain became even more rugged. Realizing that he had been tricked, Cheng Yuanyu cried out, "Oh no!" He promptly turned his horse around, but at this point, the man whistled loudly, and a group of men appeared in front of the hill.

*With hideous features, of vigorous build,
They kill under cover of night*

*And commit arson when the wind is high.
They claim to follow the Dao
And borrow the rhetoric of the scholars.
They can find no just reason for their acts,
Yet they steal the strategies of the generals.
They may go by the epithet of "bandits,"
But they make up half of the upper classes today.*

Seeing that things had taken such an ugly turn, Cheng Yuanyu knew there was no possibility of getting out of it. So he scrambled off his horse and said with a deep bow, "Oh, mighty ones, please take all my valuables but spare the saddle horse and my clothes, so that I may have enough left to make my way back home."

Sure enough, the bandits took only his parcels, emptied all his silver out of them, and went away. By the time Cheng Yuanyu turned around to check what was left for him, his horse had broken the reins and vanished from sight, and his servant, trying to hide, had also fled none knew whither. All alone by his forlorn self, he ascended to the top of a hillock and looked around. His servant and his horse were nowhere to be seen, let alone the bandits, and there was no sign of human habitation as far as his eyes could see. In the gathering darkness (IC: *Cause for alarm.*), he had no idea what to do. With a sigh, he said, "I'm as good as dead!"

At this desperate moment, he heard the sound of rustling tree leaves. He turned around, and what should he see but a human figure approaching him with light and airy steps through the dense foliage? Only when the person was right in front of him did Cheng Yuanyu see that it was a woman. Much relieved on seeing her, he was about to address her when she suddenly raised one hand in a Daoist salute to him and said, "I'm Blue Mist, disciple of Lady Wei the Eleventh. My teacher knew that you, sir, were in for a shock and told me to wait here for you. My teacher is farther ahead. Please go and meet her."

When he heard that it was Lady Wei the Eleventh and realized that her prediction of "a shock" had come true, Cheng Yuanyu felt emboldened enough to follow Blue Mist, hoping for a rescue. Before they had gone half a *li*, the woman he had met in the restaurant came up to greet him. "I apologize for not having come earlier to get you out of your plight," said she. "But I've recovered your valuables, and your horse and your servant are here. Don't worry."

Cheng Yuanyu had been so sick with fear that his voice failed him.

Lady Wei the Eleventh continued, "You must not travel tonight, sir. My humble house is not far from here. Please have supper at my house and stay the night there before continuing on your way."

In no position to do otherwise, Cheng Yuanyu followed her to her home.

After going around two hillocks, they saw, standing alone, a tall, steep mountain whose peak reached into the clouds. Lady Wei the Eleventh pointed to it and said, "That's Mount Cloud. My humble house is at the very top." (MC: *Only masters of magic arts can live in such a place.*) She led Cheng Yuanyu up the mountain by grabbing vines and trees hand over hand. At dangerously steep spots, Lady Wei and Blue Mist supported him and stopped for a rest every few steps. He was badly out of breath, while the two women moved as if they were on flat ground. Every time Cheng Yuanyu raised his head to look at the mountaintop, he saw that it was lost in clouds and mist, but when he reached a greater height, he found himself above the clouds and the mist. More than ten *li* farther on, they finally reached a flight of stone stairs with about a hundred steps. The stairs led to a flat courtyard with an exquisite thatched cottage. After Cheng Yuanyu sat down in it upon request, Lady Wei the Eleventh called forth another maidservant named Floating Cloud and had her serve tea, fruit, wild herbs, pine-nut wine, and rice. Indeed, they waited on him hand and foot.

Now that he had calmed down, Cheng Yuanyu half rose from his chair out of respect and said, "I carelessly fell into a trap. If it hadn't been for you, madam, I would have been a dead man. But what magic power did you use, madam, to recover my belongings?"

"I'm a knight-errant, not just any woman. When we were in the restaurant, I was impressed by your dignity, which set you apart from that frivolous lot. That's why I have such respect for you. I detected in your face some signs of imminent danger, so I falsely claimed that I didn't have the money to pay for my meal. It was just to test you. When it became evident that you're a man of honor, I made a point of staying here to wait for you as repayment for your kindness. As for those scoundrels who terrorized you, I've taught them a lesson."

Cheng Yuanyu was overcome with delight and admiration. Being well versed in history from the time he was a child, he knew of the existence of such magic arts. He said, "As far as I know, the art of swordsmanship you practice originated during the Tang dynasty and came to an end in the Song

dynasty, which is why nothing was known about it from the Yuan dynasty to this dynasty [Ming]. So where did you learn your art, madam?"

Lady Eleventh replied, "This art did not originate during the Tang dynasty, nor did it end in the Song dynasty. It was in existence when the Yellow Emperor received books on the art of war from the Heavenly Maiden.³ It was from these books that the emperor's retainer Fenghou acquired the skills with which he defeated Chiyou. The Yellow Emperor was fearful that the miraculous art could be abused. This, coupled with the Lord on High's strict rules, made the Yellow Emperor decide not to popularize the art. Instead, he chose only one or two men of faith and passed on the art orally, which is why the art has not been lost, but it has never gained popularity either. Later, it came to be used by the man hired by Zhang Liang to assassinate the First Emperor of Qin, by the Prince of Liang against Yuan Ang, by Gongsun Shu against Generals Lai and Cen, and by Li Shidao against Prime Minister Wu Yuanheng.⁴ This art is by no means easy to acquire. Governors of the strategically positioned outlying prefectures in the Tang dynasty so admired it that in their eagerness to learn it, they hired mysterious men of unannounced comings and goings, and those of a mercenary mind recklessly entered into their service. This gave rise to the belief that it thrived only in the Tang dynasty. In fact, these people violated the laws of the Lord on High, which is why they all died grisly deaths. Therefore, teachers of the art, drawing lessons from the past, always admonished against unauthorized teachings, indiscriminate killings, harming the good on behalf of the evil, and killing and claiming credit for the art. (IC: *That was why Lu Qi, evil minister of the Tang dynasty, was unable to recruit worthy men.*)⁵ It was these strict warnings that stopped Zhao Yuanhao's man from assassinating Duke Han of Wei and the assassin sent by Miao Fu and Liu Zhengyan from killing Zhang Deyuan.⁶ They were afraid of violating the rules."

At this point, Cheng Yuanyu commented, "The history books make no mention of the art when describing the Yellow Emperor's battle against Chiyou and Zhang Liang's hiring of an assassin. And the assassins sent by the king of Liang, Gongsun Shu, and Li Shidao are all said to have been bandits. Where did the art come in?"

Lady Eleventh countered, "You're quite mistaken, sir. That's because we don't claim credit for our art. Chiyou, with his strange appearance and his magic powers, was surely not defeated by regular war strategies. And how awe-inspiring was the First Emperor of Qin with his majestic procession!

Moreover, with the laws of Qin as draconian as they were, who would have dared attack him? And no ordinary assassin could escape after attacking him.⁷ With regard to the other cases, Yuan Ang being a trusted retainer of the emperor, Generals Lai and Cen being as important as they were, and Wu Yuanheng being the prime minister, how could anyone who lacked the divine art kill them in a large crowd or by their chariots? Moreover, Wu Yuanheng's assassin even took his skull. Who could have taken the time to do that in the haste of the moment? Actually, the history books make it clear enough. It's just that you, sir, never bothered to devote much thought to it." (MC: *Excellent argument.*)

Cheng Yuanyu said, "It's just as you say with the history books. The assassins as described by the Grand Historian must have been masters of this art.⁸ In the case of Jingke assassinating the First Emperor of Qin, Jingke's swordsmanship is said to have been mediocre.⁹ Does it follow that the other assassins covered in that volume were masters of the art?"

Lady Eleventh said, "The Grand Historian got it wrong. The First Emperor of Qin, however ruthless, was an emperor mandated by Heaven. How could a true swordsman use his art lightly on such a man? As for assassins Zhuanzhu and Nie Zheng, they were brave men driven by their sense of loyalty and honor. They did not possess the art. If you think they did, then all those who kill recklessly and lose their lives while killing can claim to be true swordsmen!"

"What about Kunlun Mole?"¹⁰

"He was too shallow! Lady Nie the Invisible and Red Thread were the real masters. Kunlun Mole was accomplished in the physical skills and applied them in overcoming all manner of difficulties, but Lady Invisible and Red Thread were on a higher plane—they used their minds, the mysterious workings of which were beyond the ken of ghosts and spirits. They were able to go through the eyes of needles and hide themselves on the surface of a city wall. They could travel a thousand *li* in a trice and leave no trace of their comings and goings. How could they possibly lack the true art?"

Cheng Yuanyu said, "According to 'The Curly-Bearded Knight,' the man ate the head of his enemy.¹¹ How could a true swordsman seek personal revenge?"

"No. What you said about the man with curly whiskers is but a story, not a fact. Even in seeking revenge, one must make a distinction between right and wrong. If I was in the wrong, I wouldn't dream of using my art to avenge

myself.” (MC: *Clearly, practitioners of this art can earn immortality precisely because their hearts are in the right place.*)

“What are the leading reasons for revenge among masters of the art?”

“They can be classified into several clusters, none of which are based on personal reasons. For starters, there are those local officials who torment the people, take their money, and do away with them. There are those judges who abuse power, fawn on their superiors, and persecute men of integrity. There are those generals who misappropriate soldiers’ pay and do so little work that they lose the empire’s border regions to invaders. There are those court ministers who cultivate their own henchmen and plot against those who are not in their camp, rewarding the evil and punishing the good. There are those civil service examination officials who make private deals, take bribes, seek personal gain, and mix black and white by letting untalented candidates pass the exams while flunking the real scholars. All those I just listed deserve extermination. (MC: *That leaves few people exempt from extermination.*) As for slimy petty officials and local despots, they fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Justice, and the God of Thunder takes care of unfilial sons and heartless ingrates. They’re no concern of mine.”

“I’ve never heard of any master swordsmen putting away the ones on your hit list.”

Lady Eleventh said with a smile, “But that’s hardly something to be made public! There are any number of ways to do away with such people. The more heinous offenders get their heads cut off, and those of their wives and offspring as well. The lesser offenders may suffer a slit throat or injuries to their vital organs. Their family members think they died sudden deaths, without knowing the real cause and how it happened. Or their souls could be snatched away to make them lose their senses and die in mental confusion. Or a spell could be cast on their households so that one scandal follows another until they die from rage or broken hearts. As for those whose number is not up yet, they can be given nightmares so that they experience fear.”

“Could you do a demonstration of your swordsmanship for me?”

“I’m not going to do an elaborate one because I don’t want to frighten you. But a simpler demonstration shouldn’t do any harm.”

Thereupon, she summoned Blue Mist and Floating Cloud and gave them these instructions: “Mr. Cheng asked for a swordsmanship demonstration. You do one for him right here on the cliff.” The two girls acknowledged the

order. Lady Eleventh extracted two pellets from her sleeve and tossed them into the air. They reached a height of several hundred feet before they began to fall. The two girls leaped onto the tip of a tree branch and caught them squarely in their palms. Each gave her pellet a swipe, and it became a dazzling dagger. The tree branch they were standing on was bending low over an unfathomably deep ravine. One little peek over the cliff gave Cheng Yuanyu goose bumps all over. His soul took flight; his hair stood on end. But Lady Eleventh went on talking and laughing without losing her composure. The movements of the two girls were discernible at first but quickly became faster, until only two white ribbons were seen swirling up and down in the air and the girls were lost to view. This went on for about as long as it would take to eat a meal, after which time they alighted from the branch, not in the least out of breath or flushed in the face.

Cheng Yuanyu sighed in admiration and said, "Their skills are truly out of this world!"

Night was well advanced by this time. A quilt plus a deer-skin coat were spread out on a bamboo couch for Cheng Yuanyu. Lady Eleventh and the two girls curtsied to him and retired to a stone chamber. It was only the eighth lunar month of the year, but Cheng Yuanyu still felt cold under the layers of bedding. He was on top of a high mountain, after all.

Before daybreak, Lady Eleventh was already up and had finished her toilette. Cheng Yuanyu also washed and did his hair and went out to greet her. In response to his profuse thanks, she said, "No, this rustic mountain dwelling is too humble for me to be a good hostess."

After breakfast, Lady Eleventh had Blue Mist take her bow and arrows and go downhill to hunt game for their lunch. After a while, Blue Mist came back empty-handed, saying that it was still too early in the day. Lady Eleventh then sent Floating Cloud down. Before long, Floating Cloud returned with a pheasant and a rabbit. In great delight, Lady Eleventh told Blue Mist to cook them in honor of their guest. Cheng Yuanyu asked in puzzlement, "Are there so few pheasants and rabbits in the mountains that they are so hard to find?"

Lady Eleventh replied, "Actually, there's no lack of them in the mountains, but finding them is the hard part because they're deeply hidden."

Cheng Yuanyu laughed. "With your divine powers, what's to stop you from hunting down a pheasant and a rabbit?"

"I'm afraid you've got it wrong, sir. How can one use this art to take a life just to fill one's stomach? The heavenly principles forbid this. Besides, we

mustn't waste our art on such trifles. In hunting pheasants and rabbits and the like, just bows, arrows, and human muscles suffice."

Cheng Yuanyi was greatly impressed. After a few rounds of drinks, he asked, "May I learn something about your family background?"

Looking deferential but ill at ease, Lady Eleventh took a moment or two to answer. "There's so much that embarrasses me. But I guess there's no harm in telling everything to someone as kind and as honorable as you are. I'm a native of Chang'an [present-day Xi'an]. My parents were poor. They took me to Pingliang [in Gansu], where they made a living as artisans. Then my father died, leaving me and my mother alone in the world. Two years thereafter, my mother married me to a man named Zheng in the same neighborhood. Then my mother remarried. My husband turned out to be a debauched scoundrel with a passion for the wandering life of a knight-errant. My pleas to him to change his ways only led to a falling-out with him. He left me and went to the frontier with some good-for-nothing friends of his, to prove his worth. He's never been heard of since. His older brother, by no means a decent man, said improper words to me, but I firmly rejected his advances. One day he sneaked up to my bed. I picked up my sword from my bedside and lunged at him. He went away after he was wounded. As a woman, I was unable to get along with my husband, and once abandoned, I found it unseemly to live with his brother in the same place. And after I wounded him, I couldn't live there any longer.

"A Daoist nun named Zhao had been very kind to me when I was small and said she could pass down her magic art to me. When my parents were alive, I was not at liberty to have my own way, but at that point I made up my mind to throw myself on her mercy. I went to see her the very next day. She accepted me joyfully. She said, 'You must leave that place. Why don't you move to my nunnery in the mountains?' She took me up a mountain that was even steeper than this one. There, in a round hut at its very top, she taught me her art and went down the mountain by herself at dusk. Before she departed to let me sleep alone, she gave me this advice: 'Whatever you do, don't drink alcohol or indulge in debauchery.' I thought, 'How would I do those things in these remote mountains?' I promised her but didn't think much about her admonition.

"As I lay in bed in the round hut, a man showed up in the middle of the night. He had entered by scaling the wall, and he was so handsome that he was a marvel to the eyes. I rose in alarm and asked him who he was. He didn't reply, nor did he step back when I told him to. Instead, he came up to

me and tried to gather me in his arms. The more I resisted him, the more adamant he became. As I unsheathed my sword against him, he did the same against me. He was a master swordsman, whereas I was but a beginner. Knowing I was no match for him, I put down my sword and begged him, 'I'm born to suffer. I've long been abstinent. How can you have the heart to break my abstinence? What's more, my teacher has laid down the rules for me, and I vowed never to break them.' Turning a deaf ear to my plea, the man put his sword to my neck and continued to demand that I submit myself to him. I stretched my neck for the execution, saying, 'I'd rather die than submit.'

"The man put down his sword and said smilingly, 'Now I know how resolute you are!' On taking a closer look, I found him to be none other than Zhao the Daoist nun, in a man's form to test me. Now convinced of the power of my will, she taught me everything she knew. After I finished my lessons, she left to travel afar, and I came to live on this mountain."

Cheng Yuanyu was all the more impressed.

As it was approaching the noon hour, Cheng Yuanyu took leave of Lady Eleventh and asked her what had happened to his belongings, his servant, and his horse. She replied, "They'll all be returned to you as you go along. You have nothing to worry about." Then she gave him a bag of herbal medicine and said, "Taking one pill will keep you free from illnesses for one year." She escorted him down the mountain and did not bid him farewell until they were by the high road.

Before he had taken many steps on the road, he saw the bandits again, standing by the road, ready to return his belongings, his servant, and his horse to him. Cheng Yuanyu offered to share half his money with them (MC: *Yuanyu is indeed a good man.*), but they stoutly declined. He then offered them just one tael of silver as a tip but was also turned down. When asked why, the bandits said, "We dare not go against Lady Wei's orders even if we're a thousand *li* from her. She'll know if we do. Our lives are more important than your money!" (MC: *They are most probably her subordinates.*)

With one sigh after another, Cheng Yuanyu repacked his money, and master and servant set out on their journey.

Nothing was heard from Lady Eleventh for more than ten years. One day, when Cheng Yuanyu was back in Sichuan and strolling on a wooden-plank walkway in the mountains, a young woman accompanied by a scholarly-looking man on the same walkway kept casting glances his way. On taking a closer look, Cheng Yuanyu found her face familiar but could not place her.

All of a sudden, the woman cried out, “Mr. Cheng! Have you been well since we last met? Do you still remember Blue Mist?”

Only then did Cheng Yuanyu recall that she was Lady Wei the Eleventh’s maidservant. After he exchanged greetings with her and the scholar, Blue Mist said to the scholar, “This is Mr. Cheng, whom my teacher holds in great esteem. I’ve told you about him.” Whereupon the scholar saluted Cheng Yuanyu again.

Cheng Yuanyu asked Blue Mist, “Where’s your venerable teacher? And who might this be?”

“Nothing has changed with my teacher. Several years after you left, sir, I married this scholar at my teacher’s order.”

Cheng asked, “And where’s Floating Cloud?”

“She has also married. My teacher has two new disciples now. Floating Cloud and I go to visit her only during festivals.”

“So where are you headed now?”

Blue Mist replied, “I have some official business to attend to. I have to go now.” With that, she took leave of Cheng Yuanyu and departed in haste.

After a few days, word got around that an official in the Sichuan region had died a violent death. That official was a cunning and crafty man hungry for fame and did little but persecute people and seize their property. When he was chief examiner of the civil service examinations, he again took bribes and passed an unqualified candidate, thus denying a worthy candidate the honor. He was therefore one of those on Lady Wei the Eleventh’s extermination list. Cheng Yuanyu wondered to himself, “This must have been the ‘official business’ that Blue Mist was out to do.” But he didn’t dare reveal the truth to anyone. Thereafter, nothing was ever heard of the women again.

All this happened in the Chenghua reign period [1465–87] of this dynasty [Ming], as recorded by Grand Scribe Hu Rujia of Nanjing in *The Biography of Lady Wei the Eleventh*. In the words of a poem,

*The knights-errant have been around since long ago,
But Lady Wei’s speech set her apart from the others.
With her two pellets, she applied her art.
With her one sword, she pursued selfless goals.
She distinguished the good from the evil;
She rewarded and punished in fairness.
Let us bring her skills into play
And get all reprobates out of the way.*



Zhang Derong Encounters a Tiger Sent by the Gods as a Matchmaker

Zhang Derong Encounters a Tiger Sent by the Gods as a Matchmaker

Pei Yueke Becomes the Lucky Mate Just in Time for the Blissful Date

As the poem says:

*Marriages are always said to be a matter of fate,
Decreed by the Old Man under the Moon.¹
Unions not so destined hardly ever come to pass;
Even timing is predetermined, to the day.*

It is said that all marriages are predestined and that, with a red string, the Old Man under the Moon ties together the ankles of couples who are meant for each other, even if they are a thousand *li* apart. But if no such predestined bond exists, there will be no marriage, however hard you may try to bring one about. And even if there is such a bond between a couple, their wedding will not take place even one day ahead of the predestined time. Conversely, if the predestined time has arrived, everything you try to do to postpone the date by even one day will be of no avail. It is the god of marriage who runs everything behind the scenes. Human efforts make no difference.

There lived in the Tang dynasty a Magistrate Li of Hongnong County [present-day city of Lingbao, Henan], who betrothed his daughter, of marriageable age as our story unfolds, to a Mr. Lu. A powerfully built man with

a long beard and an elegant bearing, young Mr. Lu favorably impressed the whole Li family. So a day was chosen for the wedding, after which the young man was to live in the Li residence.

The Li family had frequent mutual visits with a sorceress whose predictions of future events were reputedly quite accurate. On the wedding day, she also came to join the festivities. With full faith in this woman, Mrs. Li sought her opinion, asking, "As you see it, what are the prospects for my son-in-law Mr. Lu's career as an official?"

"Isn't Mr. Lu that young man with a long beard?"

"Exactly."

"In that case, he's not meant to be your son-in-law, my lady. Your son-in-law doesn't look like this at all."

"How does my son-in-law look, pray?"

"He's of medium height, fair-complexioned, and beardless."

Mrs. Li said in alarm, "If it's as you say, there will be no wedding for my daughter this evening!"

"Why? Of course there will be!"

"What kind of nonsense is this! If the wedding is to take place, who can the bridegroom be if not Mr. Lu?"

The sorceress said, "Even I have no clue about the reason for why things happen the way they do."

Before the words were quite out of her mouth, the earth-shaking sound of drum music outside fell upon their ears. Mr. Lu arrived to present the betrothal gifts and knelt down in the main hall. Holding the sorceress's hand, Mrs. Li pointed to Mr. Lu with her other hand through the chink between the double doors of the rear room where they were standing and said, "Look at the one making the bows. Obviously, he's going to consummate the wedding tonight. How can he not be my son-in-law? You're being ridiculous!"

The maidservants present burst into laughter on hearing their mistress's words. "Telling flat-out lies is second nature to that old granny. But she's caught this time!" The sorceress kept silent.

In the meantime, more and more relatives arrived for the grand wedding ceremony. For the families of officials during the Tang dynasty, you see, the wedding night was so important to the wedding ceremony that all the friends and clan members of both the bride and the groom would descend on the place. The usher and the announcer—the two masters of ceremony—were by no means social inferiors but close friends or family members

chosen for their knowledge of ritual, their good looks, and their sonorous voices, and it was an honorable profession.

Now let us come back to Mr. Lu in the main hall. Having made his bows in the presence of the usher and the announcer, he went into the bridal chamber with the bride. As soon as he lifted Miss Li's bridal head scarf by the lamplight, he gave a start, and a cold chill went down his spine. "Oh no!" he cried as he turned and darted for the door. Ignoring all questions from friends and family, he bolted out of the house, mounted his horse, and, flicking it with his whip, raced off with the speed of the wind. (MC: *Horror smote him.*) Several of his friends who wished to get to the bottom of this gave chase, as did a few people close to the Li family, worried that the auspicious hour would be missed, and they were eager to see the completion of the wedding ceremony. Some gave up the chase because Mr. Lu was too fast for them. Those who did catch up with him showered him with questions and words of admonition, but he refused to explain his actions and just kept waving his hand and saying, "This is not going to happen! Not going to happen!" And he adamantly refused to turn his horse back. In resignation, the guests returned to the house and gave a report of what they had witnessed.

Rage seized Magistrate Li. His eyes popped wide open, and his jaw dropped. Then he burst out with a cry, "This is outrageous! Simply outrageous!" To himself he said, "Since my daughter is as pretty as a flower, what could have caused this uproar? Why don't I talk to all the guests and show her to them?" So he led the guests to the door of the bridal chamber, had his daughter come out to greet the assembled company, and said, pointing to her, "This is my daughter, betrothed to Mr. Lu. Can she be so hideously ugly as to have frightened Mr. Lu away? If I don't show her to you, you may very likely take her to be a monster."

All those present raised their eyes and saw that Miss Li was indeed a ravishing beauty second to none. Some lamented that Mr. Lu was a luckless man, some commented on the lack of a predestined bond between Mr. Lu and the young lady, and others blamed it all on the wrong choice of the date, which must have run afoul of the evil spirits. While everyone was thus jabbering away, Magistrate Li's angry voice boomed out, "I don't suppose that scoundrel will go through with the ceremony, so I'm not going to beg him. Now that my daughter has greeted all of you, tonight's celebration can't be called off. Anyone willing to take the marriage offer will be my son-in-law as of tonight! With so many people as witnesses, anyone present can serve as a matchmaker."

Lo and behold! One of the two hosts of the ceremony stepped forward and said, all calm and composed, "However unworthy I am, I'll be more than happy to serve you, sir, as your son-in-law." (MC: *He is the big winner!*)

Everyone peered more intently and saw that it was Mr. Zheng, who held a government post. He was a handsome man with a complexion as fair as if by powder and lips as red as if rouged, and, as for a beard, his chin did not sport a single hair. The guests broke into cheers and said, "Now this is the right man for such an outstanding young lady! What a perfect match in age, appearance, and family status!"

Two elderly men were chosen to be the matchmakers, and a young man was picked to fill the vacancy for master of ceremonies. The young lady was brought out to exchange bows with the groom so as not to miss the chosen auspicious date. All other necessary formalities were to be completed after the wedding. And so, Mr. Zheng and Miss Li became man and wife that very night. Mr. Zheng's looks indeed corresponded to the sorceress's description. Only then did they believe that she had the divine eye.

After the wedding, Mr. Zheng met Mr. Lu, who was in fact a close friend of his. When asked why he had behaved as he had, Mr. Lu replied, "When I lifted the bridal head scarf, what I saw was that the bride had saucer-size bloodshot eyes and protruding teeth that were inches long. It was no human being but the very image of a *yaksha* painted on the walls of a Buddhist temple.² I was frightened out of my senses. How could I not run for dear life?"

Mr. Zheng said with a grin, "The bride is now mine."

"How are you managing? Having a hard time?"

Mr. Zheng said, "Follow me home. I'll introduce you to each other."

And so Mr. Lu followed Mr. Zheng home. The bride, all properly done up, came out to greet the visitor. Seeing this ravishing beauty, decidedly not the monster he had seen the other night, Mr. Lu was eaten up with remorse. Later, when he heard about what the sorceress had said, he realized that it had all been dictated by destiny. With a sigh, he dismissed the matter from his mind. This bears out the old saying,

*Those with a predestined bond will meet,
However great the distance between them.
Those without will never meet,
Face-to-face though they may be.*

Our story proper takes place in the Qianyuan reign period [758–59] of the Tang dynasty. There lived a minister of personnel named Zhang Gao. His second daughter was called Derong. During his term of office in the capital, Secretary Zhang was best friends with Pei Mian, vice director of the Imperial Secretariat. Director Pei's third son, Pei Yueke, had served as county sheriff at Lantian. Since the two families were well matched in status, Secretary Zhang betrothed his daughter Derong to the young man, and a wedding date was duly chosen.

Now let me tell of an elderly fortune-teller who had a stall in West Market in the capital city of Chang'an [present-day Xi'an]. Li Zhiwei by name, he was a clansman of Li Chunfeng's and a master astrologist.³ When telling fortunes, he invariably gave specific dates on which his predictions of disaster or good fortune were supposed to come true. And sure enough, he never got them wrong, not even by a fraction of an hour.

One day, a Mr. Liu went to him. This Mr. Liu was from an official's family and entitled to inherit a government post, but after spending several years in the capital trying to land a job, he was still getting nowhere. Earlier that year, after he had pulled a few strings in the offices that mattered most, given all the proper instructions, and taken a Ministry of Personnel examination in which he was asked to make judgments on baffling court cases, he thought he was bound to succeed. Then he heard about the reputation of Mr. Li of West Market, and so here he was, to have his fortune told.

After doing a divination, Mr. Li said with a smile, "You won't get what you want this year, but it will come to you of its own accord next year."

Mr. Liu did not believe him, but when the Ministry of Personnel published the list of successful candidates, he saw that his name was indeed not there because he had dropped a few words in his judgments on the court cases. The following year, he again took the Ministry of Personnel examination without begging for favors. With no confidence in his judgments on the court cases in the examination, he again went to West Market to seek Mr. Li's advice.

Mr. Li said, "Didn't I tell you last year that you'd surely land an official post this time around? Don't worry!"

"If I do land a government post, where will my duty station be?"

"It will be in the Kaifeng area. After you get the job, come see me again. I'll have something else to tell you."

Mr. Liu's name did appear on the ministry of personnel's list of successful candidates, and he was appointed Kaifeng County's vice magistrate in charge of police affairs. With surprise mixed with joy, Mr. Liu paid Mr. Li another visit, this time fully convinced of Li's divine power. Mr. Li said to him, "Once in your post, you need not try to be a clean and incorrupt official. Just take as much as you can. No harm will come to you. (MC: *This advice could not have been better suited to the greedy.*) When your term is up, you can ask for an assignment to the capital. I'll have another session with you then."

Mr. Liu made a mental note of these words as he took leave of the fortune-teller, after which he reported for duty. His superior, the prefect, impressed with his distinguished family background, put great trust in him. Recalling Mr. Li's advice, Mr. Liu took bribes left and right without the slightest hesitation. Officials high and low all liked him. No one raised any objections. By the time his term was up, he had amassed a fortune worth ten million taels of silver. The prefect granted his request for an assignment to the capital and told him to deliver the prefectural taxes to the imperial court.

Once he was in the capital, he paid another visit to Mr. Li. "You're due for a promotion in three days," said Li.

Mr. Liu responded, "While I'm in the capital, I'm planning to find an opportunity to obtain another government appointment, but how will three days be enough? And this isn't the usual time for promotions. I'm afraid you're off the mark this time."

"No, absolutely not! And your new, higher post will be in the same prefecture. After you get the position, come see me again. I'll have more to say to you."

Mr. Liu took himself off. The next day, when approaching the Imperial Treasury to deliver the prefectural taxes, he saw a large multicolored bird flying from a southeasterly direction and landing on top of the treasury building in a blaze of radiance. Flocks of chirping birds also flew over, blocking the sky. "How very strange!" exclaimed Mr. Liu. His cries and the commotion caught the attention of eunuchs inside, and they rushed out to see what it was all about. Some recognized the large bird as a phoenix. After pausing for a while, the bird spread its wings and flew away from the raucous scene, after which the other birds gradually dispersed.

On hearing reports of this incident, the emperor was delighted and issued a promotion order, saying, "We grant a one-grade promotion to the man who saw it first."

Investigators checked the facts and established that Mr. Liu had been the one to see it first. Whereupon the ministry of personnel was instructed to appoint him deputy magistrate of Junyi County [northwest of the city of Kaifeng]. And sure enough, this happened before three days were out, and the new post was indeed in the same prefecture. All the more impressed with the fortune-teller's powers, Mr. Liu again went to see him and asked for advice on his new job. Mr. Li said, "You need only do as you've done before." (MC: *Wonderful.*)

Following his counsel, Mr. Liu gave free rein to his greed as before and grew richer by another ten million. When his term of office expired, he traveled to the capital to await a transfer order and paid Mr. Li another visit.

Mr. Li said, "This time, you're going to be appointed a county magistrate. Don't take bribes, not even a penny. Be careful!"

Mr. Liu was indeed appointed magistrate of Shouchun County. Bribery having become second nature to him during his previous two terms of office, how could he kick the habit now? Shortly after arriving at his post, he succumbed to his old weakness and cast Mr. Li's admonition to the winds. And so he obeyed Mr. Li because the idea of bribery appealed to him and dismissed Li's advice against such behavior as hypocritical and lacking credibility. (MC: *Such are the ways of the world.*) Before long, his superiors reported against him to the emperor. The government recovered the ill-gotten money, and he was stripped of his post.

He went to Mr. Li again and said, "The first two times you told me to take freely, and the last time you warned me against it. You were right all three times. Why?"

"Let me explain. In your previous incarnation, you were a rich merchant with a fortune of twenty million. You died in Bianzhou, and your wealth got scattered among the people there. As an official in this life, you were entitled to take back what had rightfully belonged to you. (MC: *So most officials of our day must have had their wealth scattered in all directions from their earlier incarnations.*) That's why you weren't disciplined the first two times. However, no one in Shouchun County has ever owed you anything. How could you take from them? You brought all this on yourself because you sought what was not rightfully yours." Overcome with awe and shame, Mr. Liu went away. Examples of Mr. Li's accuracy in his fortune-telling are too numerous for me to cite them all.

Let us now return to the main story. Vice Director Pei, having chosen the wedding date for his son, sent the matchmakers to Minister Zhang's home to inform the Zhangs of his choice. Minister Zhang, for his part, having heard about Mr. Li the fortune-teller's divine accuracy, had him brought over to the Zhang residence. Minister Zhang then presented him with the eight characters representing the year, month, day, and hour of Miss Zhang's birth as well as the proposed wedding date, so that Mr. Li could check for any signs of a mismatch. Mr. Li looked at the eight characters and said, "The wedding is not meant to take place this year, nor will it take place here."

Minister Zhang said, "If the date is not a lucky one, we can change it. But why isn't it supposed to be sometime this year? And, since both our families live in the capital, where is the wedding to take place if not here?"

Mr. Li resumed, "As I see it, fate decrees otherwise. No wedding is to take place this year. The wedding is meant for the third day of the third lunar month next year, to be preceded by a shocking event, and it will be in the south. Since this is all a matter of destiny, you need not bother to pick a date on your own. It's not going to happen one day earlier or later."

Still dubious, Minister Zhang said, "This is quite unbelievable!" With that, he had a housekeeper prepare a packet of gift money and gave it to Mr. Li before bidding him good-bye.

Scarcely had Mr. Li gone out through the gate when the Pei family came and asked him to check if the match portended good or ill. Once at the Pei residence, Mr. Li did a divination and said, "How very strange! This tallies exactly with the divination I did for Secretary Zhang's family." With the four treasures of the scholar's study,⁴ he wrote these lines:

*The third day of the third month,
Not a day earlier, nor a day later.
When the boat is stuck in shallow water,
A tiger will show up with the lady.
It will be a shattering shock;
It will be a heavenly blessing.*

The meaning of these lines was lost on Pei Yueke. He said, "My wedding with Minister Zhang's daughter is coming up soon, later this year, so I'd like to ask if the date portends good or evil. What do you mean by 'the third day of the third month'?"

Mr. Li replied, "That is the wedding date."

"But the date has already been fixed, and it's way ahead of your date. You're not making sense!"

"Be patient, young man. The predictions of this old man never miss the mark."

"Those lines 'When the boat is stuck in shallow water, a tiger will show up with the lady' surely portends evil."

"Not necessarily. You'll see after it's confirmed." With that, Mr. Li took leave of young Mr. Pei.

Just when joyful preparations for the wedding were in full swing, several remonstrance officials vied to impeach the secretary of the ministry of personnel over improper assignments of government posts.⁵ By an imperial decree, Minister Zhang Gao was demoted to revenue manager of Yi Prefecture [in present-day Guizhou] and was ordered to set out on his journey the very next day. With a sigh, Minister Zhang said, "Li Zhiwei's predictions have been born out." He asked one of the matchmakers to notify the Pei family that the wedding was to be held in Yizhou, on the third day of the third month of the next year. With his family members in tow, he left for Yizhou before the night was out.

In the Tang dynasty, demoted high officials were a sorry lot. Relatives and friends avoided them like the plague, on alert at all times of the day for any strikes against them by the imperial court. And so Minister Zhang did not expect the marriage alliance with the Pei family to materialize.

The note from Secretary Zhang gave Pei Yueke a start. He said to himself, "So Li Zhiwei's predictions *were* right on target. We'll have to go by his date after all." The happy date already in sight had now gone up in smoke. After a gloomy New Year's Day, Pei Yueke began to pack for his journey to Yizhou for the wedding ceremony.

Extravagant spender that he was, Pei Yueke hired a large boat in a show of pomp and ceremony. Laden with baggage and household supplies, more than twenty male servants, seven or eight female domestics, and seven or eight page boys, the boat set sail on a chosen auspicious day. How Pei Yueke wished he could grow a pair of wings, rise on a cloud, and arrive at Yizhou in the twinkling of an eye! But many days went by, and the end of the second lunar month was upon them. The boat was so heavily laden that it could hardly make a hundred *li* a day, and sometimes, when it got stranded, it could take days to resume its journey. When they were still about three hundred *li*

from Yizhou, Pei Yueke began to grow frantic. He was afraid that the Zhang family, not knowing he was on his way, would not start preparations for the ceremony and therefore miss the designated day. As the boat moved along, he sent a servant to a courier station onshore to hire a fast horse and notify the Zhang family of his arrival. The servant went posthaste to Yizhou.

In faraway Yizhou, Minister Zhang was consumed with worry, wondering what the Pei family was thinking and whether Pei Yueke would be willing to undertake the long journey for the ceremony. He was in the midst of these unsettling thoughts when the message was delivered to him. Overcome with joy, he went to the residential quarters of the yamen and told his family the news. Everyone rejoiced. (MC: *As would any family that has visitors from afar.*) It was already the second day of the third month by this time. Minister Zhang said, "The wedding is supposed to take place tomorrow. How are we going to make it? Let's wait for Mr. Pei to arrive before we reschedule."

Because the wedding date was drawing near, a feast was laid out in the back garden of the yamen in honor of Miss Derong. Her hair was put up in a bun, and female family members gathered to help deck her out and offer her good wishes. The garden was about half a *li* from the yamen proper. Yizhou being deep in the mountains, the yamen was located amid bushes and bamboo groves that looked just as secluded and beautiful as if it was in a mountain forest. Miss Derong and her aunts and sisters thoroughly enjoyed themselves as they strolled around.

By the time the feast was over, darkness had fallen, and everyone rose to return to the yamen. As the women walked along, talking and laughing, some ahead of her and some behind her, a gust of wind sprang up. Suddenly, a fierce tiger leaped out from the bamboos, seized Miss Derong, and turned around. As the other women fled in horror, the tiger disappeared into the depths of the bushes. After they had collected their wits, the women hastened to report the matter to Minister Zhang, and the whole family burst into wails of grief. (MC: *Such a shock naturally brings out the tears.*)

By this time, evening had closed in on them. Although a search party was assembled, the men looked at one another without any idea of what to do. They could do no more than take up torches and look around, but not knowing which road the tiger had taken, how were they to rescue her? (MC: *There was indeed nothing they could do.*) The search and commotion lasted the whole night through, all to no avail. At daybreak, Minister Zhang tearfully hired a group of men to fan out into the wilderness in search of his daughter's remains. Even though they checked all possible places, the search

turned up nothing. Minister Zhang was deeply distressed, but of him, for the time being, no more.

We must now change the scene to Shiqian River in the Yizhou area, where Pei Yueke found himself. His heavily laden boat kept bumping against the many rocks in the river, slowing them down even more. It was already the second day of the third month, and there were still several tens of *li* to go. Pei Yueke said to himself, "At this speed, how am I going to make it by tomorrow?" Beside himself with anxiety, he yelled furiously at the crew. (MC: *As they say, the wife is the husband's source of anxiety.*)

They said, "Yelling doesn't help. We're also only too eager to arrive and join the wedding feast. Who likes being held up in this place?"

Pei Yueke countered, "But tomorrow is the wedding date. What if we stay stuck here?"

The crew members said, "The boat gets stranded so easily because it's too heavy. If you want it to go faster, some people have to go onshore to reduce the weight."

"That makes perfect sense," conceded Pei Yueke. Hurriedly he stopped the boat, jumped ashore, and called on his servants to follow suit. With the master already ashore, who would dare to not get off the boat? More than twenty people disembarked, thus reducing the boat's weight. As Pei Yueke led his servants down the road, the boat, much more manageable than before, kept pace with them along the shore.

About four or five *li* farther on, when dusk was about to fall, they saw by the bank a house built of wooden planks with a bamboo couch inside. Pei Yueke entered and told the page boys to sweep the couch clean so that he could sit for a while before moving on. Of the many servants in his entourage, some stood around him, while some planted themselves outside the door. As they stood there, resting, they heard the rustle of wind in the woods. By the dim light of the moon and the stars, they caught sight of an animal moving very quickly where the wind was blowing. Looking more intently as the animal was drawing near, they saw that it was a tiger carrying something on its back. In consternation, everyone rushed inside for shelter. When the tiger was almost at the door, everyone pounded the walls and shouted. Some even whipped the wooden walls to heighten the noise. When the tiger arrived at the house, it put down the thing on its back, shook its body, and, looking as if it was a little frightened by the clamor, gave a roar and went at the speed of the wind into the mountain. (MC: *The tiger gets nothing for its service.*)

Peeping out through the chinks between the wooden planks of the walls, everyone saw that the thing deposited on the ground looked like a human figure, and it seemed to be moving slightly. After a while, when they thought the tiger should be a safe distance away, they stepped outside to investigate, still breathless with fear. It was indeed a human being, breathing faintly. After the servants reported this to Pei Yueke, he told them to revive that person while he rushed to call the boat in to shore. As soon as the servants had carried that person onto the boat, he gave orders to immediately untie the cable and take off, for he was afraid that the tiger might return. Only quite a while after the boat had taken off did Pei Yueke ask for a light by which to see who the person was. The women servants lit the candles and saw, by the bright light that suffused the cabin, that it was a person with

*Eyebrows arched like willow leaves
And cheeks blossoming like lotus flowers.
Her breathing unsteady and labored,
She was still shivering from the fright.
Her hair unkempt, she was the very image
Of a tipsy Consort Yang mounting her horse.⁶
Her eyes closed, her lips open, she had the look
Of Du Liniang returning from the grave.⁷
She appeared to be only seventeen or eighteen,
But in beauty, she had barely any equals.*

After looking her up and down, Pei Yueke said in astonishment, “Judging from her looks and her clothes, I don’t think she’s from some ordinary peasant family.” He then told the female domestics to examine her closely.

The women spread out a soft mattress, carried her onto it, and took off her clothes, which were all torn by thistles and brambles in the woods. Luckily, there were no bruises or scratches on her body. One woman servant combed her disheveled hair and tied it into a bun with a handkerchief. Next, she forced ginger soup and then thin porridge down her slightly open mouth. They fussed over her until well past midnight, when she slowly came to. Looking refreshed, she suddenly raised her head and opened her eyes, but not recognizing any of the faces around her, she let out a sob and fell back. To all the questions from the female domestics as

to her identity and her encounter with the tiger, she maintained a stony silence.

As the sky gradually lightened, people were seen walking about on the bank, and the boatmen were ordered to tow the boat. They were only thirty *li* from the prefectural seat at this time. They heard people coming from there say, "Minister Zhang's second daughter was seized by a tiger last night when she was enjoying the back garden. They still haven't found her body." Another one said, "Could the tiger have eaten all her clothes as well?"

Hearing this, the boatmen were intrigued when they thought of last night's events. They asked one another, "Could they be talking about what we've got on the boat?" They sent one man to the boat to inform Pei Yueke of what they had heard onshore.

All the more astonished, Pei Yueke said, "From what you say, it does seem certain that the one who fell prey to the tiger is my intended. Could she be the same one we saved and brought onto the boat?"

Without a moment's delay, he called an experienced woman servant to him and said, "Go ask the young woman we've just revived if she's Miss Derong of the Zhang family."

The woman servant did as she was told. On hearing her name, the young woman burst into loud sobs and asked through her tears, "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

The woman servant replied, "This is the very boat that Mr. Pei hired to take him to Yizhou to marry you, madam. Because the boat was going so slowly, Mr. Pei was afraid that he would miss the wedding date, so he chose to go onshore and walk. (MC: *Evidence of his sincerity*.) And what do you know, he rescued you and brought you on board! There is indeed a predestined bond between you!"

Feeling a surge of relief, the young lady began to tell the woman that she had encountered a tiger when she was in a garden, that she felt as if she had been airborne through clouds and mists over goodness knows how long a distance, and that she had thought she was going to die. She went on to say that when the tiger put her down on the ground, her soul took flight and that she had no idea why she was now in a boat. After supplying her with a full account of how she had been rescued, the woman servant went back to Pei Yueke and said, "She's none other than the bride-to-be!"

Wild with joy, Pei Yueke wrote a letter and sent a servant to deliver it posthaste to Minister Zhang's home.

Minister Zhang was devoured by grief because his daughter's body was nowhere to be found and his son-in-law was supposed to be arriving any-time now. The sudden arrival of a servant of the Pei family with a letter only deepened his distress. He tore open the letter and saw these lines:

As I hurried on to make the wedding date, my boat got stuck when I was traveling by water. When I went by land to travel faster, I ran into a tiger that carried your beloved daughter on its back. We scared it off, and your daughter is unscathed. She is now safe on my boat. I await your instructions. (MC: A succinct account.)

*Respectfully,
Your son-in-law Pei Yueke*

In happy astonishment, Minister Zhang went to the interior of the yamen and told the rest of the family about the letter, much to everyone's amazement. Mrs. Zhang said, "Such a thing has hardly ever been heard of! This must have been the work of the gods because the wedding date would have been missed otherwise. Now that our daughter is on Mr. Pei's boat, we can still hold the wedding today!"

"Yes, indeed!" said Minister Zhang. He ordered forthwith that a fast horse be saddled for him and, followed by an entourage of servants, raced to the boat and arrived in less than two hours' time.

The father of the bride and the son-in-law greeted each other with great delight. On seeing his daughter, Minister Zhang was overcome by mixed emotions of joy and sorrow. After comforting her with kind words, he turned to Pei Yueke and said, "My good son-in-law, last year, Li Zhiwei did predict that the wedding was not going to take place until today. Last night, I thought that since you apparently could not make it on time, the wedding date would surely have to be put off. Who would have thought that such a miraculous event would happen and that my daughter would even be delivered to your boat! But traveling by water is so slow that we'll surely miss the wedding date if we wait until the boat arrives at Yizhou. Why don't we light the wedding candles on the boat and hold the ceremony right here? We can take our time going home tomorrow. That way, we won't miss the auspicious date." (MC: *How accommodating!*)

Pei Yueke said, "Your words remind me of what I had almost forgotten. Last year, Li Zhiwei wrote six lines. The first two lines said,

*The third day of the third month,
Not a day earlier, nor a day later.*

I thought I was going to be late when traveling by boat, but then the tiger delivered her to me, so this bears out his prediction of the date. The middle two lines said,

*When the boat is stuck in shallow water,
A tiger will show up with the lady.*

I thought this was a prediction of disaster, but it turned out to be accurate. And the last two lines said,

*It will be a shattering shock;
It will be a heavenly blessing.*

It was indeed a big shock, but as things turned out, it only helped us make the blissful date. Li Zhiwei's skills as a fortune-teller are nothing short of divine!"

Without letting a moment slip by, Minister Zhang began assigning jobs to the servants as he stood by the boat. An usher and an announcer were summoned, and preparations for the wedding feast got under way. Soon, the wedding ceremony was held right there on the boat, and the bride and groom drank the nuptial cup. After the ceremony was over, Minister Zhang returned home on horseback to prepare a proper greeting for his daughter and son-in-law when the boat arrived the next day.

That night, Pei Yueke and Miss Derong shared the nuptial bed there on the boat, and the young couple consummated their marriage. On their arrival at Yizhou the next day, they went ashore and greeted Minister Zhang and his wife and other members of the family. All those present, including the employees of the yamen, felt as if they were in a dream when they laid eyes on the bride. Some shed tears. They said, "When it looked like the auspicious date was going to be missed, the gods dispatched a tiger to be the matchmaker and delivered the bride in the twinkling of an eye over a distance of a hundred li. Nothing like this has ever happened before!"

When the story got around, everyone marveled. Temples to the tiger-matchmaker were erected everywhere, and all those who wanted to be united in marriage only had to pray devoutly to see their prayers answered.

(MC: *Wonders never cease!*) Even to this day, such temples in the Guizhou and Xia [Three Gorges] areas are never short of worshippers making offerings. At that time, a six-line ditty circulated:

*The divine fortune-teller Li Zhiwei
Foretold their ordained fate.
A tiger was sent by the gods
So as not to miss the wedding date.
But how do you offer a seat
To such a matchmaker at the feast?*

Zhao the Nun Drugs a Beauty into a Stupor

Jia the Scholar Takes Revenge in a Brilliant Move

As a poem puts it,

*Monks among men are the most prone to lewdness;
Nuns among women are no less lustful.
With easy access to the inner chambers,
They ruin the names of women in their clutches.*

Let this storyteller begin by warning everyone against associating with women of the nine professions [Buddhist nuns, Daoist priestesses, fortune-tellers, human traffickers, matchmakers, witches, procuresses, herbalists, and midwives]. Such women have too much time on their hands and too many tricks up their sleeves. (MC: *How true!*) With access to thousands of households, they know too much of the world and its ways. Never mind the nine out of ten women of easy virtue who fall readily into their traps; even women of impeccable moral behavior become prey to their machinations. With mental prowess rivaling that of Zhang Liang and Chen Ping and eloquence on a par with that of Sui He and Lu Jia, they try by every conceivable means to stir up trouble where none existed.¹ Therefore, decent and respectable officials' families, as a rule, put up large posters at their gates explicitly denying access to such women. The most vicious of the lot are the nuns.

Using Buddhism as a front, they lure women into making incense offerings and young men into seeking amusement in their nunneries, which are nothing less than their bases of operation. With men, they observe the same protocol as the monks do and greet them with proper decorum. But they usher their women visitors into the inner rooms, ostensibly to intone Buddha's name and read the sutras. Being of the same sex, they find it easier to work on the women. (MC: *A thorough explication*.) Of all illicit love affairs, nine out of ten are brought about by nuns and take place in nunneries.

Now let me tell of a woman of the Tang dynasty, Di-shi. She came of a distinguished lineage. Her husband being also an eminent official, she was addressed as "Lady," and she had no equal for beauty in the entire capital city. Women in noblemen's households bent on one-upmanship would say to one another, "You call yourself a beauty, but you don't even come close to Lady Di. How dare you walk all over me!" Such was her fame as an unrivaled beauty. She was also a highly respectable woman, virtuous, kindhearted, and reserved in her manners.

Our story unfolds with a spring excursion to West Pond in the capital. There was an endless stream of richly decorated and curtained equipages carrying men and women of the elite families. Lady Di, as was only to be expected, followed the local custom and went on an outing to the pond. A young and dashing Mr. Teng was among the crowd, in the capital awaiting an appointment to a government post. When he happened to see Lady Di, her beauty made his three souls take leave of his body, and his seven spirits give him the slip. He followed her around, keeping his eyes glued to her. Raising her head, Lady Di noticed Mr. Teng's amorous gaze, but, uninterested, she thought nothing of it. Mr. Teng, however, was spellbound. How he wished he could get a mouthful of cold water so that he could swallow her whole, clothes and all! He asked around and was told that she was a celebrated beauty, Lady Di. After the crowd dispersed, Mr. Teng returned home in low spirits. He spent the whole night thinking about her.

From that day onward, he began to forget where he was going and neglect his meals. He found himself weighed down all the time with the feeling that he had lost something. Fighting a losing battle against the torment, he sought information from her neighbors and learned that she was a woman of unsullied reputation and that, therefore, he stood no chance of taking up with her. But, he thought, "She must have mutual visits with close female friends. If I can find out who they are, I may have a chance." And so he began to scout around carefully.

One day, he saw a nun emerge from Lady Di's house. (MC: *Here comes his chance.*) As he followed the nun, he asked pedestrians who she was and learned that she was Huicheng, abbess of Quiet Delight Nunnery and a frequent visitor to Lady Di's household. "Wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Teng. Without a moment's delay, he went back to his lodgings, sealed ten taels of silver in a packet, and rushed to Quiet Delight Nunnery. "Is the abbess in?" he asked.

Huicheng came out, and seeing a young gentleman, she asked him in for tea. She raised one hand in a Buddhist salute and asked, "May I learn your honorable name? What brought you here, sir?"

After telling her his name, Mr. Teng continued, "Well, it's just that, having long heard of the good name of this venerable establishment, I'd like to make a modest donation and pay my respects to the nunnery." So saying, he produced the packet of silver from his sleeve.

Huicheng was woman of the world enough to know by the size of the packet that he had a favor to ask of her. While mouthing words of polite demurral, she took the silver and continued, "I thank you for your generosity. Do you have something to say to me?"

Mr. Teng insisted that he had nothing to say and that the donation was just a token of his goodwill. With that, he took leave of her and returned to his lodgings.

"How very strange!" thought Huicheng. "What could such a handsome young man want from this old nun? And no favor to ask of me for such a lavish gift!" And so she puzzled over the mystery.

Henceforth, Mr. Teng made daily trips to the nunnery, and, in his ever greater eagerness to please her, a certain familiarity began to grow between them. One day, Huicheng remarked, "Judging from the way you hem and haw, I guess there must be something on your mind. If you need me for anything, I'll do everything to be of service to you."

Mr. Teng said in response, "I really shouldn't bring this up, and I don't think you can pull it off anyway, but my life is at stake! Please save me, Reverend Mother! It will cost you only the slightest effort. If you fail, I'll fall ill and die. Oh well, so be it!" (MC: *It's better to satisfy this man in love.*)

Intrigued by his enigmatic words, Huicheng said, "What can't I pull off? Tell me what this is all about."

After Mr. Teng told her about his encounter with Lady Di at West Pond, his admiration for her beauty, and his readiness to spend ten thousand taels of silver for the fulfillment of his predestined bond with that lady, Huicheng

laughed. "This is a difficult mission," said she. "I do visit her from time to time, but for all her beauty, she has a spotless reputation. You don't have a chance."

After reflecting for a moment or two, Mr. Teng said, "Since you do visit her from time to time, you must know what she likes." (MC: *A careful and meticulous man.*)

"But she doesn't seem to be especially fond of anything."

"Has she asked you to do anything for her?"

"A few days ago, she did ask me to find her some high-grade pearls, and she mentioned this a couple of times. This is the only thing I can think of."

Mr. Teng burst out laughing. "Excellent! I do have a predestined bond with her after all! I have a kinsman who deals in pearls. He has an ample supply of high-quality pearls, and I happen to be staying at his house. I can get as many as you want."

Without the slightest delay, he bolted out of the nunnery, hired a horse, and rode off with the speed of the wind. (MC: *He is indeed in love.*) Before long, he came back with two bags of large pearls and showed them to Huicheng, saying, "These pearls are worth twenty thousand strings of cash. Out of regard for her beauty, I'll knock off half the price and let her have them for ten thousand strings." (IC: *Bravo!*)

"Her husband is on a mission to the north. How do you expect a stay-at-home woman to put together so much money?"

Mr. Teng said happily, "Four or five thousand strings will do. If that won't work, how about one thousand or several hundred strings? If you can make a go of it, she can have them for free." (MC: *She is worth the price.*)

Huicheng also laughed. "What kind of nonsense is this! However, with these pearls, I'll put my well-oiled tongue to good use and come up with ingenious plans to lure her into visiting this nunnery. I'll then find an opportunity for you to meet her. You do your stuff. Whether or not it works will depend on your lucky star. I'll have no part in it."

Mr. Teng said, "I'm totally in your life-saving hands, Reverend Mother!"

Carrying the two bags of pearls, Huicheng merrily went to Lady Di's house. After the usual exchange of greetings, Lady Di asked, "What have you got in those bags?"

"These two bags are filled with the kind of high-grade pearls that you asked for the other day. Take a look, milady!" So saying, she opened the bags.

Lady Di picked up a handful of the pearls, examined them, and said, while making appreciative noises, "Nice pearls indeed!" She was so captivated by them that she could not put them down. (MC: *Like a fish swallowing the bait.*) "How much for them?" she asked.

"The asking price is ten thousand strings of cash."

Lady Di said in astonishment, "That's only half of what they're worth. What a good price! But my husband is away, and I can't come up with so much money on such short notice. What's to be done?"

Huicheng tugged at Lady Di and said, "Let's go talk in a quieter place."

After they entered a private chamber, Huicheng said, "Since you like them so much, milady, you need not pay a thing, because there's a certain gentleman who has a favor to ask."

Storyteller, she can hardly tell such a decent lady point-blank that the man wants that kind of favor in exchange for the pearls, can she?

Gentle reader, please be patient. The nun, with her gift of the gab, will surely ease into the subject her way.

"What does the gentleman want?" asked Lady Di.

"That young man has lost his government post because of false accusations from a personal enemy of his. So he's looking for a connection at the Ministry of Personnel so that he can establish his innocence and regain his post. And he's willing to offer these pearls in exchange for the favor. Now, your brothers, your husband, and your uncles are all of high rank. If you can come up with a way of helping him, the pearls will be yours for free."

"In that case, why don't you take the pearls back to him for now? Let me think of a plan first."

"He's in such a hurry that he'll turn to someone else and take the pearls with him. You can forget about seeing them again! The best thing is for you to keep them here for now. I'll tell him that he does have a chance and that I'll have an answer for him tomorrow."

"All right," said Lady Di.

So Huicheng left and reported everything to Mr. Teng.

"What's to be done next?" asked Mr. Teng.

"Since she likes the pearls and is keeping them, I'll make sure that she comes to you tomorrow. Let me show you what I can do!" (MC: *How ruthless!*)

Mr. Teng gave her another ten taels of silver and urged her to go earlier the next day to Lady Di.

In the meantime, Lady Di examined the pearls closely after Huicheng's departure, and the more she looked at them, the more delight she took in them. She thought, "Asking my brothers for this favor should be easy, which means the pearls will be all mine."

The truth is that one is not supposed to have desires. Once your desires become known, you are liable to fall into traps. (MC: *Good advice*.) If Lady Di had not asked the nun for pearls, nothing would have happened. Even if she did lay eyes on them, she should have bought them if she had the money or done nothing if she did not. If it had been that pure and simple, she would have remained staunchly impervious to the greatest tempter. As things were, however, she loved the pearls even though she did not have the money to buy them, and so she walked into the trap that had been laid for her and compromised her otherwise unsullied reputation.

To get on with our story, Lady Di was still turning this matter over in her mind the next day when Huicheng went to see her again. She asked, "So, do you think this job can be done or not, milady?"

"I gave his request careful thought last night. Pulling a few strings for him won't be a problem."

"But there is a problem: A transaction involving ten thousand strings of cash is no small matter. I'm just a poor and humble nun worth nothing. With me relaying oral messages back and forth between two parties who are strangers to each other, how will the other party trust me when the time comes to carry out the deal?"

"That is a problem, but what's to be done?"

"I humbly suggest that you come to my nunnery for a prayer session and wait for that young gentleman to show up. When he does, just pretend that it's an unplanned meeting. Will that do?"

Being a woman who observed the rules of proper conduct, Lady Di felt the blood rush to the roots of her ears on hearing that she was to meet a strange man. Waving her hand in disapproval, she said, "That will never do!"

Huicheng's face hardened. "What's so difficult about that? You need only hear his account and give him your promise so that he can put his mind at ease. If you refuse to see him, then the deal is off. I won't presume to force it on you." (MC: *The trick is in doing it discreetly so as not to arouse suspicion*.)

After another moment's reflection, Lady Di said, "If that's your idea, Reverend Mother, I don't think there will be any harm done. The day after tomorrow is the anniversary of my brother's death. I'll come to your nunnery for a prayer session, but I'll exchange only a few words with him without even

sitting down and quickly send him on his way. Otherwise, it will be unseemly if he and I are seen or heard."

Huicheng said, "That's exactly what I had in mind! Why would you keep him after both have said what needs to be said? Of course not! That will be fine!"

Having fixed the date, Huicheng returned to the nunnery, where Mr. Teng was waiting. After she told him what had happened, Mr. Teng bowed gratefully and said, "Zhang Yi and Su Qin could not have accomplished more!"²

When the much-awaited day finally arrived, Huicheng rose bright and early, made preparations for the prayer session, and hid Mr. Teng in a secluded meditation room. After she set out exquisite wine and food on the table, she closed the door behind her and went to an outer room to wait for Lady Di's arrival. Truly,

*She laid out sweet-smelling bait
And waited for a big fish to swallow it.*

Sure enough, later that afternoon, Lady Di showed up, dressed in all her finery. Afraid of attracting unwelcome notice, she had dismissed all the servants and came with only one young maid. When she saw Huicheng, she asked, "Is he here?"

"Not yet," replied Huicheng.

"That's all the better. Let's do the prayer session first."

After reading the prayers on her behalf and completing the formalities, Huicheng ordered a young novice to take the maid elsewhere for some fun (MC: *Important*.) while she herself said to Lady Di, "Follow me to a private room." And so she took Lady Di through several secluded, winding corridors until they came to the private room. The portiere was raised, and Lady Di gave a start at the sight of a handsome young man alone in the room next to a table with a fine spread of wine and food. As she shrank back, intending to remove herself from this male presence, Huicheng said with mischief in mind, "He's been waiting to say something to your face." Turning to the young man, she continued, "Young Master, why don't you greet her ladyship?"

Eager to show off his graceful deportment, Mr. Teng made haste to walk up to Lady Di and bowed deeply. Lady Di saw nothing for it but to bow in return.

Huicheng said, "The young gentleman has prepared some wine out of the most sincere gratitude for your ladyship's kindness. Please don't turn him down." (MC: *Slowing down and speeding up by turns. Most effective*.)

As she was about to draw herself upright, Lady Di raised her eyes and recognized the young man as the one she had seen at West Pond. His youth and his dazzlingly winsome, refined looks softened her heart. In shyness mixed with delight, she heard herself say, "Please tell me straight out what it is you want to say."

Seizing Lady Di by her sleeve, Huicheng said, "Milady, why don't you sit down so that it will be easier to talk? How can the two of you remain standing like this?"

Mr. Teng filled a cup with wine, cheerfully made an exaggeratedly low bow, and offered the cup to her with both hands as they sat down. Finding it impolite to reject the offer, Lady Di resignedly took the cup and finished the wine in one gulp. (IC: *He's getting where he wants to go.*) Huicheng picked up the wine flask and also filled one cup. Taking the hint, Lady Di took the cup and offered it to Mr. Teng in return. Exchanging significant glances with him, Lady Di forgot all about her prim and proper ladylike manners. She asked, "What government post do you have in mind, sir?"

Shooting a glance at Huicheng, Mr. Teng said, "I can't very well say it in the presence of the Reverend Mother."

"Let me get out of your way," said Huicheng, jumping to her feet. As she went out, she closed the side door behind her.

In less time than it takes to tell, Mr. Teng had left his seat and was at Lady Di's side. Gathering her into his arms, he said, "Ever since I saw you at West Pond, you've been in my thoughts day and night. My lovesickness for you is driving me to an early grave! My only wish is for you to save my life. If you're willing to oblige, my whole body and my life will belong to you. I couldn't care less about government posts!" With that, he dropped to his knees.

Smitten with his winning looks and moved by his sad words and pleas for mercy, she was overcome by alarm and tender emotions. She thought of screaming, but she knew it would have made no difference. She thought of pushing him away, but his grip was tight. From his kneeling position, he only found it easier to lift her with both arms. He carried her to the bed, put her down on it, and began to tug at her underwear. Lady Di found it hard to suppress her aroused desires (MC: *She cannot but be aroused.*) and was at a loss as to what to do. She did try to cover herself up here and there, but only half-heartedly. Eventually, she let him have his way with her. In the prime of his youth, Mr. Teng was a master in the art of lovemaking and threw her into raptures. Although she was a married woman, her husband had never given

her such pleasure. After their passion had abated, she said to Mr. Teng, holding his hand, "What is your name? If it were not for you, I would have lived my life in vain. I must see you every evening from now on." Whereupon Mr. Teng told her his name and thanked her profusely.

It was right at this point that Huicheng opened the door and entered. As Lady Di sat shame-faced in silence, Huicheng said, "Don't blame me, milady. This young gentleman was on the verge of death for your sake. Since mercy is the guiding principle for a nun, I contrived to have you save his life, and saving a life is better than building a seven-story stupa, you know!" (MC: *Sugary words.*)

"A nice job you did, tricking me like that!" said Lady Di. "But now I'll count on you to send him to my home every evening." (IC: *Yes, count on her!*)

"No problem," said Huicheng. And they all went their separate ways that night.

Henceforth, Mr. Teng was let into Lady Di's house through a side gate every evening without exception. Lady Di was so taken with him that, afraid he might be displeased, she did her best to play up to him. Mr. Teng, for his part, also bent over backward to please her, and the flames of their passion burned high. After her husband returned home a few months later, the frequency of the trysts fell off slightly, but she would send for him as soon as her husband went away. After more than a year had elapsed, the husband began to sense that something was wrong. Under his watchful eyes, the trysts came to an end. Lady Di missed Mr. Teng so sorely that she fell ill and died. In fact, everything had been going well for her before the nun lured her into adultery, which in turn led to her death. But on the other hand, the nun was able to have her way only because Lady Di herself was, after all, a woman of easy virtue and lost all integrity after her desires were aroused.

Let me now tell of a woman of staunch integrity who, feeling bitter after falling victim to a nun's diabolical scheme, joined hands with her husband in bringing about the nun's ignominious death. Indeed, it was an exhilarating victory, of a kind that is quite unheard of. Just as is said in the "Universal Gateway" chapter in the Lotus Sutra,

*Those who mean to do harm
By curses, spells, or poison—
They bring harm only to themselves
Thanks to the power of Guanyin.*

Our story proper is about an untitled scholar named Jia of Wuzhou [present-day Jinhua, Zhejiang]. He was in the prime of his youth and an erudite scholar with outstanding abilities and intelligence. His wife, Wu-shi, was a ravishing beauty and was virtuous and kind by nature. The loving couple were as happy in their union as fish in water, and there had never been a cross word between them. The scholar taught in a tutorial school run by a prominent family and often had to stay away from home for six months at a stretch, leaving Wu-shi at home with a maid called Spring Flower. Wu-shi spent her time doing needlework, an art in which she excelled. A portrait of the bodhisattva Guanyin that she embroidered was so lifelike in the bodhisattva's solemn dignity that she proudly asked her husband to have it mounted at a picture-mounter's shop. Everyone who saw it broke into praise. After the finished scroll was taken back home, it was hung up in a scrupulously clean room, and incense was burned respectfully in front of it both morning and evening. Because of her devout worship of the bodhisattva Guanyin, a nun, surname Zhao, of the Guanyin Nunnery on the same street, often came to visit her. (MC: *What a fine excuse!*) When Scholar Jia was away from home, Wu-shi would keep the nun in the house for a couple of days for companionship. The nun also invited her to the nunnery from time to time, but Wu-shi, ever the good and dutiful wife, preferred not to leave home unless absolutely necessary and visited the nunnery no more than once or twice a year.

One spring day when the scholar was away, Zhao the nun came to see Wu-shi. After they chatted for a while, Wu-shi rose and saw the nun out. "What nice weather we have today!" said the nun. "Why don't you join me and take a look outside?"

It was as if something was destined to happen. On reaching the gate with the nun, Wu-shi popped her head out for a look and found herself face-to-face with a rakishly dressed man sauntering down the street. Wu-shi promptly shrank back and took cover behind the gate. The nun, however, did not budge. It turned out that the man knew Zhao the nun. "Reverend Mother," said he, "I've been looking everywhere for you, and here you turn up! I need to talk to you."

The nun replied, "Let me say good-bye to the lady of the house before I join you." So she walked in and took leave of Wu-shi, who then closed the gate and went inside by herself.

Now, that rakishly dressed man who stopped to talk with Zhao the nun was called Bu Liang. A notorious debaucher in the town of Wuzhou, he took

up with every pretty woman he happened to lay eyes on, and would not stop until he had his way with her. In fact, he had an insatiable appetite for all kinds of women, beautiful or otherwise, including many of the nuns. Sometimes the nuns served him as procuresses and sometimes as his lovers. Zhao the nun had a disciple whose Buddhist name was Benkong. Only in her early twenties, she was quite a delight to the eye. Far from being a nun in the true sense of the word, she was a de facto paid prostitute kept by Zhao the nun (MC: *Such things happen in other nunneries as well.*), but these goings-on were kept under tight wraps. Bu Liang was one of Zhao the nun's patrons.

To return: Zhao the nun said good-bye to Wu-shi and caught up with Bu Liang. "Mr. Bu, what is it you want to talk about?" asked she.

"Were you at Scholar Jia's house just now?"

"Yes."

"I've long heard that his wife is a beauty. The one who was with you and then dived back behind the gate must be her?"

"None other, you wise man! You can't find another woman as pretty as she is, not only in the Jia residence, but also throughout this neighborhood!"

"Yes, her beauty does justify her reputation. I'd like to see her again, up close."

"What's difficult about that?" said the nun. "There will be a street fair on the nineteenth day of the second month to celebrate Guanyin's birthday. The streets will be filled to bursting. You can rent an upstairs room across from her house. While she's home, I'll go and take her to her gate to watch the street. We'll surely be standing for a good while, so you'll get to look your fill through your window!"

"Good idea!" said Bu Liang.

When that day arrived, Bu Liang rented a room across from Scholar Jia's house, as planned, and fixed his eyes on the gate. Sure enough, Zhao the nun entered it and took Wu-shi out. Wu-shi complied partly because she did not suspect anything was awry and partly because she would only be standing by her own gate. She was on guard against being seen by people on the street. How was she to know that there were ogling eyes right across from her house? (MC: *How abominable!*) And so Bu Liang got to feast his eyes on her. It was after she turned back into the house that he went downstairs. It so happened that Zhao the nun left the Jia house at this time, and the two met. The nun asked, smiling, "Did you manage to look your fill?"

"I did, all right, but wishful thinking doesn't help. The longer I looked at her, the more aroused I was. How I wish to lay hands on her!"

"You're like a toad in the gutter lusting after a swan's flesh! She's the wife of a scholar, no less, and she doesn't leave the house without a good reason. You're not a relative of hers. In fact, you have nothing to do with her whatsoever. How am I supposed to bring her to you? You'll have to settle for using your eyes only!"

While engaged in this conversation, they reached the nunnery. Once inside, Bu Liang knelt down before Zhao the nun and said, "Since you have access to her house, you'll have to come up with a plan to lead her on."

Shaking her head, the nun said, "It will be too tough a job!"

"But I must have a taste of her so that I can die without regrets."

"This woman is unlike any other," said the nun. "She doesn't even go in for lighthearted banter. If you want her to get horny and hook up with you, you can try for ten thousand years and she still won't budge! But if you want just one little taste and do it the hard way, you may have a chance (MC: *Ruthless*), although you must bide your time."

"You're not suggesting that I rape her?"

"No, not that, but she won't be able to turn you down."

"What ingenious plan do you have? Let me honor you as the mastermind!"

The nun said, "As the old saying goes, 'Row your boat slowly and knock the fish senseless before catching them.' If I see to it that she drinks herself senseless, you can do whatever you want to her. What do you say?"

"That all sounds very fine, but how are you going to get her drunk?"

"Well, she doesn't drink even a drop of wine. If she's determined not to drink any, you can hardly force it on her. If you go out of the way to press it on her, she'll grow suspicious. If she loses her temper and rejects any offers of wine out of hand, there will be nothing you can do. Even if you manage to get her drunk on one or two cups, she'll sober up just as quickly, and you still won't be able to do a thing." (MC: *She does cover all the angles*.)

"So, what's to be done?"

The nun continued, "I do have a trick in mind, but don't ask me about it."

However, at Bu Liang's insistence that she let him in on the secret, she whispered her plan into his ear. "What do you think?" she asked after she had finished.

Bu Liang stamped his feet and burst into hearty laughter. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he said. "Nothing like this has ever been done since the dawn of history!"

"There's one thing, though. After she wakes up, she may make a fuss and get angry with me for having tricked her. What if she cuts all ties with me?"

"My worst fear is that I won't be able to succeed. If I have my way with her, how can she make a fuss? How will she turn against you? After I coax her with sugarcoated words, my relationship with her may even last a long time for all I know! If she does somehow hold you to blame, I'll give you a hefty reward. Maybe after she warms up to me, I'll ask her for favors for you!"

"You're terrible!" said the nun.

After thus teasing each other for a while, they went their separate ways. From then on, Bu Liang went to the nunnery every day to make inquiries, and Zhao the nun racked her brains every day, trying to set a trap for Wu-shi.

A few days later, Zhao the nun went to see Wu-shi, carrying two boxes of delicacies. Wu-shi asked her to stay for dinner, and the nun jumped at the opportunity. She kept up a steady stream of chatter before saying, "You and your scholar husband—you two young people have been married for some years now. Isn't it time you have good news to report, that you're going to have a baby?"

"Quite so," said Wu-shi.

"So why don't you say a prayer and put all your heart into it?"

"I do make incense offerings mornings and evenings to the portrait of Guanyin that I embroidered, and I say silent prayers, but nothing has worked so far." (MC: *Echoes earlier content.*)

"You're too young to know the right way to pray for a child. It's the White-Robed Guanyin (Pandaravasini) you must pray to for male offspring. There's a volume of the sutra of the White-Robed Guanyin. It's not the regular Guanyin you pray to, nor should you use the Universal Door Guanyin Sutra. The sutra of the White-Robed Guanyin can work miracles! The volume I have in my nunnery has an appendix with a complete record of successful cases. Too bad I didn't bring it to show you. In Wuzhou alone, both in and out of the town, those who paid for its printing and circulation and chanted it aloud have all had sons. There hasn't been a single exception."

"If it works such wonders, could you please bring a copy to me so that I can chant it at home?"

"But you don't know the right way to go about it, madam. This isn't something you can rush into. You must first come to my nunnery and tell the White-Robed Guanyin bodhisattva which chapters you will chant. This poor nun will pray to the bodhisattva before helping you start chanting. I'll chant the first few chapters for you. I'll then follow you home and make sure that you learn the right way of chanting. After that, you can chant it every day on your own."

“Good idea!” said Wu-shi. “Let me start off by observing a vegetarian diet for a couple of days before I go to your nunnery to make a vow and begin chanting.”

“Yes, observing a vegetarian diet for a couple of days will be a good way to show your faith. After you start chanting, you’ll still need to eat a vegetarian breakfast before chanting the sutra. But after your morning chanting is over, eating meat is all right for the rest of the day.”

“I see. That’s easy.”

And so Wu-shi and the nun set a date for Wu-shi’s visit to the nunnery. Wu-shi also gave the nun five maces of silver to cover the necessary expenses. Zhao the nun departed and immediately informed Bu Liang about the new development.

As promised, Wu-shi observed a vegetarian diet for two days. (MC: *She is all sincerity. Poor thing.*) On the third day, she rose before daybreak, dressed herself for the occasion, and, with her maid Spring Flower in tow, walked to the nunnery while the streets were still bare of pedestrians.

Gentle reader, mark this: Men and women of respectable families should not visit temples and nunneries without good reasons. If this storyteller had been born in the same year she was and had grown up with her and had overheard what was said in secret, I would have blocked the gate and stopped her, so as to preserve both her good name and Zhao the nun’s life. But as it was, this visit tarnished the name of a fine lady of distinguished lineage and led to a bloodbath in that nefarious nunnery. But I’m getting ahead of my story.

To resume: Zhao the nun greeted Wu-shi and, delirious with joy, ushered her in and offered her a seat. After tea was served, she took Wu-shi to pay homage to the image of the White-Robed Guanyin bodhisattva.

While Wu-shi was silently saying her own prayers, Zhao the nun said to the image of Guanyin on behalf of Wu-shi, “A devout worshipper, Wu-shi, the wife of Mr. Jia, wishes to intone chapters from the White-Robed Guanyin Sutra and pray for a son and good luck in the fulfillment of her wishes.” Having spoken these words, she began to rap on a wooden fish and intone the sutra.³ She recited the Pure Mouth Incantation and the Land Tranquilizing Incantation. Then she chanted the Buddha’s name for the longest time before moving on to the sutra and chanting it about twenty times in one breath.

Being as crafty as she was, Zhao the nun had guessed that Wu-shi must have skipped breakfast, partly because she had arrived so early and partly

because she had been on a vegetarian diet the past two days. So the nun refrained from serving breakfast, pretending to have forgotten about it, and did not even ask Wu-shi if she had eaten breakfast. The nun meant to stall for time in order to prolong Wu-shi's hunger so as to better take advantage of her. (MC: *Extremely diabolical.*)

Wu-shi, always frail, was by this time feeling tired and hungry, having gotten up so early in the morning and praying to Guanyin for so long on an empty stomach. Thinking it improper to bring this up with the nun, she whispered to her maid, "Go to the kitchen and bring me a bowl of hot water."

Zhao the nun saw them. Deliberately she said, "I've been so preoccupied with our proper business, chanting the sutra, that I forgot to ask if Madam has eaten breakfast or not."

Wu-shi replied, "No, I haven't, because I came so early."

"Oh, I'm really getting senile! I didn't prepare breakfast, and it's too late now. What's to be done? Well, why don't I serve an early lunch?"

"To be honest with you, Reverend Mother, I'm starving. Anything you have will do."

Zhao the nun played for more time by making some long-winded apologetic remarks. Then she went to her own room, where she dillydallied a while before she went to the kitchen. (MC: *How cunning!*) There, she again dragged her feet before finally sending the novice Benkong out with a tray of food and a pot of tea. By this time, Wu-shi was ravenously hungry. Fresh fruit and tidbits were laid out on the table, but most were not the kind that could stay the pangs of hunger, except for a plate laden with steaming-hot cakes. So she took a piece and found it appealingly soft and sweet. Gnawed by hunger, she wolfed down several pieces in a row without realizing what she was doing. Then she took two sips of the hot tea that Benkong the novice offered her, did justice to a few more pieces of cake, and picked up another cup of tea. After a couple of sips, she felt the blood rush into her face. The ceiling and the floor changed places. Yawning, she sank, a senseless heap, into her chair.

Zhao the nun said in feigned alarm, "What's the matter with her? She must be feeling dizzy because she rose too early. Let's carry her to bed and let her take a nap." She and the novice carried Wu-shi and the chair to a bed and laid her flat on it so that she could take a nap.

You may ask, why were the cakes so powerful? What happened was that Zhao the nun had done something with the cakes, knowing Wu-shi did not drink. She had ground glutinous rice into a fine flour, mixed it well with

wine, baked the mixture dry, ground it again, and added more wine. After repeating the process a couple of times, she stirred in excessive amounts of two powdered drugs. Then she put the cake mixture into the steamer. The hot water, the drugs, and the wine combined to work like the yeast used for fermenting wine. The strength of the mixture would have been too much for any other person, let alone Wu-shi, who could get drunk on just the dregs of wine and on this occasion, she had consumed too much of that stuff while in the grip of hunger. With hot tea making the effect of the mixture even worse, how could she stand it all? Indeed,

*However clever you may be,
You still end up the victim.*

So Zhao the nun drugged Wu-shi into a stupor. With her mistress asleep, Spring Flower the maid was only too happy to gain a few moments of leisure. The novice offered to take her away for a snack and some fun, so she was certainly not prepared to stay and wait on her mistress. Without a moment's delay, Zhao the nun brought Bu Liang out from his hiding place and said, "The bitch is asleep in bed. Go and enjoy her! I wonder how you plan to thank me?"

Bu Liang closed the door behind him and raised the bed curtain. There, reeking of alcohol, lay Wu-shi, her face flushed and as lovely as a red crab-apple flower in bloom. Finding her all the more attractive, Bu Liang burned with lust and planted a kiss on her mouth. As Wu-shi remained unconscious, he noiselessly took off her pants, exposing her snow-white legs to view. (MC: *Taking advantage of her unconscious state further incriminates them and justifies their violent deaths.*) Mounting her, he said proudly, "Lucky me! I never thought I'd be so blessed!" Wu-shi, although still incapable of movement and in a trance, was just conscious enough to imagine herself at home with her husband. (IC: *Poor thing.*) And so, quite oblivious of the truth, she let him have his way with her. At the height of their union, she even moaned in her drunken stupor. Wild with joy, Bu Liang held her in a tight embrace and cried out, "My sweetheart, I'm a dead man!" With that, he ejaculated. As Wu-shi still lay in a befuddled state (IC: *Poor thing.*), Bu Liang lay down next to her to sleep, cheek to cheek and with one arm resting on her body.

It was a long time before Wu-shi regained consciousness as the power of the drugs wore off. Shocked on realizing that she was sharing a bed with a

strange man, she broke into a cold sweat. "Horrors!" she cried. As she abruptly sat up, all remnants of the drugs' effects evaporated without a trace. "Who are you?" she shouted at the top of her voice. "How dare you defile a respectable lady!"

Somewhat unnerved, Bu Liang quickly got down on his knees and asked for forgiveness. "Please have mercy!" he said. "Please forgive me for my impudence!"

Noticing that her pants were down, Wu-shi realized what had happened. Ignoring the man, she pulled up her pants and, calling out her maid's name, jumped down from the bed and headed for the door. Afraid of being seen, Bu Liang did not follow her but remained hiding in the room. Wu-shi opened the door, went out, and cried again, "Spring Flower!"

The maid, having gotten up too early that morning, was taking a nap in the novice's room. When she heard her mistress call her, she rose and, yawning her head off, walked up to her mistress.

"You lowlife!" Wu-shi cursed. "Why didn't you stay with me when I was sleeping in that room?" Without an object on which to vent her anger, Wu-shi made as if to hit Spring Flower hard. As Zhao the nun arrived on the scene to play the peacemaker, the sight of her only stirred Wu-shi to greater fury. Slapping Spring Flower twice, she said, "Get my things ready. I'm going home immediately!"

Spring Flower said, "But don't you need to chant the sutra?"

"That's not for you to say, you lowlife!" said Wu-shi. Livid with rage, she stormed out of the nunnery with Spring Flower and went home, all in one breath, paying no attention to Zhao the nun and saying nothing about what had happened.

On reaching home, she opened the gate, went in, and sat down in her room, sulking. After she had calmed down somewhat, she said to Spring Flower, "I remember I was hungry and ate a few pieces of cake. But how did I end up sleeping on a bed?"

"Ma'am, after you ate the cakes and drank some tea, you collapsed in your chair. The Reverend Mother and the novice carried you to bed."

"Where were you?"

"When you were sleeping, ma'am, I ate the leftover cakes because I was also hungry, and then I went to the novice's room for tea. Then I got sleepy and took a nap. I came to you when I heard you call me."

"Did you see anyone enter the room I was in?"

“No. Only those two could have entered the room.”

Wu-shi fell silent. Recalling what she seemed to have been dimly aware of in her sleep, she placed a hand on her private parts and found the area clammy to the touch. With a sigh she said to herself, “I’m done for. Who would have thought that the nun could be so diabolical! Now that she has helped that accursed scoundrel defile my spotless body, how am I going to hold my head up again?” With tears in her eyes, she seethed with silent anger. She thought of committing suicide, but she could not bring herself to do so without seeing her husband one more time. She turned to the image of Guan-yin that she had embroidered and prayed tearfully, “This worshipper has grievances in her heart. Please manifest your holy power and avenge her.” With that, she broke down in sobs. Sorely missing her husband, she cried her heart out and went to bed in low spirits. Spring Flower had no inkling of what had happened.

Let us leave Wu-shi in her distress and return to Zhao the nun. Watching Wu-shi leaving in a huff without saying good-bye to her, she knew that Bu Liang had got what he wanted. She entered the room and saw Bu Liang still lying in bed, one finger in his mouth, unseeing, concentrating on a replay of the scene of pleasure. Despite her advanced years, the nun’s desires stirred at the sight. She mounted Bu Liang and said, “Come on! Show your match-maker some gratitude!” So saying, she began to make her move. However, having just ejaculated, Bu Liang failed to perform. Frustrated, the old nun bit him and said, “You landed a good deal, but you got me all worked up for nothing!”

“I can’t thank you enough,” said Bu Liang. “I’ll spend tonight with you, and we’ll enjoy ourselves to the full! I need to talk to you anyway about a follow-up plan.”

“Didn’t you say you just wanted one little taste? What follow-up plan can there be?”

“It’s human nature to push the advantage one has gained. Once I’ve had a taste, how can you expect me to stop? I had my way by forcing myself on her, but the real fun lies in having her come to me gladly and of her own free will.”

“There’s just no satisfying you!” said the nun. “After you forced yourself on her, she smoldered with rage and left without even saying good-bye to me. Without knowing what she’s thinking, how can you plan for next time? You’d better wait and see. If she doesn’t cut me dead, you’ll have a chance.”
(MC: *How fearsome!*)

“Good point, good point. I’m totally in your hands, master strategist!”

Bu Liang spent that night holed up in the nunnery in order to return the favor. How they cavorted with each other is no part of our story.

Meanwhile, Scholar Jia had a dream that night at his school: He was at home when a white-robed woman entered the gate. He was about to go out and ask who she was when she walked straight into his bedroom. Taking large strides, he followed her, only to see her disappear into the embroidered scroll of Guanyin on the wall. He raised his eyes and saw two lines of characters on it. He looked harder and saw the following:

*What comes from the mouth goes into another mouth;
My disciple will wreak revenge.*

After reading the couplet, he turned around, only to see his wife prostrated on the floor. As he hastened to help her to her feet, he woke up with a start. He thought, “The meaning of this dream eludes me. Could it be that my wife is ill and the Guanyin bodhisattva was giving me a signal with her divine power?”

The very next day he took leave of his employer, left the school, and headed for home. All along the way he pondered the meaning of the dream and felt ill at ease.

When he arrived at home, Spring Flower opened the gate at his knock. “Where’s your mistress?” he asked.

“Madam is still in bed.”

“Why is she still in bed at this hour?”

“Madam is feeling a little low. She’s calling your name and weeping all the time.”

On hearing this, the scholar hastened to the bedroom. At the sight of her husband, Wu-shi jumped out of bed. The scholar saw that her hair was disheveled, her face unwashed, and her eyes bloodshot. She walked up to him and prostrated herself on the floor, sobbing.

In alarm, the scholar asked, “What makes you do this?”

As he helped her up to her feet, Wu-shi said, “You must do right by me!”

“Who has wronged you?”

Wu-shi sent the maid to the kitchen to boil water for tea and cook lunch before she said in tears (IC: *She’s prudent.*), “Since I married you, we’ve never had a cross word, and I’ve never been guilty of the slightest offense. But I’ve now committed a horrible crime. I’m still alive only because I waited for

your return so that I could tell you all the facts. If you take action on my behalf and see that justice is done, I'll leave this world without regrets."

"What makes you say such ominous words?"

Thereupon, Wu-shi told him about how Zhao the nun had lured her to the nunnery to chant sutras, how the nun had tricked her into eating drugged cakes, and how, with the nun's help, a man had raped her while she was in a drunken stupor. Again, she burst into a flood of tears and sank onto the floor.

The scholar's hair stood on end after he heard this account. "This is outrageous!" he exclaimed. "Do you know who that man was?"

"How would I know?"

The scholar drew out his sword from the head of the bed, rapped it against the table, and said, "What kind of man am I if I don't wipe such scum off the face of the earth? But not knowing who did this, I'll have to be extra careful. Otherwise he'll get away. Let me work out a plan first."

"Now that I've told you everything, my work is done. Give me your sword. This is the moment of my death. No more need be said." (MC: *How sad! How worthy of respect!*)

"No suicide! You didn't offer yourself to him. You were a victim! And your good faith is clear enough. If you take your own life so rashly, you'll only make things worse in many ways."

"I don't care!"

"If you die, your parents as well as other people will ask why. If I tell them, your name will be tarnished even in death and my career will also suffer. If I don't tell them, members of your clan won't let me get away with it, and I'll be stung by my own conscience. When will I ever be able to avenge you?"

"I'll live only if that evil nun and that monster both die before my eyes. Otherwise, I won't be able to live down the shame and hang on to life."

After a moment's reflection, the scholar continued, "After you were tricked, what did you say to Zhao the nun?"

"I headed straight for home in high dudgeon. I didn't say a word to her."

"In that case, we mustn't go about our revenge in the open. If we do, we'll have to report to the authorities, and we won't be able to hide the facts. As the story spreads from mouth to mouth, your spotless reputation will be sullied. I'll have to come up with a plan to bump off every guilty person without leaving a trace." (MC: *The scholar is also ruthless, but his cunning is more than equal to dealing with Nun Zhao.*) He lowered his head and gave himself up to

thought. Suddenly he said, "I have it! My plan corresponds exactly to the words of Guanyin that appeared in my dream. This is wonderful!"

"What's the plan?" asked Wu-shi.

"If you want vindication and revenge, you must do as I say. If not, no revenge or vindication will be possible."

"I wouldn't dream of rejecting any idea of yours, but it must go without a hitch."

"Since you didn't confront that nun and didn't fall out with her, she might think that you were only bashful at the time and, assuming you're a woman of easy virtue, that you might have fallen for him. Now let's turn the tables on them: You'll go trick Zhao the nun into coming here. I have a brilliant idea." He whispered his idea into her ear, adding, "Isn't this a sure-fire plan?"

"It is a good plan all right, but I'll be so ashamed! Oh well, for the sake of revenge, I don't care!"

And so, husband and wife had everything worked out.

The next day, while Scholar Jia was hidden in a secluded spot behind the rear gate, Wu-shi sent Spring Flower to the nunnery to ask Zhao the nun over for a chat. At Spring Flower's invitation, the nun thought, "That bitch must have enjoyed the sweet taste of the affair, and now, unable to fight off her desire, she has changed her mind." With her rolling gait, she followed Spring Flower as quickly as she could to go see Wu-shi.

Once brought into Wu-shi's presence, Zhao the nun said, "I gave you offense the other day, and I wasn't a good hostess. Please don't hold it against me."

After dismissing Spring Flower, Wu-shi took the nun's hands in her own and asked in a subdued voice (MC: *With assumed docility.*), "Who was the man the other day?"

Encouraged by her manner, the nun said, also under her breath, "He's Bu Liang, a most romantic man who lives in the neighborhood. He has such a way with women that there isn't a girl who doesn't fall for him. He's such an admirer of your beauty that he kept pestering me day and night for a rendezvous with you. I felt sorry for him. He was indeed very sincere, and I found it hard to turn him down. What's more, I thought you were too lonely, living by yourself in the house. You should make the most of your youth and have a couple of lovers while you're still young. (MC: *She sounds so caring that a less determined woman would have taken the bait.*) That's why I brought you two

together. What cat can stay away from fish? This old woman knows what's what. So don't take things too seriously. Enjoy life while you can! What's so bad about that man putting you on a pedestal and making a fuss over you?"

"But you should have consulted me beforehand and not tricked me into it. But what's done is done. No more need be said." (IC: *Very clever*.)

The nun continued in her own defense, "But you didn't know him. If I'd leveled with you, you would never have agreed. Now that you've met him once, it would be better to turn it into a long-term relationship."

"I made a fool of myself without even getting to see the man clearly. I have no idea what he looks like and what kind of man he is. Since he cares for me, please ask him to come to my home. If he's really nice, I'll agree to keep up the clandestine visits." (IC: *Ingenious!*)

Believing Wu-shi was playing into her hands, Zhao the nun was beside herself with joy. Not even the shadow of a doubt crossed her mind. (IC: *Of course she has no doubts.*) She said, "If you so wish, I'll have him come tonight. He's a really handsome man, close-up."

"I'll wait for him behind the gate at lighting-up time. My cough will be the signal for ushering him in."

Jubilantly, Zhao the nun returned to the nunnery and relayed the message to Bu Liang. Bu Liang danced for joy. How he wished the sun would take a nosedive and the moon would shoot up that very instant! By dusk, he was already prowling around the Jia residence, wishing he could take off that member of his and toss it through the gate. When dusk deepened into night, he saw the gate close. Wondering if the nun could be playing him false, he began to feel uneasy. Just as he was weighing his options, he heard a cough from inside. He also coughed. Gently, the gate opened. After Bu Liang coughed again, someone inside coughed back. Quickly, Bu Liang slipped through the gate. A few steps took him to a courtyard. There, by the dim light of the moon and the stars, he saw the hazy contours of Wu-shi. He went up and, gathering her into his arms, said, "Your kindness to me is boundless!"

Although burning with indignation, Wu-shi calculatedly refrained from pushing him away. Instead, she clasped him tightly with both hands as if she was taking him into custody. Eagerly, Bu Liang kissed her and stuck his tongue into her mouth. As his tongue rolled around, Wu-shi tightened her grip on him and sucked his tongue. In his excitement, Bu Liang thrust his tongue farther into her mouth. Seized with a rush of rage, Wu-shi sank her teeth into his tongue and held it. (MC: *She retaliates with the same strategy—act when the other party is unsuspecting.*) In searing pain, Bu Liang let go of her, but by

the time he struggled out of her grip, Wu-shi had bitten off about half an inch of his tongue. In a panic, Bu Liang bolted out through the gate.

Wu-shi spit the tip of Bu Liang's tongue into her hand and quickly closed the gate. Then she went to the back gate, where her husband was, and said to him, "Our enemy's tongue is here."

In great glee, the scholar took the tongue, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and, sword in hand, made straight for the nunnery by the feeble light of the moon and the stars. (MC: *Merciless*.)

Believing that Bu Liang must have scored another success and was in bed at the Jia residence, Zhao the nun had closed the nunnery gate and gone to sleep. But then there were knocks at the door. The young novice had flopped down to sleep and was not likely to wake up even if the gate was battered down. The old nun, however, was wide awake, aflame with desire at the thought of Bu Liang and Wu-shi. On hearing the knocks, she thought Bu Liang must have returned from his tryst. She called out the novice's name, but, not getting a response, she rose from bed to answer the gate. The moment she opened it, Scholar Jia aimed a frontal blow at her and chopped into her. She fell backward, spouting blood, and died instantly.

Scholar Jia closed the gate and, sword in hand, went inside to search, thinking, "If that Bu Liang is in the nunnery, I'll finish him off, too." Seeing the eternal flame burning in front of the Buddha's image, he picked up the lamp to look around the nunnery but saw no one except the novice in her room. He also made short work of her. Quickly, he turned up the lampwick, untied his handkerchief, took out the tongue, pried open the novice's mouth with his sword, and placed the tongue inside. (IC: *Ingenious*.) Then he put out the lamp, closed the gate behind him, and went home. To his wife he said, "I've killed both the nun and the novice. Our revenge is complete!"

Wu-shi said, "No! That scoundrel lost only part of his tongue. He's still alive!"

"That's all right. Someone will take care of him. (IC: *Hurrah!*) From now on, let's play ignorant and not bring this up again."

Let me now turn to the nunnery's neighbors. With the sun high in the sky but the nunnery gate still closed, and with no sign of anything astir, the neighbors began to worry. They tried to push the gate open. It was unbolted and yielded easily to them. Alarmed on seeing the old nun's corpse by the gate, they pushed farther in and found the dead body of the novice in her room. One had died of a split head, the other of a slashed throat. In consternation, the neighbors brought the local community headmen to the scene to

examine the bodies so that a report could be drawn up and submitted to the government authorities. While checking the corpses, the headmen noticed that there was something between the novice's clenched teeth. They took it out and saw that it was part of a human tongue. One headman said, "Needless to say, this is a case of rape and murder, but since we're unable to establish the identity of the murderer, we should report the crime to the county yamen first."

A report was drawn up and immediately submitted to the magistrate in the county court, which happened to be in session. The magistrate said, "It doesn't take much to find the culprit. Just search the whole town and the surrounding areas for a man missing part of his tongue. Tell the community leaders at the county and ward levels, as well as the neighborhood mutual-security units, to go on a house-to-house search. They'll surely find him."

Sure enough, soon after the order was issued, the local headmen found their man.

Here's what happened: After his tongue was bitten off, Bu Liang realized that he had fallen into a trap. Overcome with panic, he ran helter-skelter and lost his way in his confusion. Afraid of being caught, he spent the whole night squatting under the eaves of a house in a back alley, hoping to be able to find his way home after daybreak. But divine justice was destined to catch up with him at this time. After daybreak, he walked up and down the alley, trying to find the main road, but in his desperation, he just could not figure out which way to go, and he could hardly ask around for directions. (IC: *Wonderful detail*.) Passersby found his behavior suspicious and became watchful. In a matter of moments, news about the nunnery murders got around, and posters from the county yamen were put up. A few inquisitive people stopped to question him but could hear only mumbles from a blood-smearred mouth. A commotion ensued, and the crowd around him swelled. "Who can he be if not the killer?" they said.

Without further ado, they trussed him up with a rope and took him to the county yamen. Several people gathering in front of the yamen recognized him, saying, "This man is not a decent sort. It's no surprise that he committed this atrocity."

After the county magistrate declared his court in session, Bu Liang was brought into his presence. He answered the magistrate's questions with such gibberish that no one could make out even one word. The magistrate ordered a few slaps across his face and ordered him to stick out his tongue, but he was seen to have only the stump of his tongue left, and the bloodstains

were still fresh. (MC: *Only now does the ingenuity of the plan reveal itself.*) The magistrate asked the local headmen, "What is this villain's name?"

In answering this question, those who had always found him hateful not only gave his name but also poured out accounts of all his nefarious doings over the years.

"You need not go on," said the magistrate. "That villain must have been planning to defile the novice. When the old nun opened the gate, he struck her down and then went to rape the novice. Hating him, the novice bit off his tongue. In the heat of the moment, he killed her." Turning to Bu Liang, he continued, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Bu Liang gesticulated desperately, trying to say something in his defense, but he could not get even half a word out.

In a towering rage, the magistrate said, "Why waste paper and writing brush on such a depraved rogue? Since he can't talk and the murder weapon hasn't been found, I won't be able to get a confession. Just give him a hundred strokes with the heaviest rods until he's dead!"

A dashing womanizer, Bu Liang did not have what it takes to withstand torture. Fifty strokes of the rods, and he was dead. The magistrate ordered that the headmen notify Bu Liang's kith and kin to claim the dead body and that the nuns' corpses be cremated and buried. Then he wrote a memorandum with these lines:

*Bu Liang's tongue—where has it gone
After an affair that tore it apart?
The novice's neck—what happened to it?
It succumbed to the rapist's sword.
Death is fully justified for the man,
His guilt beyond the shadow of a doubt.*

This memorandum is hereby placed on record for future reference.

So the magistrate closed the file on the case. Of this, no more.

Scholar Jia and Wu-shi rejoiced inwardly on hearing the story from pedestrians on the streets. Wu-shi's humiliation and the killings remained a watertight secret. This was made possible by Scholar Jia's good judgment as well as by the Guanyin bodhisattva, who, moved by Wu-shi's piety, exercised her divine powers and gave him those instructions. So the act of revenge was accomplished without tarnishing Wu-shi's reputation in any way. Wu-shi

was impressed by her husband's decisiveness, and Scholar Jia was impressed by his wife's staunch integrity. Both held each other in even higher esteem.

Comments of later times on this event said that although revenge had been achieved, no word had leaked out, and the plan had worked perfectly, Wu-shi's purity, nonetheless, had been defiled. Others were none the wiser, but when all is said and done, she herself must have been deeply distressed. And it was all because she had thoughtlessly associated with a nun. (MC: *Serious and good admonition for women.*) Women proud of spirit, be warned!

In the words of a quatrain,

Lovely flowers fall and lose their fragrance

Because, sadly, they have been defiled.

Listen to this word of advice:

Women should not leave their boudoirs!

Emperor Minghuang of Tang, a Daoist Devotee, Seeks Out Eminent Daoists

Consort Wu, a Buddhist Disciple, Witnesses Contests of Magic Power

As the poem says,

*No men will be left in Yan;
No horse will return from the Pass.
Once the foot of Wei is reached,
A silk scarf will tie up the ring.*

The above quatrain was written by Li Xiazhou, a Daoist, during the reign of Emperor Minghuang [or Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–56)] of the Tang dynasty. A consummate practitioner of the Daoist arts, he was summoned by Emperor Minghuang in the Kaiyuan reign period [713–42] to the palace, from which he later moved to Xuandu Temple. In the last year of the Tianbao reign period [742–56], when An Lushan was abusing power, worries about An's ambition spread far beyond the imperial court, but Emperor Minghuang remained blind to it and, if anything, showered even more favors on him.¹ One day, Li Xiazhou the Daoist made an unobserved departure from his temple and went none knew whither, leaving the above-quoted quatrain on the wall of his room. But the meaning of the poem eluded everyone who happened to read it. It was not until An Lushan rose in rebellion, Emperor Minghuang fled to the Shu [present-day Sichuan] region, the troops mutinied,

and Imperial Consort Yang was strangled that the poem came to be understood. It was in fact a prophecy. An after-the-fact explication of the lines is as follows: “No men will be left in Yan” means that An Lushan was to raise an army and recruit all the men in the Yan and Ji areas [close to present-day Beijing]. “No horse will return from the Pass” means that General Geshu Han was to suffer such a crushing defeat at the Tongguan Pass that even every horse was to perish.² “Once the foot of Wei is reached” foresees the arrival of the fleeing emperor’s procession at Mawei Slope. As for “A silk scarf will tie up the ring,” the ring is part of Imperial Consort Yang’s given name, Jade Ring [Yuhuan], and at Mawei Slope, the eunuch Gao Lishi [684–762] ordered that she be strangled with a silk scarf.³ How accurate the predictions of the Daoist!

Emperor Minghuang himself was said to be the reincarnation of the Daoist sage Kong Sheng, which explains the emperor’s devotion to Daoism. Zhang Guo, Ye Fashan, Luo Gongyuan, and other eminent Daoist immortals gifted in the Daoist arts frequently gathered in the imperial court to display their magic powers. Li Xiazhou was but a minor figure hardly worthy of more description.

Let us turn our attention to Zhang Guo first. (MC: *Zhang Guo enters the scene.*) While serving as a retainer to King Yao of ancient times, he acquired a deep-breathing method and could go without food for days on end. Goodness knows how long he lived, but during the reign of Emperor Minghuang of Tang, he lived as a hermit on Mount Zhongtiao [in present-day Shanxi], Hengzhou. Coming and going on his white donkey, he could cover tens of thousands of *li* per day. On reaching his destination, he would fold the donkey as if it were a piece of paper and put it, now paper-thin, into his trunk. Whenever he wanted to ride it, he would sprinkle water on it, and it would immediately change back into a donkey. In fact, he is none other than the donkey-riding Zhang Guolao, one of the Eight Immortals, about whom stories still abound to this day.⁴

In the twenty-third year of the Kaiyuan period, Emperor Minghuang heard about Zhang Guo’s fame and dispatched a protocol officer, Pei Wu by name, to Hengzhou to bring him to the court. After arriving at Mount Zhongtiao, Pei Wu was somewhat displeased to find that Zhang Guo was an ugly, hoary-haired old man with many teeth missing, and he did little to hide his disappointment. What was going on in his mind was by no means lost on Zhang Guo. He had hardly finished exchanging greetings with Pei Wu when he slipped and fell. His last breath was expelled, and he did not inhale again.

It was all over for him. (MC: *The pranks immortals play on humans!*) Pei Wu was horrified. "I had no idea you would drop dead on me like that!" he said. "Now what am I going to say to the emperor?" But then he thought, "I've heard that immortals like to test people. Maybe he's not really dead. Let me try this." He filled an incense burner with sticks of incense and lit them. Then he got down on his knees and began to pray with great concentration. As he stated the emperor's sincerity in entrusting him with the mission to seek out eminent Daoists, Zhang Guo was seen to be gradually regaining consciousness. (MC: *Pei Wu does know a thing or two.*) Quite taken aback, Pei Wu realized that Zhang Guo was indeed no ordinary man. Not daring to put any pressure on him, Pei Wu returned to the capital posthaste and reported everything to the Son of Heaven. Emperor Minghuang was all the more impressed.

Disappointed by Pei Wu's incompetence, the emperor reassigned the job to Xu Qiao, director of the Imperial Secretariat. Equipped with an imperial decree bearing the emperor's seal, Xu Qiao mounted a carriage and went to extend a respectful invitation to Zhang Guo. With his delicacy and discretion, Xu Qiao talked Zhang Guo into following him to the capital. After depositing Zhang Guo's luggage at the Academy of Worthy Scholars, they proceeded to the palace on sedan-chairs for an audience with the emperor.

At the sight of the old man, the emperor asked, "Since you, sir, have already acquired the Dao, why are your hair and teeth in such a deplorable condition?"

Zhang Guo replied, "I'm in such a sorry state precisely because I still haven't managed to acquire the Dao in spite of my old age. I'm really ashamed of myself. Now that Your Majesty has brought this up, I might as well do away with my remaining hair and teeth." Having said that, he pulled out every hair on his head and his chin right there in the emperor's presence. Then he made a fist and thumped his own jaws left and right until his few remaining broken teeth fell out one by one into a pool of blood.

The emperor was aghast. "Why did you have to do this, sir?" he asked. "You'd better take a little rest outside."

After Zhang Guo went out, the emperor said to himself, "What an old geezer!" Before long, he called Zhang Guo back. Lo and behold: Approaching the throne in his rolling gait, Zhang Guo was seen to be sporting a full head of black hair, a black beard, and a set of gleaming white teeth, looking more pleasing to the eye than a young man. Immensely delighted, the emperor granted him access to the royal inner chamber and had wine set out.

After drinking a few cups, Zhang Guo said, by way of declining more offers of wine, "This old subject of Your Majesty's has little capacity for wine.

Three pints is the maximum I can hold, but I have a disciple who can hold up to two gallons.”

Whereupon the emperor ordered that the disciple be brought into his presence. As Zhang Guo mumbled something incomprehensible, a handsome young fifteen- or sixteen-year-old Daoist flew down from the eaves of the hall. After making his kowtows to the emperor, he walked up to Zhang Guo and saluted him with a raised hand, in the Daoist way. His manner was impeccable, his speech articulate, and his voice pleasant. When the emperor told him to take a seat, Zhang Guo objected, saying, “No! This will not do. My disciple should remain standing.” Accordingly, the young disciple bowed and stood off to the side. Liking the young man more and more, the emperor ordered wine for him. Every cup that was offered to him was filled to the brim, and he drained every one of them. He did not decline more offers after he had finished ten liters, but Zhang Guo rose and pleaded on his behalf, saying, “Please don’t give him more. This is as much as he can hold. If he exceeds his limit, he’ll surely make a fool of himself and incur Your Majesty’s disdain.”

The emperor said, “We don’t mind if he succumbs to the influence of the wine.” Turning to the young man, he continued, “We hereby grant you a pardon!” So saying, he stood up, had a jade goblet filled to the brim with wine, held the goblet to the young Daoist’s lips, and insisted that he drink it up. No sooner had the young man gulped it down than the wine gushed out from the top of his head and knocked his hat to the floor. The young Daoist bent down to pick it up, but he lost his footing and fell, to the merriment of the emperor and the palace maids by his side. Then they realized, as they looked around more intently, that the young Daoist had disappeared, leaving behind only a golden vessel filled with wine. It was found, on close examination, to belong to the Academy of Worthy Scholars. To the emperor’s astonishment, it held exactly ten liters of wine.

The next day, the emperor told Zhang Guo to join him as an observer in his hunting expedition outside the capital. The advance party encircled and then captured a stag. When the prey was delivered to the kitchen to be slaughtered and cooked, Zhang Guo exclaimed, “Don’t kill it! It’s an immortal stag, already a thousand years old. It was captured in one of Emperor Wudi’s hunting expeditions in the fifth year of the Yuanshou reign period [118 BCE, in the Han dynasty] in the imperial park. I was there in attendance. The stag was then set free out of compassion.”

With a smile, the emperor said, “There’s no lack of stags out there. How do you know it’s the same stag you’re talking about? (MC: *Good point.*) What’s more, so many years have gone by. How can you be so sure that the same stag has been spared by every hunter until today?”

Zhang Guo replied, “When setting the stag free, Emperor Wudi tied a brass tag to its left antler as a mark. Please check if the tag is still there.”

Thereupon, the emperor ordered that this be done, and, sure enough, there was indeed a two-inch-long brass tag dangling from its left antler. There were two lines of small characters on the tag, but they were quite illegible due to wear and tear over time. Only then was the emperor convinced. He asked, “Which cyclical year was the fifth year of the Yuanshou reign period? How many years has it been?”

Zhang Guo replied, “It was the *kuihai* cyclical year. It has been 852 years since Emperor Wudi built Kunming Pond until this *jiaxu* cyclical year [734, the twenty-second year of the Kaiyuan reign period].”

By the emperor’s order, the Grand Historian checked the dates and corroborated Zhang Guo’s story. The fact that Zhang Guo was about a thousand years old deeply impressed the assembled officials.

One day, Wang Huizhi, director of the Grand Secretariat, and Xiao Hua, vice director of the Office of Imperial Rites, went together to the Academy of Worthy Scholars to visit Zhang Guo. After greeting them and sitting down, Zhang Guo suddenly broke into a chuckle and said to them, “It’s a frightening thing to have a princess for wife.” Surprised at the irrelevance of this remark, his two visitors looked blankly at each other, wondering what he could have meant by that. In the midst of their conversation, they heard announcements from outside that a messenger was there, carrying an imperial decree. Zhang Guo promptly had an incense altar set out in anticipation of the messenger’s arrival. As it turned out, Emperor Minghuang had a daughter, Princess Yuzhen, who had been a Daoist devotee since childhood, and she had not yet been “lowered in status.” Now, when it comes to marriage, an ordinary woman “marries,” but a princess is “lowered in status.” An ordinary man “takes a wife,” but an ordinary man who marries a princess “elevates his status.” Since Zhang Guo was a real immortal and the princess was a Daoist devotee, Emperor Minghuang was struck with the idea of lowering his daughter’s status and marrying her to Zhang Guo. That way, the latter could pass on his arts to the princess through this alliance between an immortal and a mortal, so that she could also attain immortality.

After the decision was made, the emperor issued a decree and had a courtier go to the Academy of Worthy Scholars and read it aloud to Zhang Guo. When the retainer had finished reading it, Zhang Guo burst into a peal of hearty laughter (MC: *It is indeed quite laughable.*) and refused to say the obligatory words of gratitude for the imperial bounty. Noticing the presence of Mr. Wang and Mr. Xiao, the courtier told them about the emperor's readiness to "lower the status" of the princess and asked the two of them to bring him around. Only then did the two officials catch on to the meaning of what Zhang Guo had said to them in the beginning. So they said to him, "The Venerable Immortal knew this all along, and he told us so." The three men then began to plead with him, but laugh was all he did. Realizing that there was no bringing him around, the courtier resignedly went back to report to the emperor.

Displeased by Zhang Guo's decline, the emperor consulted Gao Lishi, saying, "I understand that juice made from poisonous violet is a most powerful poison that causes instant death to whoever drinks it. Only a genuine immortal is immune. Why don't we put that oldster to the test?"

It was an unusually cold, snowy day. Emperor Minghuang summoned Zhang Guo to the palace and had a palace attendant offer him a cup of heated wine laced with poisonous violet, ostensibly to warm him up. Without hesitation, Zhang Guo downed three cups of the wine in quick succession. As the blood rushed to his face, he cast his eyes around and said, clicking his tongue, "That wine tastes awful." With a yawn, he flopped down to sleep. The emperor kept an eye on him and did not say a word. After a while, Zhang Guo woke up and muttered as he sat up, "How very strange! How very strange!" He retrieved a small mirror from his sleeve, looked into it, and found that his teeth had all turned black. Seeing an iron *ruyi* scepter on the emperor's desk, he told the attendants to get it for him.⁵ He knocked out each of his blackened teeth with it (MC: *Second time.*) and then stuffed the teeth into his waistband. Next, he whipped out a packet of powdered medicine, poured some of it onto his gums, and flung himself down again to sleep. He slept soundly, unlike the last time. By the time he rose more than two hours later, he had regained most of his teeth, and the new ones were stronger and whiter than before. Awed and amazed, the emperor conferred on Zhang Guo the title The Ultimate Daoist. But misgivings about Zhang Guo's origins began to assail his mind.

There lived at the time a certain Gui Yeguang, who was able to recognize a ghost in its true form. The emperor summoned him and told him to look at Zhang Guo. Gui Yeguang did but found little out of the ordinary.

There was a Xing Hepu who could tell fortunes with an abacus. Whenever anyone sought his advice, he would click away at his abacus and unerringly come up with the name, the fate, and the life span of the person involved. Having always marveled at his skills, Emperor Minghuang had him brought in for a consultation. Fervently moving the abacus beads up and down, Hepu made prodigious efforts until he reddened to the roots of his ears, but he could not come up with anything, not even Zhang Guo's age.

There was another Daoist, Ye Fashan, who was also a master of arcane arts. (MC: *Ye Fashan comes on the scene.*) When the emperor privately sought his advice on Zhang Guo, he said, "This humble subject of Your Majesty's is the only one with knowledge of Zhang Guo's origin, but it's a secret I'm not at liberty to divulge." (MC: *Clever transition to the second protagonist.*)

"Why?" asked the emperor.

"Because I'll surely die if I do."

At the emperor's insistence that he divulge the secret, Ye Fashan said, "I won't die only if Your Majesty takes off your crown and your shoes in order to save me." The emperor promised to do so. Only then did Fashan say, "He's the spirit of a white bat born when the earth was first separated from heaven." Before these words were quite out of his mouth, blood began to ooze from the seven apertures in his head. Death might not have overtaken him yet, but he had lost the use of all four of his limbs. The emperor rushed over to Zhang Guo, removed his crown and shoes, and apologized.

As for Zhang Guo, rather than being overwhelmed by the emperor's gesture, he said, deliberately spacing out the words, "That wretch is too talkative. If I don't teach him a lesson, he will wreak havoc with heaven and earth."

The emperor pleaded, "But it was all my idea. Fashan is not at fault. Please forgive him, Venerable Immortal!"

Only then did Zhang Guo relent. He asked for some water and squirted it on Fashan. In a trice, the latter came back to life.

Now let me tell more about this Ye Fashan, courtesy name Daoyuan. He used to live in Songyang County, Chuzhou [in present-day southern Zhejiang], where he practiced Daoism, just as his forefathers, going back three generations, had done. At age twenty, he went on a tour of the Kuocang White Horse Mountains, where he encountered three divine beings wearing brocade robes and bejeweled crowns. They passed on to him secret injunctions from the Venerable Laozi. Thereafter, he devoted himself to exterminating evil spirits, vanquishing demons, and rescuing their human victims.

After moving into the capital, Fashan incurred the wrath of the power-abusing Wu Sansi because he was always watching out for omens of woe or weal in order to protect Emperor Zhongzong [r. 705–10], the crown prince, and [the crown prince's son, later to be] Emperor Minghuang.⁶ Fashan therefore fled to the southern seas. After Emperor Minghuang assumed the throne, Fashan went back to the capital, riding over the seas on a white deer, and arrived before the night was out. During Emperor Minghuang's reign, Fashan made a point of reporting to him all omens that portended good or ill.

One day, a messenger from Tibet came to present a treasure, claiming that the tightly sealed box held secret contents and must therefore be opened by no one but the emperor himself. Not knowing the true intent of the messenger and why he had made such a request, court officials looked at one another uneasily and did not venture to say a word. At this point, Fashan communicated privately with the emperor, saying, "This is an evil plot. Better ask him to open the package himself."

The emperor acted accordingly. As the unsuspecting messenger raised the lid of the box, an arrow flew out of it and killed the messenger. What happened was that the Tibetan chieftain had taken it into his head to assassinate the Tang emperor and had a booby trap set in the gift box. Even the messenger was not privy to the secret, but thanks to Ye Fashan, who saw through the plot, the emperor did not fall for the trick, and the messenger ended up the victim instead.

On the fifteenth night of the first lunar month in the first year of the Kaiyuan reign period [713], Emperor Minghuang went to Shangyang Hall in the palace to view the lanterns. Mao Shunxin, artisan of the Imperial Manufactories, had ingeniously designed and built a decorated two-story structure in order to show off his skills. The structure, 150 feet high with more than thirty rooms, sparkled with pieces of gold, emeralds, pearls, and jade. Seats on the ground floor commanded a spectacular view of the multitude of lanterns upstairs. Once ignited, the lanterns—in the shapes of phoenixes, different kinds of dragons, leopards, and a hundred kinds of birds and other animals—would dance in the air and wheel around. The ingenuity of it all could only have been divinely inspired. Immensely pleased, the emperor ordered that Venerable Teacher Ye be immediately brought to the palace to enjoy the lanterns with him.

It was quite a while before Ye Fashan showed up downstairs. To the emperor's praise of the lantern show, Fashan had this to say, "Yes, it's wonderful.

But to my eyes, tonight's lantern show in Xiliang Prefecture [in present-day Gansu] is just as good."

"How were you able to see tonight's lantern show there, Venerable Teacher?" asked the emperor.

"I was there watching the show before I rushed here on Your Majesty's order."

Intrigued by this explanation, the emperor asked pointedly, "Can we go and watch the lantern show there if we want to?"

"Of course! Nothing easier!" replied Fashan. He told the emperor to close his eyes, adding, "Your Majesty must keep your eyes closed or something terrible will happen."

The emperor did as he was told.

"Rise!" shouted Fashan. Immediately the emperor rose on a cloud next to Fashan. A moment later, when their feet touched ground, Fashan said, "Your Majesty may open your eyes now."

Opening his royal eyes, Emperor Minghuang saw lit lanterns stretching for tens of *li* along streets that were thronged with horse-carriages and men and women out for fun. It was indeed a scene no less glamorous than that in the capital. While the emperor was clapping his hands in glee, a sudden thought struck him. "Too bad there's no wine with which to celebrate the glory of the night."

Fashan asked in response, "What have you brought with you, Your Majesty?"

"Only a wrought-iron *ruyi* scepter."

Fashan took it, went to a restaurant, and exchanged the scepter for a flask of wine and several dishes. He and the emperor sat down face-to-face and applied themselves to the wine and food. After Fashan returned the empty utensils, the emperor said, "Let's go back."

As before, Fashan told the emperor to close his eyes. They rose into the air and, in a matter of moments, were back at the lantern show in the palace. The song that was being performed at the time of the emperor's departure had not yet finished, and in the meantime the emperor had traveled more than a thousand *li*. The emperor began to suspect that it had all been a Daoist magic trick that had fooled his eyes and doubted that he had been in Liangzhou at all. Then another thought suddenly crossed his mind: "My scepter paid for the wine. That did happen and is verifiable."

The next day, he sent a court retainer on a mission to Liangzhou, ostensibly on some official business but in fact to track down the wrought-iron

scepter. It was indeed in that restaurant. The restaurant owner said, “A Daoist used it to pay for wine on the fifteenth night of the first month.” Only then was the emperor convinced that his lantern-viewing trip had been for real.

On the evening of the Mid-Autumn Festival [the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month], the boundless sky was flooded with silvery moonlight. While leaning against the white jade balustrade and enjoying the moon surrounded by strains of music and between cups of wine, the emperor turned his face upward and gave himself over to thoughts about the vast universe. There is a *ci* poem in testimony:

*Osmanthus blossoms adorn the immortals' abode;
The full moon casts its glory over the sky.
The night air feels cool and clean;
The breezes chill the bones and ruffle hair and beards.
In the crystal palace where fairies live,
Snakes and dragons have come to a standstill.
Over temples, towers, and palace halls
Waft sounds of music and singing.
With the land bathed in moonlight,
How one wishes to ride the colorful clouds!
(To the tune of “Libation to River and Moon”)*

The emperor was so overwhelmed with the grandeur of the universe that he said, “The moon that illuminates the whole world must be a very beautiful place. (MC: *This is but an illusion.*) Isn't it said that Chang'e the moon goddess flew up to the moon palace after she stole an elixir? If there is a palace on the moon, it should be worth a tour. But how do I go up there?”

Immediately, he called for Venerable Teacher Ye. When Ye Fashan showed up, the emperor asked, “With your Daoist arts, can you take us to the moon palace for a little tour?”

“Nothing to it! Your Majesty may begin the journey right now.” So saying, Fashan tossed a tablet into the air, and it changed into a snowy white ribbonlike bridge leading straight to the moon. Fashan helped the emperor go up the bridge. It turned out to be steady and easy to cross, and the part of the bridge they trod on vanished as they walked along.

After covering more than a *li*, they came to a place where bone-chilling air descended on them and cold dewdrops collected on their clothes. An

exquisite four-column archway loomed in front of them. They raised their heads and saw a large horizontal board bearing six gilded characters atop the archway. The emperor recognized them as “The Vast and Cold Moon Palace.” After going through the archway with Fashan, he saw a massive *Osmanthus* tree with a canopy that spread for goodness knows how many *li* around. At the foot of the tree, numerous white-robed fairy maidens were dancing on white phoenixes. In a nearby courtyard, another group of fairy maidens in the same attire, each with a musical instrument in hand, was playing music as accompaniment to the dance. They were unruffled by the approach of the emperor and Fashan, nor did they stop to greet them but went on playing music and dancing. As the emperor stood staring, Fashan said, pointing to the fairy maidens, “They’re called ‘White Maidens.’ Their white robes are called ‘Rainbow Feather Robes.’ The music being played is called ‘The Purple Clouds.’”

An accomplished musician, Emperor Minghuang clapped his hands in time to the music and memorized the melody. (MC: *What an interesting emperor!*) Later, after he returned to his palace, he passed it on to Imperial Consort Yang Taizhen and gave it the name “Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Robe Dance.” Through the Music Bureau, it became a much-prized melody of the Tang dynasty.⁷ But I am getting ahead of myself.

After he had listened long enough, the emperor felt cold and wanted to go back to his palace. Two colorful clouds appeared at Fashan’s command. They mounted the clouds and returned to the human world without having to take one step, and the ride was as smooth as if they had been walking on flat ground. As they passed Luzhou, they heard the night-watch drum strike the third watch. By the brighter-than-usual moonlight, they could see everything in the city clearly. But at that time of the night, all was still. Fashan said, “Since no one knows that Your Majesty and I are here at this time of night, why don’t you play the celestial music that you just learned?”

“Wonderful idea!” said the emperor. “But I didn’t bring my jade flute.”

“Where’s the flute?”

“It’s in my bedchamber.”

“That’s no problem,” said Fashan. As he jabbed a finger in the air, the emperor’s jade flute fell from the clouds. Overcome with delight, the emperor took it and, recalling the melody he had heard on the moon, played the tune. Then he extracted a few gold coins from his sleeve and tossed them down before he returned to his palace with the moon lighting their way. This story

about Emperor Minghuang of the Tang dynasty touring the moon palace is still in circulation today.

Those unable to sleep that night in Luzhou heard the crisp, pleasant notes of a flute. Detecting something quite out of the ordinary about the music, some rose to listen more intently but felt mystified because the notes were coming from somewhere high up in the air. The next day, some people found the gold coins in the streets and reported the matter to the prefectural yamen. Believing these were auspicious omens, the prefectural officials wrote a memorial to the throne. (MC: *These officials have nothing better to do.*) After about ten days, when the memorial reached his hands, the emperor saw that it read, “On the fifteenth night of the eighth lunar month, celestial music was heard in this city and gold coins were found in the streets. These auspicious omens for the empire bring immense joy.”

Knowing all too well what had happened, the emperor abandoned himself to a peal of laughter. Henceforth, he held Fashan in as much esteem as he did Zhang Guo, often kept them in the palace for chess games and little contests of magic power, and made the games and contests more interesting by placing bets on them.

One day, Ye Fashan and Zhang Guo were playing chess in the palace when the emperor received a memorial from the prefect of Ezhou [in present-day Hubei] claiming that a local immortal boy, Luo Gongyuan by name, possessed a wide range of Daoist magic arts. (MC: *Luo Gongyuan comes on the scene.*) It went on to say that on the day the prefect presided over celebrations for the advent of spring, a white-robed, ten-foot-tall man with the strangest looks watched the event from among the crowd. Many of those who saw him were so frightened that they fled from his presence. A boy who was off to one side cried out, “Accursed vermin! How dare you leave where you belong and cause a disturbance at an official event? Be gone this instant!”

Not daring to let out a peep, the man hitched up his robe and ran off with the speed of the wind. Finding the boy’s behavior strange, the prefectural police seized him, took him to the yamen, and reported to the prefect. When the prefect asked his name, the boy said, “I’m Luo Gongyuan. Some moments ago, I saw the dragon who’s the guardian of the river out on the shore, watching the spring celebrations. So I ordered him to return to his proper abode.”

The prefect did not believe him. “How do you know he was a dragon?” he asked. “I’ll believe you only when I see him in his true form.”

The boy replied, “In that case, please wait until the day after tomorrow.”

When that day came, the boy dug a small pit one foot deep about ten feet away from the shore and diverted river water into it. The prefect and the assembled villagers saw a white fish five or six inches long swim into the pit with the current. After it jumped up and down twice, it grew in size. Then, as a plume of blue smoke rose from the pit, the sky immediately became overcast with heavy clouds. The boy said, "Please go to the pavilion by the shore for shelter!" As they were on their way there, flashes of lightning shot across the sky, and a heavy rain came down in sheets. When it stopped moments later, a great white dragon was seen rising from the middle of the river until its head touched the clouds, and it stayed in that position for about the time it takes to eat a meal and then disappeared. The prefect wrote an eyewitness account and instructed Luo Gongyuan to take the report to the court and submit it to the emperor.

After telling Zhang Guo and Ye Fashan about the memorial from the prefect, the emperor called in Luo Gongyuan so that he could meet Zhang and Ye. At the sight of the boy, Zhang and Ye roared with laughter. "What does a little village boy know?" said they. (MC: *Could the emperor be testing the two of them, to see if they are too shallow?*) Each of them took a handful of chess pieces, made a fist, and asked, "What do I have in my fist?"

Gongyuan replied with a smile, "Your fists are empty." Sure enough, when Zhang and Ye loosened their fists, there was indeed nothing in their palms. All the chess pieces were now in Gongyuan's hands. Only then did Zhang and Ye realize that there was something unusual about the little boy. The emperor told Gongyuan to take the seat below Ye Fashan. The weather was cold, so they sat around a stove.

In those times, there grew in the Jiannan Circuit [present-day Sichuan and Yunnan] a kind of fruit called "ripe in a day." They normally were no longer fresh by the time shipments of them arrived at the capital, but Zhang and Ye had been putting their magic powers to use and having them delivered by messengers every day, so that the emperor was never short of a fresh supply after lunch. That day, however, they waited in vain until evening. Zhang and Ye were full of misgivings. Consulting each other, they wondered if Luo Gongyuan had anything to do with the delay. Turning their eyes to Luo, they stared at him with fixed intensity. In point of fact, Luo Gongyuan had stuck the fire poker into the ashes on first coming to the stove. It was only when he noticed their suspicious looks that he smilingly pulled out the fire poker. (MC: *Such are the lengths to which immortals go in playing pranks on*

one another.) Soon thereafter, the messenger with the fruit arrived. Fashan asked, "Why are you so late today?"

The messenger replied, "I was about to arrive in the capital when a fire broke out, with the flames leaping into the sky and blocking all roads. I wasn't able to continue on my way until the fire died out."

Everyone present was awestruck by Gongyuan's prowess.

Let me now tell of a Consort Wu [699–737], who monopolized the attention of Emperor Minghuang before Consort Yang had even entered the palace. The emperor was a Daoist devotee, but Consort Wu was a pious Buddhist; each was given to a different pursuit. Consort Wu's teacher, with the Buddhist name Vajra Tripitaka, was also not of the common run, a man whose magic power rivaled that of Ye, Luo, and Zhang. (MC: *Could Consort Wu's devotion to Buddhism be attributed to family tradition?*)⁸ Once, on a visit to the Work of Merit Monastery, the emperor suddenly felt itchy on his back. Luo Gongyuan broke a pine branch, changed it into a seven-jewel scepter, and presented it to the emperor so that he could scratch his own back. Delighted, the emperor turned to Tripitaka and said, "Are you, Your Reverence, also able to do this?"

Tripitaka replied, "Gongyuan had to make a scepter out of something else, but I have the real thing for Your Majesty." So saying, he whipped a seven-jewel scepter out of his sleeve and presented it to the emperor. As the emperor reached for it, the scepter given by Gongyuan instantly changed back into a bamboo branch. On returning to the palace, the emperor told Consort Wu about what had happened and she, too, was overcome with delight.

When taken with a desire to visit Luoyang, the emperor said to Consort Wu, "You'll be going with me, but I'm also thinking of taking Venerable Teachers Ye and Luo and Tripitaka on the trip so that they can engage in contests of their magic powers to see who will come out the winner. What do you say?"

Consort Wu said joyfully, "I'm all for it!"

By imperial decree, a grand procession set out for Luoyang, and in a matter of days, it reached its destination. As Linzhi Hall was still being built, a massive beam forty to fifty feet long and six or seven feet in diameter was lying on the ground in the courtyard. The emperor said to Ye Fashan, "Venerable Teacher, please try and raise it for us."

Thus ordered, Fashan put his magic arts to use and raised one end of the beam several feet above the ground, but the other end did not budge.

The emperor asked, "With your divine power, Venerable Teacher, why were you able to raise only one end of it?"

Fa Shan replied, "That's because Tripitaka is making the *deva* guardians hold down the other end."

As a matter of fact, Fashan said that on purpose, meaning to make Consort Wu look good. (MC: *Immortals also know how to flatter just as humans do.*) His plan was to wait until Tripitaka overplayed his hand and then to strike and come out the winner. Sure enough, Consort Wu was beside herself with joy at the implication that Buddhist dharma was gaining the upper hand. Tripitaka, too, thought Ye was being sincere and got a little carried away. But Luo Gongyuan, his head lowered, kept grinning.

Not quite ready to acknowledge defeat, the emperor turned to Tripitaka again and said, "If Your Reverence does possess greater divine power than Venerable Teacher Ye, can you chant an incantation and put him into this water jar here?"

Thus ordered, Tripitaka set the water jar in front of him, instructed Ye Fashan to sit properly in the Buddhist fashion, and began to chant an incantation. Before he had finished chanting, Fashan's body began to move toward the jar. By the time he finished the incantation a second time, Fashan had already blithely gotten through the mouth of the jar, much to the emperor's dismay. After a while, as Ye Fashan remained inside, the emperor said to Tripitaka, "Now that Your Reverence has put him into the jar, can you let him out?"

Tripitaka replied, "Getting him in was the hard part. Getting him out shouldn't be a problem." With that, he began chanting another incantation, but nothing happened after he finished chanting. Tripitaka began to grow frantic. He repeated the incantation several times in succession, still to no avail. (MC: *This is hilarious.*)

The emperor said in alarm, "Could the Venerable Teacher have ceased to be?" His countenance fell.

Consort Wu was aghast. Tripitaka also panicked. Only Luo Gongyuan was amused, his lips parting in a huge grin. The emperor asked him, "What's to be done now?"

Luo Gongyuan replied gleefully, "Don't worry, Your Majesty! Fashan is not far from here."

Tripitaka resumed his chanting, but still to no effect. Just when he was at his wit's end, Gao Lishi announced from outside, "Venerable Teacher Ye is here!"

The emperor said in astonishment, "The bronze jar is here. Where did he come from?" Without a moment's delay, he called in Ye Fashan and asked him what had happened.

Fashan said, "The Prince of Ning invited me to dinner, but I was in the middle of a show of Daoist power. Your Majesty would not have let me go if I'd asked for leave. (MC: *Hilarious*.) So the timing of entering the jar couldn't have been better. I took the opportunity to go to the Prince of Ning's residence and came back after finishing the meal. If it hadn't been for His Reverence's incantation, I wouldn't have been able to make it!" On hearing this, the emperor abandoned himself to mirth, to the great relief of Consort Wu and Tripitaka.

Ye Fashan continued, "Now that His Reverence is done with his incantation, it's my turn to reciprocate." He picked up Tripitaka's red copper alms bowl, held it over the stove until it was scalding hot inside and out, and toyed with it as if he was not being hurt in the slightest. All of a sudden, he raised the bowl with both hands and lunged at Tripitaka, but before Fashan could put the bowl over his shaved head, upside down, Tripitaka let out a cry and managed to dodge him. The emperor roared with laughter.

Gongyuan said, "Your Majesty may find this amusing, but this is an inferior Daoist trick. Must Venerable Teacher Ye resort to it?" (MC: *Gongyuan is the greater master because he refrains from showing off his prowess*.)

The emperor rejoined, "Why don't you, Venerable Teacher, also do a trick for our amusement?"

Gongyuan said, addressing Tripitaka, "Pray, Your Reverence, how do you want to do this?"

Tripitaka replied, "This poor monk will hide his cassock. You, sir, will try and find it. If you don't find it, you lose. If you do, this poor monk loses."

Immensely delighted, the emperor went with them to the Daoist ceremonial hall to watch.

Tripitaka set up an altar, lit incense, put his cassock in a silver box, laid the box in the smallest of a set of wooden boxes of increasing size, locked every box before he put it into the next one, and transferred the whole stack to the altar. He then sat down on the altar in the meditation posture. The emperor, Consort Wu, and Venerable Teacher Ye all saw on the altar a circle of bodhisattvas surrounded by golden-armored *devas* who, in their turn, were surrounded by a group of *vajras*. With so many deities shoulder to shoulder in a tight circle and Tripitaka keeping a vigilant watch with unblinking eyes, Gongyuan, seated on a rope bed, did nothing but talk and laugh as

if nothing had happened. Everyone stared at him, but he looked as if he could not care less.

After a good while, the emperor said, "What's taking you so long? You're not stumped, are you?"

Gongyuan replied, "I don't want to boast, nor do I know if I stand a chance, but please have Tripitaka open the boxes, and that will be that."

So the emperor told Tripitaka to open the boxes and take out the cassock. Pleased that every padlock was in place, Tripitaka began to open them one by one. When he got to the silver box, he gave a mournful shriek. The cassock was not there. The box was empty. Tripitaka's face went white with horror, and he could not find his tongue for the longest time. As the emperor clapped his hands and laughed boisterously, Luo Gongyuan said, "Please have someone pick up the cassock from the cabinet in my temple." A court messenger duly went there and brought the cassock back shortly afterward. The emperor checked the cassock and said to Gongyuan, "I was an eyewitness to the deities' tight encirclement of the boxes. How did you do it?"

Gongyuan replied, "The bodhisattvas and the *vajras* are of the middling sort among deities, and the golden-armored *devas* are minor figures, but the wonders of Venerable Laozi are beyond the ken of necromancers. The cassock was taken from the box by the divine maiden Jade Purity. She's invisible to the bodhisattva and *vajras*. Taking the cassock was the easiest thing for her. There was nothing to stop her from doing it."

An elated emperor showered Luo Gongyuan with imperial bounty. Ye Fashan and Tripitaka were also profoundly impressed with his divine powers.

The emperor wished to learn the art of body concealment from Gongyuan, but Gongyuan declined, saying, "Your Majesty is a reincarnation of the Sage. In your exalted status, which comes with the obligation to safeguard the empire and protect the people, you have no use for such a minor trick." (MC: *Said like the real master that he is.*)

The emperor flew into a rage and heaped angry words on him. Gongyuan disappeared into a column in the hall and, from there, reeled off a long list of the emperor's faults. All the more enraged, the emperor ordered that the column be cut down in order to capture him. After the column was smashed, Luo Gongyuan disappeared into the column's pedestal, which was then broken into several tens of pieces. With each bearing the image of Gongyuan, nothing could be done to him. Only after the emperor apologized did Gongyuan suddenly appear again in the royal presence.

The emperor pleaded so vehemently to be taught the art that Gongyuan saw nothing for it but to relent. However, he did not teach the emperor everything. When the emperor was doing the body concealment trick with him, both were indeed visible to no one, but if the emperor tried it by himself in Gongyuan's absence, something of him would always show, such as a waistband or the two corners of his cap. So he never succeeded in eluding anyone in the palace.

Knowing that Luo Gongyuan was holding things back from him, the emperor gave him lavish gifts so as to win him over but sometimes also threatened him, saying, "If you don't teach me everything, we will immediately put you to death!" (MC: *How stupid of the emperor!*) But Gongyuan held his ground. In a towering rage, the emperor sharply ordered that he be tied up, taken out of the palace, and beheaded. Thus ordered, the executioners took him to the marketplace and beheaded him.

About ten days later, a court retainer, Fu Xianyu by name, was on his way back to the capital from a mission via the Shu region when he ran into Luo Gongyuan on a donkey. Cheerfully, Gongyuan said to the official, "The emperor doesn't play by the rules." Extracting a letter from his sleeve, he continued, "Please deliver this to the throne for me." Then, producing a packet of medicine, he added, "If the emperor asks what it is, just say that it's a Shu variety of angelica." With that, he vanished into thin air.

Back in the capital, Fu Xianyu reported to the emperor. The emperor took the letter and was mystified when he saw that the signature looked like "Gongyuan" but each of the two characters was missing the top component. As soon as Fu Xianyu left, Luo Gongyuan appeared before the emperor. Realizing that the letter was from Gongyuan, the emperor asked, "Why did you change your name?"

"Didn't Your Majesty have my head cut off? Hence the new name."

The emperor raised a hand in a Daoist salute and apologized. Gongyuan continued, "Oh well, so what if you don't play by the rules?" Having said that, he walked out the door and went none knew whither.

When Emperor Minghuang proceeded to the Shu region during An Lushan's rebellion at the end of the Tianbao reign period, Luo Gongyuan went to Sword Mountain County to greet the imperial procession and escorted the emperor all the way to Chengdu before departing with a flick of his sleeves. Later, when Emperor Suzhong assumed the throne at Lingwu [present-day Ningxia Autonomous Region], Emperor Minghuang suspected that he might not be able to return to Chang'an, and therefore, after greeting the new

emperor in his capacity as the “Super Emperor,” he returned to the capital from the Shu region. Only then did he catch on to the meaning of “a Shu kind of angelica.” This and Li Xiazhou’s poem quoted at the beginning of the story testify to the divine foresight of Daoist masters.

*Emperors of Qin and Han, Daoists though they were,
Little understood the laws of constancy.
However powerful the arcane arts,
None was able to save the Yangs’ lives.¹⁰*

General Wu Repays the Debt of One Meal

Chen Dalang Reunites with Two Loved Ones

As the poem says,

*One may be surprised that so many men take up banditry,
But as it turns out, there are heroes among bandits.
Consider "Timely Rain" of yesteryear;¹
His sense of honor is the stuff of legend.*

Let me begin our story with a comment on the word "bandit." It inspires such fear that it easily lends itself to being used as a vile epithet. But let us be fair. If you stop to consider it, can you name any place in the world that is free of bandits? What about those officials who harm the country's interests, deceive the emperor, and exploit the people? However highly placed and richly paid, they are in fact the bigger bandits. (MC: *Bravo!*) And what about those men who, emboldened by the power of their fathers and brothers, throw their weight around, plague the people, take bribes, and hide their loot? You never know to what lengths they will go. The people dare not air their grievances, and the government yamens dare not investigate. Are they not big bandits, too? And then there are those scholars, titled and untitled, who gather their cronies around them and dominate the government yamens, initiating or dismissing lawsuits and breaking up respectable families. Are

they not big bandits? If that goes for such members of the elite class, how much truer is it for brokers, merchants, lictors, and the like? The 360 professions are rife with rapacious and savage men no better than bandits, but let me say no more about this than quoting these lines from Instructor Li She after he ran into a group of bandits:²

To the rain-washed village by the river at dusk

Come heroes of the greenwood.

Must you conceal your names when we meet?

The world of today abounds in men like you.

Well, those are cynical remarks for mocking people who are ruthless even to their kith and kin, to say nothing of casual acquaintances who do them favors. Such men have none of the pride of the bandit characters in the novel *Water Margin*, who, calling themselves “heroes,” are determined to win glory for themselves and accomplish what is beyond the reach of the average man. In the bandits’ dens, some are impoverished men needing a place to stay, some have killed out of a sense of loyalty and honor and fled there for shelter, and some, overlooked by the imperial court, have come down in the world and fallen into such company. Granted that most bandits are depraved characters, many of them do fight injustice and help the needy. Stories about bandits freeing and rewarding Zhao Li and showering Zhang Qixian with lavish gifts are based on real people and real events in olden times.³

Let me come back to our own times and tell of a Mr. Wang of an ordinary family in Suzhou. He lived under the same roof with his father, Wang Sanlang, a merchant, his mother, Li-shi (née Li), and his widowed and childless aunt, Yang-shi, wife of his father’s brother. Mr. Wang Junior was clever and well behaved from his earliest childhood. His aunt loved him dearly. All too unexpectedly, his parents died one after the other when he was seven or eight years old. Thanks to Yang-shi, the funerals and burials were held with proper observance of ritual, after which she began to treat the young boy as her very own flesh and blood. In due course, he grew up, and in the twinkling of an eye, he was a young man of eighteen of sharp business acumen.

One day, his aunt Yang-shi said to him, “Now that you’ve come of age, you can’t very well stay idle and eat yourself out of hearth and home. Now, what funds I have and what your father left should be enough for you to run a business of your own. Why don’t I put together a thousand taels of silver so that you can go out and do some business? That will be the right pursuit.”

Joyfully, young Mr. Wang said, "Yes, that's indeed the proper pursuit."

Forthwith Yang-shi put together a thousand taels of silver, and the silver changed hands. Young Mr. Wang consulted a group of merchants, and since Nanjing was said to be a good place to make money, he bought some local Suzhou merchandise with several hundred taels of silver. On a chosen day, he booked a long-distance sailing boat, packed, took leave of Yang-shi, went on board, made burnt offerings to the gods, and set sail.

The journey was uneventful until they reached Jingkou [present-day Zhenjiang, Jiangsu] a few days later. Sailing before the east wind, they crossed the river and entered Huangtian Lake. All of a sudden, an eerie wind sprang up, whipping up white-capped waves sky-high. The boat was blown off course, to a place no one on the boat recognized. In the gathering darkness, they saw nothing but reeds all around them. No other passenger boat was anywhere in sight. Young Mr. Wang and his fellow travelers were overcome with panic. Then, at the striking of a gong, three or four small boats emerged from the reeds, each carrying seven or eight men. As the men jumped onto the passenger boat, young Mr. Wang and the others gasped and kowtowed, asking for mercy. But the men did not seem inclined to take lives. Without a word, they raided the boat and swept it clean of everything of value. Once they were back in their own boats, they cried out, "Sorry to have bothered you!" With that, they put their oars to work and raced off with the speed of the wind.

All the passengers were shocked out of their senses. Their eyes popped wide; their jaws dropped. Young Mr. Wang found himself sobbing violently. "What a luckless man I am!" he cried. Turning to his fellow passengers, he said, "Now that all our baggage and money are gone, what's the point of going to Nanjing? We might as well go home before deciding on what to do next."

The travelers talked until daybreak. By then, the wind had subsided and the waves had died down. The boat turned around and headed toward Zhenjiang. Once there, young Mr. Wang went ashore and made his way to a relative's house. He borrowed a few maces of silver from his host before departing for home.

Judging from his earlier-than-expected return, his unkempt appearance, and his sorrowful look, his aunt Yang-shi gained a pretty good idea of what had happened. He walked up to her, chanted a greeting, and sank to the floor in a flood of tears. After he answered her questions as to all the details, Yang-shi gave him these words of comfort: "My child, it was just your fate. It wasn't as if you spent all the money on youthful indiscretions.

Don't be so upset. Relax and stay home for a while. I'll put together more money for you to go out again. Just be sure you make up for the loss."

"I'll be content with doing business locally rather than taking all the risks of a long journey."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Yang-shi. "It's only right for a man with any pride in him to go on one-thousand-*li* journeys for business ventures!"

After staying home for more than a month, young Mr. Wang consulted his friends and said to Yang-shi, "Fabrics sell well in Yangzhou. I'll buy fabrics from Songjiang and dispose of them in Yangzhou. I'll also take some money to buy rice and beans and bring them home for sale. I'll be able to make a nice profit that way." So Yang-shi scraped together several hundred taels of silver, with which he bought about a hundred bolts of fabric from Songjiang. Then he chartered a fast sailing boat and, taking several hundred taels of silver for buying rice and beans, set sail on a chosen day with a hired hand.

On arriving at Changzhou, he heard those in the boats coming from the opposite direction complain, "It was choking! Simply choking!" He hastened to ask what they meant and got this answer: "So many grain-carrying boats are heading for Danyang that the riverway from Qingyangpu to Lingkou is all clogged up. Commercial boats have no chance of getting through."

"What's to be done?" asked young Mr. Wang.

His boatman said, "We don't need to go up to watch the crowd, do we? Why don't we take the Meng River?"

"I'm afraid that route isn't safe."

The boatman rejoined, "What harm could there be if we travel only by daylight? Otherwise, when will our turn ever come?"

And so young Mr. Wang gave in and agreed to take the Meng River detour. Sure enough, it was still daylight when they left the Meng River behind. Overjoyed, young Mr. Wang said, "All's well now! If we hadn't taken this river, we'd still be stuck in that inland waterway!" (MC: *Don't let your cup of happiness overflow!*)

They were still exulting when they heard the sound of sloshing water behind them. A three-scuttle and eight-oar boat was racing toward them. When it drew near, a hook flew over and caught Mr. Wang's boat. About ten bandits with swords, iron bars, and metal rings jumped on board.

The fact is that east of the Meng River is the Yangzi River, and the area was infested with bandits even in daytime. Only empty boats could get through safely. Now that a commercial boat had come their way, which was

too bad for the boat, how could the bandits let such an opportunity slip through their fingers? They helped themselves to everything on the boat. Angry at the boatman for still holding on to the scull, one of the bandits hit him with an iron bar. The boatman quickly let go.

In his agitated state, young Mr. Wang saw out of the corner of his eye that the bandits were none other than those he had run into on Huangtian Lake. "Mighty heroes!" he cried out. "You already got your way the last time we met. Why did I have to run into you again today? I must owe you a huge debt from my previous incarnation!" (MC: *For his courage, Mr. Wang deserves the good fortune that is in store for him.*)

A big, tall man among the bandits said, "In that case, let's give him some travel money." So saying, he tossed over a small package. Then the pirates' boat rowed away and shot off like a puff of smoke.

Letting out a groan, young Mr. Wang picked up the package and, on opening it, saw that it contained about ten taels of loose pieces of silver. Fighting back tears, he said with a cynical laugh, "I'm glad I don't have to borrow travel money this time. What a lucky man I am!" Turning to the boatman, he said, "It was your idea to take this route that landed us in such a mess. Well, let's go back now!"

The boatman said, "The world has changed. Who would have known that nowadays bandits operate in broad daylight!" There was nothing for it but to turn the boat around and go back the way they had come.

Yang-shi again gave a start on seeing him return home so soon. His face awash in tears, young Mr. Wang walked up to her and sobbed out an account of what had happened. Yang-shi was an exceptionally kind person, and, what's more, she was a good judge of character. Confident that her nephew was destined to rise spectacularly in life, she did not bear him the least grudge but comforted him and told him to bide his time before deciding on the next course of action.

After some time went by, Yang-shi again put together some silver and urged him to be on his way, saying, "Your two encounters with bandits were the workings of fate. If you're predestined to lose money, robbers will get their hands on you even if you're sitting at home. (MC: *She takes things philosophically.*) You mustn't let those two incidents put an end to the family business."

But young Mr. Wang was still gripped by fear.

Yang-shi continued, "If you're still not convinced, why don't you find a fortune-teller and ask him what lies ahead for you?"

So he engaged a fortune-teller and took him home. The fortune-teller did several divinations in succession for locations where his business could prosper, but each time the answer was: "The Very Worst." Only when the fortune-teller tried Nanjing did he draw the answer: "The Very Best." The fortune-teller added, "You don't even have to be in Nanjing. As long as you go in the direction of Nanjing, you'll naturally be in for a windfall."

Yang-shi said, "My boy, as they say, 'Fearlessness gets you everywhere; excessive caution ties you down.' There are only about six or seven courier stations between Suzhou and Nanjing, and they're all busy with travelers going in both directions.⁴ Your father and your uncle both knew the route well. It was just bad luck that you ran into bandits twice, but they couldn't have been waiting expressly for you in order to do their dirty work! Since the divination is favorable, just set your mind at rest and go ahead."

And so, young Mr. Wang took his aunt's counsel, packed, and set out on his journey, as was dictated by his destiny. Verily,

Everything that you possess

Is at the gods' disposal.

Robbers do not come without a reason;

At the right time, they may bring you a windfall.

After two days on the road, Mr. Wang again reached the Yangzi River. That day, with a favorable wind, he sailed past ten thousand mountains that flanked the river and reached the Longjiang checkpoint outside Nanjing. But it was already dark by this time and therefore too late for him to go on shore, so he made preparations to spend the night on the boat in a berth. Having learned from experience to be cautious, he had his boat tied next to a police patrol boat. He went to sleep believing that nothing could possibly happen.

As the third watch of the night was struck, the sound of a gong rang out and torches lit up the sky. Young Mr. Wang woke up with a start and saw a group of bandits leaping onto his boat. As before, they swept the boat clean. Then he realized that his boat was no longer at its mooring place but was now on a wide section of the river. By the light of the torches, he watched the bandits up close and recognized them to be none other than those who had plagued him twice before. He plucked up enough courage to seize the man who had tossed him a package last time. Falling on his knees, he said, "Mighty hero! Your humble servant begs to die."

The ringleader of the bandits said, "We've taken a vow to never take human lives. You're free to go. Why do you try to cause trouble instead?"

Young Mr. Wang said tearfully, "You wouldn't have imagined it, sir, but my parents died when I was small. It's my aunt who funds my business trips. This is my third trip. It just so happens that I seem to owe you a debt from a previous incarnation. All three times I lost everything to you, sir. How can I face my aunt? How am I going to return my aunt's money? If you don't kill me, I'll jump into the river and drown. Nothing will make me go back to face my kind aunt!"

As he broke down in a violent fit of heartrending sobs, the bandit chief, a man not without a sense of honor, took pity on him. "I'm not going to kill you," said he, "but I'm not going to return the money to you either. I have a solution. Last night, I seized what I thought was a passenger boat, but it turned out to be carrying nothing but bales of ramie, and there's quite a lot of them. I have no use for ramie. So I'll keep your money, and you take the ramie to use as capital for your business. We'll be even."

This offer exceeded young Mr. Wang's wildest hopes. As he poured out a flood of thanks, the bandits began to toss the bales helter-skelter onto his boat. He and the boatman busily put the bales into neat stacks. There were altogether about two hundred to three hundred bales, and he did not have time to check them carefully. After disposing of all the ramie, the pirates gave a whistle and rowed off.

Young Mr. Wang's boatman saw an open berth and maneuvered the boat into it.

After daybreak the next morning, young Mr. Wang said to himself, "That was a bandit with a spark of conscience in him. I think these bales of ramie should be worth about a thousand taels of silver. He gave them to me because he wouldn't be able to dispose of them. If I take the bales to an agent for sale as they are, they may be recognized as looted property, and that will reflect badly on me. A better option is to take them home first and rebind them before shipping them elsewhere for sale." (MC: *He is a discreet and prudent man.*)

So the boat turned back the way it had come. The journey downstream took less time. Soon they passed Jingkou Sluice Gate and arrived home.

On seeing his aunt, he gave her a full account of what had happened. Yang-shi said, "You lost the silver but came back with so many bales of ramie. So you didn't come out of it too badly."

When they opened the first bale, they found one layer of ramie beneath another until they came to a tightly bound bundle in the middle. Carefully, they unwrapped one layer of cotton paper after another, only to expose large ingots of gleaming silver. Then they opened the second bale and the rest of the bales, and the same thing happened each time. There were altogether more than five thousand taels of silver. The truth of the matter was that an experienced rich merchant, as a precaution against robbery, had buried his silver in bales of ramie so as to masquerade as a trader in ramie. Little did he know that the robbers would take them regardless of the camouflage and thus make a certain Mr. Wang a rich man.

Yang-shi and young Mr. Wang cried, "What good luck!" Even though the young man had been traumatized three times, they still could hardly contain their joy because this windfall was twice the amount they had put in. Henceforth, young Mr. Wang made a success of every one of his business ventures. In a few years, he became an immensely rich man. This of course was because he was in fortune's favor, but that pirate chief's exceptional spark of kindness also played a role. It would thus appear that there are men of good character even among robbers.

Now let me tell of another Suzhou native who happened to form a friendship with a hero-bandit and, because of this relationship, made his fortune later on and was reunited with his lost wife. There is a poem in testimony:

*His lofty sense of honor soars to the sky;
This amazing tale is second to none.
If everyone has the same noble mind,
Even the Fountain of Greed cannot corrupt.⁵*

The story tells that in the Jingtai reign period [1450–56], there was a certain Mr. Ouyang, a small trader, who lived in Wujiang County, Suzhou Prefecture. His wife, Zeng-shi, a native of Chongming County in the same prefecture, bore him a daughter and a son. The son, now sixteen years of age, was yet unbetrothed. The daughter of this family of modest means, age twenty, had some claim to attractiveness. She was married to Chen Dalang of the same village, and they lived in her parents' house. Neither rich nor poor, the family owned a small general store at the front of their house, with Chen Dalang and his brother-in-law taking care of the daily business. The parents, the young couple, and Mr. Ouyang Junior got by on

income generated by the business, and they lived in harmony and with respect and love for one another.

When winter rolled around, Chen Dalang went to Suzhou to procure goods. As he walked down the street, snowflakes were spinning down from the sky. An ancient quatrain rightly says,

*They all say snow heralds a fat year for crops,
But what does a fat year for crops bring to all?
With so many paupers in Chang'an,
A harvest is welcome, but not the snow!*

Chen Dalang was trudging through the snow in search of a tavern for a drink and a little warmth when he saw a man walking toward him from a distance. You may ask, “How did he look?” Behold:

*A close-fitting black gown,
A knife halfhidden at the waist,
He had a somewhat imposing bearing,
With no soft flesh on his face.
Whiskers sprouted on his cheeks;
Long hair covers his whole body.*

Standing seven feet tall, the man had broad shoulders and a large face mostly hidden behind his whiskers. Strangely enough, those parts of his face that lacked whiskers were covered by inch-long hair so that his whole face was smothered in hair except for his eyes. It was just as the ancients said in jest about roguishly abundant hair: It takes up space that rightfully belongs to the face!

Chen Dalang gave a start. He said to himself, “How very strange that man looks! I wonder how he manages to eat. Doesn’t his mouth have to make an appearance?” Then again he thought, “I’ve got an idea. Let me go to some expense and invite him for a drink at the tavern. Then I’ll be able to see how he eats.”

He was doing this just for the fun of more closely examining the man’s unusual looks. Eagerly, he stepped forward with a slight bow and chanted a greeting. The man promptly returned the courtesy. Chen Dalang said, “Your humble servant would like to invite you, sir, to a tavern for a little drink.”

Having come from afar and being thirsty and hungry in this snowy weather, the man broke into a happy smile. "I'm a total stranger to you," said he. "I don't deserve your kindness!"

Chen Dalang said, tongue in cheek, "You, sir, have such imposing looks that I believe you must be a mighty hero. May I have the pleasure of a little chat with you, sir?"

"I don't deserve the honor," said the man, but he did not decline the offer. Instead, he followed Chen into a tavern and up the stairs. Chen Dalang ordered a few measures of wine, a leg of lamb, and some chicken, fish, meat, and vegetable dishes from the waiter. (MC: *Chen Dalang is by no means a stingy man.*) Wishing to watch the man eat, Chen Dalang offered him a wine cup and pressed wine on him. The man took the offered wine cup and put it on the table. Then he retrieved a pair of small silver hooks from his sleeve, hung them over his ears, gathered his whiskers, tucked them into the hooks (MC: *Ingenious.*), pulled out his knife, cut the meat, and began to enjoy himself. Finding the cup too small, he asked the waiter for a large bowl and finished off several flasks of wine in succession. Then he asked for rice. After rice was served, he went through about ten bowls of it, to Chen Dalang's amazement. The man then rose and said, with hands folded in front of his chest, "Many thanks to you, my brother, for your kindness. May I ask your name and your native place?"

Chen Dalang told him his name, adding, "I'm a native of Wujiang County of this prefecture."

The man made a mental note of the information. Chen Dalang also asked his name, but the man was not very forthcoming, saying only, "My family name is Wu. I'm a native of Zhejiang. Should you, my brother, visit my province on business, maybe we can meet again. I'll never forget your kindness and will surely repay you."

"That will be too much of an honor for me," said Chen Dalang. He then paid the bill. With many expressions of gratitude, the man bade him farewell, went out the door, and took himself off.

Chen Dalang did not take the man's promise seriously. He thought those were just offhand remarks that did not mean much. On returning home, he told his family what had happened. Some believed him, some doubted the veracity of his story, but everyone had a good laugh, at which point our story leaves them.

More than two years thereafter, Chen Dalang and his wife began to talk about taking a trip to Mount Potalaka [or Putuoshan, a small island off the

Zhejiang coast]. Still childless after several years of marriage, they wanted to make an offering of incense to the statue of the bodhisattva Guanyin there and pray for a son. While they were still consulting each other, pending a decision, Mr. Ouyang, Chen Dalang's father-in-law, went out on some business, and in his absence, a man came from outside, calling out, "Is Old Mr. Ouyang at home?"

Chen Dalang hastened to greet the visitor, who turned out to be Chu Jingqiao from Chongming County. After an exchange of amenities, Mr. Chu asked, "Is your father-in-law home?"

"He's out, but he'll be back soon."

Chu Jingqiao said, "Your wife's maternal grandmother, Madam Lu, is indisposed. She wants me to give you a message, to ask her daughter, your mother-in-law, to go stay with her for some time."

After hearing this, Dalang went inside and relayed the message to his mother-in-law, Zeng-shi.

Zeng-shi said, "I'll go, but your father-in-law is away, so I can't very well leave right now." Then she called her daughter and her son to her and gave them these words of instruction: "Your grandmother is ill. You two go to Chongming County and nurse her for a few days. As soon as your father is back home, I'll go there to replace you, and you can come back."

After the decision was made, she kept Chu Jingqiao for lunch and asked him to take the message to her mother. Two days later, all packed and ready to go, the sister and brother rented a boat. Upon their departure, the mother again gave a few words of instruction: "Tell Granny from me to relax and focus on her treatment and I'll be going to see her soon. Although it's not a long journey, you two young people should still be careful!" (MC: *Considering their youth, she should not be so rash about letting them go.*) The sister and brother promised to do their mother's bidding and went off to Chongming. On this journey,

*Bandits are out to kidnap;
The fair one is in for a mishap.*

To get on with our story: More than ten days after Chen Dalang's wife and brother-in-law departed, Mr. Ouyang returned home. Another message was delivered from Chongming, saying, "Chu Jingqiao reported that my grandchildren would be coming soon, but why aren't they here yet?"

Mr. and Mrs. Ouyang and Chen Dalang were appalled. "They've been gone for ten days. Why does she say they're not there yet?"

The messenger said, "There's no trace of them. Madam Lu has recovered from her illness, but what could have happened to her grandchildren?"

Hastily, Chen Dalang went to look for the boatman who had transported them. The boatman said, "When we reached the shore, because the boat couldn't go any farther, the young master and the young lady said, 'The house isn't far from the shore. We know the way. You can go back now.' It was getting dark by that time. The two of them went off in a hurry, so I rowed back. How could they have disappeared?"

Not knowing what to do in his dismay, Mr. Ouyang said to his wife, Zeng-shi, "I'll stay here and look after the house. You and our son-in-law can go see your mother and find out what has happened. Then you can return home soon."

Zeng-shi and Chen Dalang were so worried that they lost no time in packing and hiring a boat and arrived in Chongming early the next morning. On seeing Lu-shi, they inquired after her health and learned that she had indeed recovered from her illness. But there was not the slightest trace of her two grandchildren. Zeng-shi burst into wails of grief, calling them by various terms of endearment. Lu-shi and the neighboring women who had rushed over in alarm to find out what was going on also shed copious tears.

Being a man with an explosive temper, Chen Dalang slapped the table and said in a blaze of anger, "That messenger Chu Jingqiao is behind it all! He and his accomplices are the ones who tricked us and committed this kidnapping."

Impetuously, he went to the Chu residence in high dudgeon. There, he ran smack into the unsuspecting Chu Jingqiao. Before Chu had time to ask what was happening, Chen Dalang seized him by the front of his upper garment and shouted, "Give my people back to me! Give my people back to me!" (MC: *He just can't help but take out his frustration on others.*) As Chen Dalang tried to drag him to the government yamen, the commotion drew a crowd of onlookers from the neighborhood.

Turning pale, Chu Jingqiao cried, "What crime am I guilty of? At least give me an explanation!"

Chen Dalang said, "How dare you deny it! I was at home, enjoying my peaceful day, when you showed up with a so-called message. Then you kidnapped my wife and brother-in-law. Now where are you hiding them?"

Thumping his chest, Chu Jingqiao exclaimed, "You do me such injustice! I was doing you a favor, and now you turn around and blame me! I delivered the message for you out of the goodness of my heart. Your wife never showed

up, which has nothing to do with me, but the way you put it, I've suddenly become a criminal!"

Dalang said, "My wife and my brother-in-law left home ten days ago. Tell me, where are they?"

Jingqiao said, "There you go again! It's been twelve days since I delivered the message to you. I came home the next evening, and I haven't gone out since. Your wife and brother-in-law hadn't departed yet. So when did I manage to kidnap them? All my neighbors are my witnesses. If I've gone anywhere in the past ten days, I'll be ready to accept responsibility!"

The neighbors commented, "How could such a thing happen? They must have run into either kidnappers or bandits. You can't falsely accuse an innocent man!"

Realizing that Chu Jingqiao was indeed innocent, Chen Dalang let go of him and went home, stifling his indignation. He filed a missing-person report with the Chongming County yamen. Then he went to Suzhou and filed another report with the Suzhou prefectural yamen, which, in turn, ordered the Chongming police department to investigate the case. Posters went up on walls everywhere, announcing a reward of twenty taels of silver to anyone with information. Then Chen Dalang found the boatman who had transported his wife and brother-in-law and took him to the police station, where he was released on bail pending further investigation.

Chen Dalang then returned to Lu-shi's home in Chongming and spent the next twenty days or so with his mother-in-law without hearing a word about the case. In the meantime, the last days of winter had given way to the advent of the new year, so the two of them were obliged to return to their own home. Mr. Ouyang already knew what had happened. On seeing one another, the three of them fell into a heap, sobbing their hearts out. But of this, no more need be said. Other families celebrated the New Year with good cheer. They were the only ones who spent the days looking woebegone and glum. (MC: *Sparing no description of emotions.*)

One month went by quickly. Before they knew it, the second lunar month was upon them, but there was still no news about the missing ones. All of a sudden, Chen Dalang was struck with an idea: "I was planning to go to Mount Potalaka last year to pray for a child, be it a boy or a girl. Who could have known that the mother of my future children would go missing. What a luckless man I am! The nineteenth day of this month is the bodhisattva Guanyin's birthday. Why don't I go there and make a votive offering? Partly to pray for the bodhisattva's grace and partly to see some Zhejiang sights, to

take my mind off my troubles and to do some trading while I'm there." Having thus made up his mind, he told his father-in-law about his plan, asked him to keep an eye on the store, packed, and started off for Hangzhou.

After crossing the Qiantang River at Hangzhou, he got off his boat and went ashore at Mount Potalaka. He prostrated himself on the ground once every three steps all the way to the Bodhisattva Guanyin Hall. After offering incense and paying homage to the bodhisattva statue, he recounted the details of how he and his wife had come to be separated and said, with one kowtow after another, "Your disciple fervently prays that in your infinite compassion for those in distress, you'll work wonders and reunite me and my wife."

After saying his prayers, he returned to his boat and moored by the rocky shore to spend the night. In his sleep, he saw the bodhisattva Guanyin, who intoned the following quatrain:

*A reunion is on the horizon;
Bear your present woes with aplomb.
The meal at Suzhou will be well repaid;
Have faith despite the endless waves.*

After waking up with a start, Chen Dalang could still recall every word of the quatrain. He was no scholar, but those four lines were easy enough for him. With a sigh, he said, "The bodhisattva is indeed responsive. According to that quatrain, a reunion does look likely. But the way things are now, I wonder how it's going to happen." He sank into deeper gloom. He had long forgotten about the meal he had offered at Suzhou.

He rose early in the morning and set sail for home. Before he had covered many *li*, a hurricane sprang up. The sky grew so dark that the boatman lost his bearings and, with a firm hold on the helm, let the boat drift before the wind. They soon found themselves blown to an island. Once they were there, the wind died down and the sun came out. On the island, hundreds of bandits were practicing their martial arts skills. A boat blown their way was like a mouse delivered to the mouth of a cat. How in the world would they not pounce? The bandits stormed onto it and stripped everyone on board of his silver and luggage. As the passengers were mostly pilgrims and did not have much, the disappointed bandits raised their swords threateningly. In this desperate moment, Chen Dalang cried, "Mighty heroes! Please spare our lives!"

Detecting an eastern accent, the bandits asked, "Where are you from?"

Shivering in fear, Chen Dalang replied, "Your humble servant is a native of Suzhou."

The bandits said, "In that case, let's not kill him. Let's just tie him up and take him to the chief." And so, the lives of all the others were also spared, and they were tied up and brought to the Hall of Righteous Fraternity.

His mind in turmoil, Chen Dalang thought that he was more or less a goner. His teary eyes closed, he kept chanting, "Relieve us of our sufferings, Bodhisattva Guanyin!"

At this point, the chieftain slowly walked down the dais and peered closely at Chen Dalang. Greatly taken aback, he said, "This is a friend of mine! Untie him! Be quick!"

Only when he heard this did Chen Dalang steal a glance at the chieftain. It turned out that the chieftain was none other than the hairy man whom Chen Dalang had treated to dinner two years earlier. (MC: *His generosity pays off*.) Eagerly, the lackeys untied Dalang. The chieftain pulled over a folding chair, made Dalang sit in it, bowed, and said, "My men don't know any better. Please forgive them for their offense against you, my good brother!"

Chen Dalang hastened to return the bow. "I'm the one who has given offense to your fortress. I should rightfully be put to the sword. How could I presume to ask for more?"

The chieftain said, "What a thing to say, my good brother! I'm ever so grateful for the meal you offered me on that snowy day. That memory will never fade. I've often wanted to visit you, but each time, things at the fortress held me back. I've instructed my men not to be rash and make short work of merchants from Suzhou. It's by Heaven's decree that I get to meet you today, my good brother!"

Chen Dalang said, "Mighty hero, since you don't scorn my lowliness, would you please return the luggage to each of us so that we can go home as soon as possible? I vow to repay your kindness in this and in my next life!" (MC: *Dalang also has a sense of loyalty*.)

The chieftain said, "How can you go before I've done anything to express my gratitude! What's more, there's one thing that I need to talk to you about, and it's going to take some time."

Turning to his followers, he told them to untie the passengers, return their luggage and money to them, and let them go immediately. Everyone rejoiced. This was nothing short of being released from the gates of hell. Kowtowing busily, they thanked the chieftain and Chen Dalang. Wishing

their parents had given each of them an extra pair of legs, they raced off to their boat with the speed of the wind.

The chieftain had a feast set out to help Chen Dalang recover from the shock. The fine spread on the table included delicacies from the mountains and the seas as well as human livers and brains. After the chieftain sat down and several cups of wine were consumed, Chen Dalang said, "Last time, we were in such haste that I forgot my manners and didn't ask for your name, mighty hero. I beg to be enlightened."

"I was born by the sea. My surname is Wu, my given name You. I've been strong ever since early childhood, and I was chosen by everyone to be the ruler of this island. Because of my abundant hair, they call me "General Wu" [Black]. Last time, I was on my way to Chongming County by sea when I got to visit your town and meet you. I'm grateful to you for the meal not because I'm a glutton but because I value friendship more than material things. If you didn't understand me in this mundane world of ours, you wouldn't have shown such hospitality to such a total stranger. (MC: *Little does he know that Chen was prompted only by a wish to watch him eat.*) As they say, 'A scholar dies for one who appreciates his worth.' You're nothing less than my soul mate!"

Dalang was pleasantly surprised. He thought, "What a stroke of luck this is! Had I not treated him to that meal, I wouldn't have survived this day."

After another few rounds of wine, the chieftain continued, "May I ask how large your family is?" (MC: *A strange question.*)

"There are just my parents-in-law, my wife, and my brother-in-law. That's all."

"Are they well?"

Chen Dalang replied, his eyes moistening, "To tell you the truth, my wife and brother-in-law went to visit a relative in Chongming, but they disappeared on the way there. To this day, I have no idea what happened to them."

"This sounds like a hopeless case. But I have here a woman who is also from your hometown, and she's a good match for you in age and looks. What would you say if I made her your wife?"

Afraid of offending the chieftain, Chen Dalang thought it prudent not to reject him. Loudly the chieftain ordered, "Invite them in!"

Lo and behold! A man and a woman entered the hall. Dalang looked a little harder and saw that they were none other than his wife and his brother-in-law. Unable to contain themselves, they fell on one another's shoulders and broke down in a flood of tears.

The chieftain ordered more food and then took the host's seat while the three of them sat down as guests.

"My good brother," said the chieftain, "do you know why your wife is here? Well, last winter, my men were doing some business at a quiet spot on the coast of Chongming. They saw a man and a woman walking together at dusk. They seized the two of them and brought them to me. I learned on questioning them that they're members of your family. So I immediately put them up in separate rooms of their own to show them proper respect. (IC: *Important*.) It's been more than two months now, but I haven't managed to send them home. I've been thinking that as long as I can meet you, I'll be able to return them to you easily. And today, Heaven brought us together."

The three guests thanked him profusely. Privately, Dalang's wife and her brother said to Dalang, "That day, when we got on shore, we dismissed our boat when we were within sight of Granny's house. (MC: *So the boatman did not lie*.) On our way there, we ran into a group of men who tied us up and brought us here. We thought we were as good as dead. But then we saw the chieftain, and he asked us about our background. As soon as we truthfully answered his questions, he began to show us respect. We had no idea why. Now that we've learned what happened, I remember what you said a couple of years ago about meeting a man in Suzhou. So what you said is true."

Again, Chen Dalang thought, "What a stroke of luck this is! Had I not treated him to that meal, I would have lost my wife!"

The feast over, Chen Dalang rose and said, "My parents-in-law are wearing their eyes out looking forward to my return. Now that the three of us have been reunited thanks to you, mighty hero, we'd really like to go home as soon as possible."

"In that case, I'll see you off tomorrow."

That very night, the chieftain put Dalang and his wife up in one place and the brother-in-law in another. So everyone turned in for the night.

The next day, the chieftain again laid out a feast, this time as a farewell dinner. When the three guests said their thanks and were ready to leave, the chieftain had his men bring out three hundred taels of gold, a thousand taels of silver, countless bolts of colorful silk, and other goods. Chen Dalang repeatedly declined the gifts, saying, "I'm deeply grateful for the lavish gifts, but we won't be able to carry them with us."

"But of course I'll have my men carry them for you."

Dalang could not do otherwise than accept the gifts.

The chieftain continued, saying, "From now on, you'll visit me once every year."

Dalang promised. The chieftain escorted them all the way to the shore, where his men were already waiting in their own boat. In high spirits, the three guests bade the chieftain farewell and boarded the boat. The sea being the base of the pirates' operations, storms and surging waves meant little to them. Before two days were out, they arrived at Chongming. The boat went off after the party of three went ashore.

The three of them walked straight to Lu-shi's house. On seeing Granny, they told her everything that had happened. The old lady was overcome with delight and called them all kinds of terms of endearment. Chen Dalang then hired another boat, and all three returned home together.

When they saw their daughter, son, and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Ouyang thought they were dreaming. At Dalang's account of their experience, everyone broke down in tears of joy and sorrow. Mr. Ouyang said, "General Wu is indeed a man of honor. But had it not been for the hurricane, you wouldn't have been blown to that island. The bodhisattva Guanyin is truly responsive to prayers!"

Dalang then recited the quatrain he had heard in his dream, much to everyone's amazement. Henceforth, Dalang and his wife made annual incense-offering trips to Mount Potalaka. Each time, General Wu sent men by sea to take them there and escort them back. And each time, he gave them gifts of silver ranging from hundreds of taels to a thousand, making sure that the boat escorting them was heavily laden. On Chen Dalang's part, he always made a point of buying exotic treasures on his annual trips to other parts of the country and offering them as gifts to General Wu, but General Wu would pay him back twice as much as they were worth. Chen Dalang thus became one of the richest men in the Wu region, all because of one meal. A later poet had this to say in admiration:

*Han Xin richly rewarded an old woman;⁶
A bandit turned out to be just as generous.
Stories abound about remarkable men.
Why should bandits always lose to scholars?*

In the Director's Garden, Young Ladies Enjoy a Swing-Set Party

At Pure and Peaceful Temple, Husband and Wife Laugh and Cry at Their Reunion

As the poem goes,

*It is the god of marriage's sole duty
To fulfill marital destinies.
Matches are made not only for the living
But also for those raised from the dead.
Divine power shows not in simple cases
But only when twists and turns abound.
As for the workings of the god of fate,
They well deserve one's abiding faith.*

Our story makes the point that one must not seek a marriage that is against one's fate because every marriage in this world of ours is predestined. If it is not meant for you, it will not happen however much you strain your brain to cook up evil schemes and machinations. But if it is meant for you, whatever obstacles are laid in your path, whatever wedges are driven between you and your intended, the marriage will take place even if the betrothed parties have gone their separate ways, and even the dead will be brought back to life to fulfill the marriage destiny. (MC: *These observations help stop fantasies and misconduct.*) Tang dynasty tales tell of a girl's soul

departing her body for conjugal union in “Qianniang’s Departed Soul” and of the dead coming back to life to be joined in matrimony in “Cui Hu Asking for a Drink.”¹ There are too many such strange tales to enumerate here. I will limit myself to retelling a story in *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility*.²

There was once a stout-hearted young Mr. Liu. A man with a combative streak in him, he found delight in archery, horse riding, swordsmanship, drinking, and ball playing, and he associated only with swordsmen, gamblers, and young hooligans capable of killing without compunction. During a tour of the Chu region, he found the local customs much to his liking, so he joined a group of like-minded men and developed a fraternal friendship with them. One of them said to him, “My neighbor Mr. Wang’s daughter is the prettiest girl alive.” Right away, Mr. Liu asked someone present to be his matchmaker and propose to the Wang family.

The Wangs’ reply was, “Although he is a brave young man, we heard that his behavior deviates somewhat from the norm, and he is not of a practical turn of mind. We are afraid that he may get into trouble someday and compromise our daughter’s future.”

In spite of her parents’ firm rejection, the daughter felt more than a little drawn to the young man, for she had long heard about his bravery and sense of loyalty. (MC: *Herein lies their marriage destiny*.) But with her parents blocking the way, there was nothing she could do.

After hearing the matchmaker’s report, Liu said in his impetuous way, “Well, so be it! A man of worth is bound to find a good wife! Why should I worry?” And so he did not give the matter a second thought.

Then he moved on to other places. During his wandering years, he was approached by several matchmakers, but each time the candidate was either too highly placed or too lowly for him. By the time he returned to the Chu region, still a bachelor, the Wangs’ daughter had already been spoken for. Liu thought nothing of this news. Now that he was back, his old friends resumed their visits to him. With arms around one another’s shoulders, they went on hunting trips by day and cooked their kill at night, be it deer, pheasant, or rabbit, and their drinking parties would not break up until the wee hours of the morning. (MC: *Unrestrained behavior not hard to visualize*.)

On their way back from hunting one day, they dismounted their horses to take a little rest in a grove of trees more than ten *li* from the city wall. It was a bleak and desolate place with sinister-looking trees. Rainfall had damaged the six or seven earth mounds in the grove, exposing coffins to view. Some

of the coffins had fallen into such decay that the corpses were clearly visible. Someone commented, "What a place! Luckily, it's still daylight. Imagine how frightful it could get if one were traveling alone here at night!"

In response, Mr. Liu said, "Gods and ghosts respect real men. What's there to be scared of even if it's night? I'll be back here tonight to walk around, just to show you!"

"You're indeed a brave man, Brother Liu," said his friends. "But we're afraid you might not be able to manage that!"

"But I will be able to do it!"

"What proof are you going to produce?"

Liu picked up a brick from an ancient grave and wrote the names of everyone present on it. "I'm going to take this brick with me," he announced. "After nightfall, I'll return and put it back." Pointing at a coffin, he continued, "I'll put it on that coffin. You can come back tomorrow to check. If I fail to return with the brick, I lose the wager, and I'll treat you all to dinner. But if I do bring it back, all of you lose and treat me. Your names are all there, on the brick. No one will get off the hook!"

Everyone was amused. "Good idea! Good idea!" said they in chorus.

After this exchange, they heard faintly audible rumblings of thunder. With one accord, they mounted their horses and returned to Mr. Liu's lodgings, where they again slaughtered and cooked their kill and indulged in drinking.

Suddenly a thunderstorm came on. As the thunderclaps shook the house, the men said teasingly to Liu, "Remember what you said earlier today, Brother Liu? Even an iron man wouldn't dare venture out at such a moment!"

"Nonsense!" said Liu. "As soon as the rain lets up a little, I'll be out of here!"

Sure enough, as the rain began to slacken after the first fit of the storm's fury was over, Liu picked up the brick from the grave and went out the door. His friends said, laughing, "He's going to hang around outside for a while before coming back with a story to tell. We'll have a free dinner to enjoy!"

Under the emboldening influence of the wine, Liu walked in one breath to the grave where they had rested earlier in the day and said to himself with a chuckle, "What a bunch of cowards! I don't know what they could possibly have been afraid of when they told me not to come here."

By this time, the storm had died down. He was about to put the brick on the coffin by the dim light of the stars when he saw something lying on the coffin. He touched it and wondered, "How very strange! What could it be?"

In the darkness, he ran his fingers over the object and felt that it was something in a cloth wrap. When he got his arms around it and lifted it, he found it to be about seventy to eighty catties in weight. Smiling to himself, he thought, "Whatever it is, let me carry it back just to show them, so they won't have to wait until tomorrow to believe me." (MC: *He is fearless.*)

Smug about his physical prowess and meaning to frighten his friends, he laid the brick on the coffin, lifted the object with one hand, slung it over his shoulders, and headed back with big strides.

It was already midnight when he got back, but the drinking party was still in full swing. Hearing footsteps outside, they knew Mr. Liu was back, but it sounded as if he was carrying a heavy burden. Intrigued, they saw Liu enter, make straight for the lamp, and lower the object from his back. By the lamplight, everyone saw that it was a female corpse in brand-new clothes. Strangely, the corpse was able to stand erect instead of plopping stiffly to the floor. When the men looked up sharply and saw it, they were so frightened that some wet their pants and some could not find the door quickly enough. Liu, however, held the lamp to the dead woman's face and saw that it was a beautiful face that had been rouged and powdered only recently, but the eyes were tightly closed, and for some mysterious reason, no breath was coming out or going in.

Liu's friends said in fear, "What a thing to do, Brother Liu, playing such a horrible practical joke on us! How could you carry a corpse home and frighten us like this! Now get it out of the house! Quick!"

With a peal of laughter, Liu said, "Let me introduce you to my wife! I'm going to share my bed with her tonight. How could I have the heart to throw her out the door?" Having said that, he rolled up his sleeves, carried the corpse to his bed, and lay down under the same quilt, mouth to mouth. (MC: *Naughty, naughty! And amusing, too.*) As a matter of fact, he was just trying to impress his friends with an act of bravado.

"What an insolent good-for-nothing!" said his friends, frightened and amused in equal measure. "You're indeed a fearless one! But we could have just conceded defeat and treated you to dinner. All these shenanigans are so unnecessary!"

Turning a deaf ear to them, Liu remained in bed. And the men went their separate ways.

It was the fourth watch of the night when Liu woke up. The corpse by his side, having been exposed to the vital *qi* of a living human being, gradually began to breathe. (MC: *Will wonders never cease?*) Appalled, Liu felt the

corpse's chest with a hand and found that it was warm. "Good grief!" he exclaimed. "Could a dead body have come back to life?"

As he was wondering to himself, the woman's four limbs began to move. Liu breathed on her to give her more warmth, and, sure enough, she turned over and said, now wide awake, "Where am I? Why am I here?" Liu asked her name, but, bashfully, she refused to answer.

Soon the sky brightened. Several of the men who had been at the dinner table the night before came and asked, "Where's that corpse you brought here last night? The strangest thing has happened!"

Covering the woman with the quilt, Liu asked, "What strangest thing?"

"Last night was supposed to be Mr. Wang's daughter's wedding night. She was all dressed up and ready to get into the bridal sedan-chair when she suddenly died of a heart attack. Before they had time to put her body into a coffin, they heard a crash of thunder, and with that, the corpse vanished. (IC: *It's a common occurrence for dead bodies to be jolted by thunderclaps.*) They still haven't found it. Could it be the very corpse you carried here last night?"

Liu burst into another peal of laughter. "I carried back a living human being, not a corpse!" (MC: *Hilarious!*)

"Nonsense!" cried everyone.

As Liu lifted the quilt, everyone saw that it was indeed no corpse but a woman very much alive.

"Well! Wonders never cease!" exclaimed the men. "But who are the young lady's parents?"

Seeing so many people present, the young woman spoke up: "I'm from the Wang family of this neighborhood. Last night, I had a dizzy spell and fell to the ground. I wonder why I ended up in this place."

Liu burst into yet another peal of laughter. "I told them last night that you were my wife. Now I know for sure that you're the very one to whom I made an offer of marriage years ago. So I didn't lie!" (MC: *His expansive nature comes through in these three peals of laughter.*)

Amid general laughter, someone said, "There must be a predestined marriage bond between you. We'll surely act as go-betweens for you!"

Soon after the story got around, Mr. and Mrs. Wang made their appearance. To their surprise and joy, they found their daughter alive and well. Knowing that young Mr. Liu was the one who had once proposed marriage, Miss Wang said to her parents, "I already died, but I came back to life for the sole purpose of meeting Mr. Liu. Although I was but a corpse last night, I

shared his bed for half the night as a living being, so I can hardly marry anyone else. (MC: *It's better to comply with her wish.*) Father and Mother, you must do right by me!"

Everyone present took the young lady's part and said to the parents, "You must not act against divine will!"

And so Mr. and Mrs. Wang took Liu in as a live-in son-in-law. Mr. Liu and Wang-shi remained a devoted couple until the end of their lives. Clearly, this was a match made in heaven. Had it not been for her sudden death that thunderous night, Miss Wang would have married into another family, and had it not been for his act of bravado, Liu would not have had anything to do with a missing corpse. It was the couple's predestined bond that brought about all those strange and confused events.

The above story is about a case in which the parents turned down the marriage offer at first. My next story is about parents who accepted a marriage offer at first but then withdrew from the betrothal. It also involves a corpse coming back to life. Remaining faithful to each other, the young lovers were finally married, leaving behind a much-told tale titled "Meeting at the Swing-Set." Verily,

*Unshaken faith melts the hardest metal and stone;
Staunch devotion can revive the dead for a reunion.*

Our story proper takes place in the Dade reign period [1297–1307] of the Yuan dynasty. There was a Mr. Boluo, director of the Imperial Board of Alimentation. An ethnic Tartar, he was the son of the former prime minister, the Duke of Qi. Born into such a distinguished family, he lived in the lap of luxury in a mansion that was second to none in its grandeur. But he was also quite a scholar and was respectful to the learned and the virtuous. Officials of the imperial court all spoke highly of him. His residence was located to the west of Haizi Bridge, next to the residences of Judge Yandula and Registrar Rongfu, Prince of Dongping [in present-day Shandong]. The three families, living in such proximity to one another, enjoyed a warm friendship.

Director Boluo had a garden at the back of the house. It was named Apricot Garden in celebration of the line "The fence can hardly block the signs of spring from view; there, o'er the top, a spring of apricot blossoms or two." In terms of its botanical rarities and its magnificent pavilions, no other rich man's garden came close. Every spring, Director Boluo's sisters and daughters

invited the womenfolk of the other two households for a swing-set party in the garden, where the feasts and the laughter could last the whole day. The other two families would reciprocate, and so the three families took turns playing the host every other day from the end of the second lunar month until after the Clear and Bright Festival.³ They called their gatherings “Swing-Set Parties.”

As one of those parties was going on, a young man astride a horse went past the garden wall. Baizhu by name, he was the son of Timur Buhua, an official in the Bureau of Military Affairs. On hearing sounds of laughter inside, he rose slightly from his saddle and looked over the wall. There, enjoying themselves on the swing-sets were beautiful girls shrieking in delight. Baizhu reined in his horse and hid himself in the shadow of a willow tree to look his fill. For a long time he looked, unaware of the passing of time. The old janitor heard the tinkling of a horse bell and went out to investigate and saw a young man on horseback staring into the garden, motionless. Recognizing him as the son of Mr. Timur, the janitor went to report to Director Boluo. Immediately, the director sent a servant to greet him, but Baizhu had given his horse the whip and was already some distance off because he thought it unbecoming to have been found out by the janitor.

After returning home, he excitedly told his mother that every girl in Director Boluo’s household was a ravishing beauty. Catching on to the implication, she said, “Our family and theirs are well matched in status. We need only engage a matchmaker and make a betrothal offer. They’ll surely agree. You won’t have to admire them from a distance.”

And so a matchmaker was sent to the director’s house to make a proposal. The director said affably, “Could this be from the young man on horseback who watched the swing-set party the other day? It just so happens that I’m about to select a son-in-law. Tell him to come here so that I can take a look at him. If he’s bright and good-looking, I’ll surely give my consent.”

The matchmaker reported as much to Mr. Timur, to the latter’s great delight. By his father’s order, Baizhu went, arrayed in his best, to the director’s home.

Director Boluo was pleased with Baizhu’s fine appearance. Wondering if the young man was equally impressive in learning, he thought it necessary to give him a test. “Since you enjoy watching swing-sets,” he began, “why don’t you compose a *ci* poem on that topic to the tune of ‘Bodhisattva Barbarian’ for my enlightenment?”

Thereupon, Baizhu asked for a writing brush and an ink slab and wrote the following poem without a single pause:

*Red ropes, painted boards, and slender fingers,
Swallows rise on the east wind in pairs.
Showing off their beauty, they strive to swing highest,
Binding their skirts all the more tightly.*

*Worn out, they succumb to sleep on ivory beds;
Their golden hairpins fall every which way.
When they wake up and push back their pillows,
It is late, with the moon at their gauze windows.*

Immensely delighted by the young man's gushing poetic talent, Director Boluo ordered that a feast be laid out in his honor. When the feast was ready, he made the young man, a junior, sit by his side, whereas he himself took the host's seat, as proper etiquette demanded.

In the midst of the drinking, the director thought, "That was indeed a nice poem, but could he have written it right after he watched the swing-set party that day? And the topic I set couldn't have suited him better. Otherwise, how could he have come out with it so quickly? Cao Zhi couldn't have done better.⁴ Let me put him to the test once more."

As he happened to hear an oriole warbling on a tree outside, he said to Baizhu, "This old man begs to be enlightened again. I hope you won't begrudge me another poem, this time on that oriole, to the tune of 'Red Filling the River.'"

Baizhu obliged him and composed another poem right there on the spot. He smoothed out a sheet of high-grade paper, wielded his brush, and presented the finished product to the director. The poem said,

*The sweet sunlight of spring clears the sky of rain;
The peach blossoms half open, the oriole tries out its voice.
By my lonely pillow, the notes burst on my ears;
By my folding screen, I hear the trebles.
In the east wind, the sweet chirps take on greater charm.*

*Awake from a sad dream, it sinks into gloom;
The last apricot blossoms fade; the doors close.*

*Amid the lilting and graceful music,
It flits among willow trees and flowers.
It seeks loving friends, but to no avail;
Its eyes on the trees, it wonders when to perch with a mate.
Its heart is far, far away.*

The director was pleased with the young man's diction and his calligraphy, and when he got to the line with its implication of oriole-inspired courtship sentiments, he involuntarily slapped the table and exclaimed, "Nice job! You'd be a worthy son-in-law! My third wife has a daughter named Sugeshili. She's a good match for you. Let me call her forth to meet you." With that, he ordered the cloud-shaped announcement iron board struck, to summon his third wife and their daughter into the main hall.

After kowtowing to his future mother-in-law, Baizhu exchanged greetings with Sugeshili (MC: *As per Mongolian customs.*), who was none other than the most beautiful girl at the swing-set party. Baizhu dared not hold his head high, but he did manage to steal a good look at her, unlike the time when he had watched from the other side of the wall. Joy flooded his heart. After the greetings, mother and daughter returned to their rooms.

Let me now turn to the other womenfolk in the inner chambers of the mansion. On hearing that the third wife and her daughter were invited into the main hall, they guessed, correctly, that the master had chosen a son-in-law. Young ladies peeped through the chinks between the double doors (MC: *It is especially the women of the family who are most anxious to see.*), and all admired Baizhu's refined looks. When Sugeshili came back to the interior of the mansion, they congratulated her privately, saying, "This is indeed a case of 'A happy event for the household, a son-in-law with a bright future!'"

Let us leave the Boluo family in their joy and come back to Baizhu.

After taking leave of Director Boluo with many expressions of gratitude, Baizhu returned home and told his parents about what had happened. Shortly afterward, they picked an auspicious day and presented betrothal gifts to the director's family. There was such a prodigious abundance of gifts and such a display of poetic talent that word about the grand event spread all around the capital.

Unfortunately, the road to happiness never runs smooth, and an unforeseen storm descended on them. Officials of the Bureau of Remonstrance, appalled by Mr. Timur's fabulous wealth, wrote to the emperor, accusing Timur of corruption.⁵ The emperor sent an imperial inspector to investigate.

As was usual in such circumstances, Mr. Timur was placed in detention. He was a man who had known nothing but soft living. How could he possibly put up with the hardships of prison life? Not many days passed before he fell ill. In the Yuan dynasty, imprisoned court officials suffering from ill health could be released upon request. Mr. Timur was thus fortunate enough to be set free so that he could undergo medical treatment at home. As it happened, his illness took a turn for the worse. None of the various prescribed medicines did any good. In less than ten days, it was all over with him. The entire family burst into wails of grief. As it turned out, he had died of a contagious disease that he had caught in prison, and it went around the entire family. One died after another every few days until, within a month, everyone in the family had perished except Baizhu. Then the inspectorate took action to recover the late Mr. Timur's embezzled possessions. What was left of the entire family property was not enough to pay off the debt to the government. Indeed, in the twinkling of an eye, like ice melting and tiles breaking into pieces, the family fortune disappeared, and all of Baizhu's closest kith and kin were dead and gone.

Director Boluo's heart went out to Baizhu. He wanted Baizhu to move into his home, marry his daughter, and pursue an education so that the young man could start a career of his own. The director consulted his third wife, but, being of the weaker sex, she did not have the moral loftiness to rise above the snobbish ways of the world. She took it very hard. As a matter of fact, of his multiple wives, the third one was the director's favorite. Since she made all the decisions in the household, it was her daughter who had come to mind when he found Baizhu to be a suitable son-in-law, and she had taken it as a victory over the other wives. But now, her future son-in-law had come down in the world, whereas daughters of the other wives were betrothed to wealthy and distinguished families. (MC: *What she took to be his special favor has now reduced her to last place.*) Full of resentment, she decided to break off the engagement.

She told her daughter, Sugeshili, about her intention, but the girl would not hear of it. Tearfully, she remonstrated with her mother, saying, "Once an alliance is made, marital or otherwise, it isn't supposed to be changed in any way. (MC: *What a girl! With her kind of determination, the marriage alliance is as good as settled.*) I do envy my sisters for marrying into prosperous families, but a pledge is a pledge. One can't play false with the spirits and the gods. How can you go back on your word just because he has fallen into poverty? No decent human being would do such a thing. I'd sooner die than comply."

Director Boluo acknowledged that his daughter's arguments made sense, but he gave in to his wife with her coquettishly petulant ways and did an about-face. Brushing aside his daughter's objections, he betrothed her to Grand Councilor Kuokuochu's son Sengjanu. This news deeply upset Baizhu, but he knew he was in no position to fight.

On a chosen day, the grand councilor presented betrothal gifts that were even more lavish than Mr. Timur's. The director's third wife felt vindicated, and her good humor returned. On a chosen auspicious day, the grand councilor sent a sedan-chair to the Boluo residence to bring the bride to her new home. But Sugeshili refused to mount the sedan-chair. It was only after the many wives and their daughters came to plead with her that she broke down in a flood of tears and reluctantly stepped into the sedan-chair.

After she arrived at the grand councilor's mansion, the master of ceremonies intoned a poem and invited her to dismount the sedan-chair. The bridesmaid drew aside the curtain for the bride to emerge. After an extended wait without any sign of movement, the bridesmaid stuck her head into the sedan-chair for a look. "Oh no!" she screamed. Sugeshili was dead. She had untied her foot wraps and strangled herself.

Without a moment's delay, the bridesmaid reported to the grand councilor. Even the grand councilor was at a loss as to what to do. He sent a servant to inform Director Boluo. On hearing the news, the director's third wife burst out wailing and called her daughter all manner of terms of endearment. A servant was immediately dispatched to bring the sedan-chair back home. The foot wraps were quickly taken down, and ginger soup was forced down her throat, but she remained unconscious, her teeth tightly clenched. Her mother fainted several times. In resignation, the family bought an expensive coffin, stuffed it with the girl's dowry, her jewelry, and the gifts from both betrothals, and deposited it at Pure and Peaceful Temple for the time being. (MC: *What good does all this largesse do? Their love for the girl clouds their wits.*)

Let me now turn to Baizhu, who was at home when he heard that his betrothed had died for his sake. On learning that her coffin was at Pure and Peaceful Temple, he wanted to go there and mourn her death. He went that night. Saddened by the sight of the coffin, he thumped his chest and burst into sobs that were sad enough to move the statues of Buddha to tears and the monks to emit deep, drawn-out sighs. After he cried his fill, Baizhu rapped at the coffin with both hands and said, "Miss! Your soul shouldn't have gone far. Baizhu is here!"

After saying that, he heard a soft voice from inside the coffin, "Open the coffin! Quick! I've come back to life!"

Every word was unmistakably clear to Baizhu's ears. Preparing to open the coffin, he looked it over and found the painted nails too firmly lodged for him to do anything to them. So he went to the abbot and said, "The young lady in the coffin is my wife. She died an unjust death, but she said from inside the coffin that she has come back to life. I was trying to open the coffin, but I can't do it by myself. I need your help."

The abbot said, "Who would dare to open the coffin of the director's daughter without authorization? Anyone who does it will be committing a crime."

But Baizhu held his ground. "I'll be solely responsible for the crime. You won't be implicated. What's more, no one will know at this time of night. If the young mistress is indeed alive and is let out of the coffin, I'll share the valuables in it with the honorable members of this temple. (MC: *With this promise, the coffin is as good as open.*) If she turns out to be lifeless, I at least get to see her before we close the lid on her again. Who's to know?"

On hearing that the burial articles were to be shared with them, the monks felt the stirrings of greed because they had heard about the lavishness of the items. In addition, Baizhu had been a benefactor of the temple in his better days, and therefore it would be unseemly to contradict him.

So an ax was applied to the coffin to pry open the lid. With a creak, it popped open, and Sugeshili sat up. Both Baizhu and Sugeshili were overwhelmed with joy on seeing each other. Baizhu said, "Your new lease on life is predestined, of course, but it's also thanks to the venerable monks' help." Thereupon, the young lady took off a pair of gold bracelets from her wrists and half the jewelry on her head and offered them to the monks in gratitude. What remained was still worth tens of thousands of taels of silver.

Baizhu took counsel with the young lady and said, "We should by rights report this to Director Boluo, but I wouldn't be surprised if things turn out unfavorably for us. Since we have such a lot of valuables with us, the best option is for the two of us to go far away in secret. We'll ask the monks to buy some paint, repaint the coffin, and keep their mouths shut. Not a soul will know a thing about all this. Wouldn't this be the best way out?"

Having been so heavily bribed, the monks did his bidding and painted the coffin until it shone and showed no marks of having been tampered with, and they never breathed a word of this to anyone.

Baizhu and Sugeshili then went to the secondary capital, Kaiping [in present-day Inner Mongolia], and took up residence there. Although they were well heeled, Baizhu still found a job tutoring several Mongol students and had a regular monthly income. With more than enough to live on, the loving husband and wife spent their days in peace. Before they knew it, one year had elapsed with no one any the wiser about their situation. Their identities as offspring of highly placed officials remained well hidden.

Let us now turn to Director Boluo. After he lost his daughter, he sank into low spirits. He did not bother to inquire about what had become of Baizhu. He attributed Baizhu's prolonged absence to an unsettled life constantly on the go. He even thought that the young man might not have long to live. One day, an imperial decree came, promoting him to prefect of Kaiping. So he took his family and went to take up his post. There was so much official business to attend to that Prefect Boluo found it necessary to hire a secretary to draft documents for him. But Kaiping, the secondary capital up in the north, was not known for its supply of scholars. After many days of futile seeking, he was given this advice: "We found one scholar who recently moved here from the capital with his wife. He is also a Tartar. He has set up a school and has shown himself to be a highly accomplished scholar. He's the only one who could serve as your secretary, sir."

Delighted, Prefect Boluo called a messenger to him, gave him a name card, and told him to make haste and invite the scholar to the yamen.

At the sight of the prefect's name card, Baizhu knew that it was none other than Director Boluo. He promptly told the young lady about it and, properly dressed for the occasion, went by himself to see the prefect.

Prefect Boluo was startled at the sight of the young man. "Isn't this Baizhu?" he thought. "I haven't seen him for so long that I thought he might not have survived a life on the road. Why is he so splendidly dressed and looking so radiant with good health?" Involuntarily, he thought of his daughter. (IC: *Naturally*.) Feeling somewhat distressed, he said to Baizhu, "I've done you wrong and unexpectedly caused my beloved daughter's death. Now why did you come to this place? And are you married?"

Baizhu replied, "I'm honored that you show me such regard, sir. As your humble son-in-law, I wouldn't dream of hiding anything from you. Your daughter isn't dead. She's in this city, with me."

The prefect was appalled. "Nonsense!" he said. "My daughter died of strangulation, and her coffin is now at Pure and Peaceful Temple. How can she be alive?"

"The unfulfilled marriage bond between your daughter and me gave her a new lease on life. She's now at our residence, and she can come here immediately to see you. Far be it from me to lie to you!"

The prefect rushed into the inner section of the house and told his third wife about it. No one believed him. (MC: *It is indeed quite unbelievable.*)

Baizhu sent a messenger to the young lady, and she soon arrived at the yamen in a sedan-chair. The entire family, all astonishment, jostled to get a closer look and found that it was indeed Sugeshili. Not caring whether this was a ghost or a living human being, the prefect and his third wife fell on the young lady's shoulders and broke down in a flood of tears.

After crying themselves out, the parents looked a little harder at their daughter, who was still dressed in her burial clothes. She cast a shadow, her clothes had seams, and her voice was quite audible—all indications that she was a living human being. Her mother said, "My child! Even if you were a ghost, I'd never have the heart to let you go!"

The prefect, with the sensible mind of a scholar, was still incredulous. He said skeptically to himself, "This could be the aggrieved soul of someone who died an unjust death, here in human form to beguile the young." (MC: *Such are the speculations of a scholar.*)

Without saying anything, he secretly dispatched a messenger to the capital, Dadu, to make inquiries at Pure and Peaceful Temple. The monks denied any knowledge at first, but after the messenger told them that the young lady and her parents had been reunited, they relented and came out with the truth. The messenger refused to believe what he heard. The monks then pried open the coffin, so that he could see for himself that there was nothing in it. The messenger returned home and reported the facts to the prefect.

Prefect Boluo said, "So, they do have a predestined marriage bond, and it was my daughter's iron will that made such a remarkable thing possible. If I'd known things would come to this, I would have held my ground and taken him in as a live-in son-in-law. That way, we would have been spared all this trouble!"

Stung by this comment and feeling bitterly remorseful, Mrs. Boluo began to treat her son-in-law with extra cordiality. Baizhu moved into the Boluo residence and lived there for the rest of his life.

Later, Sugeshili bore Baizhu three sons: Jiaohua, the oldest one, became a vice grand councilor; Manggudai, the second son, and Heisi, the youngest, both became members of the palace guard. Heisi survived Jiaohua and Manggudai and rose to be military affairs commissioner.

When the Ming army descended on the Yan region, Emperor Shundi of the Yuan dynasty called a meeting at the palace in Pure and Serene Hall for a discussion with the imperial consorts and the crown prince on how to elude the advancing troops. Tearfully, Heisi and Prime Minister Shiliemen offered this advice: "Ours is an empire that Emperor Shizu [Kublai Khan (1215–1294)] left to us. We must defend it to the death." But Emperor Shundi turned a deaf ear to them. In the middle of the night, the emperor had the Jiande Gate [the Desheng Gate of Beijing, as of the Ming dynasty] opened for him and took flight. Heisi followed the emperor north into the desert, and nothing has been known of him ever since.

*A bridal sedan-chair carried a dead body;
Monks in a temple painted an empty coffin.
Had it not been for a predestined bond,
There would have been no rebirth or reunion.*

Scholar Han Takes a Wife in a Wave of Panic

Prefect Wu Makes a Match for a Talented Scholar

A poem reads,

*In finding a husband for your daughter,
Be sure he is of good character.
As for wealth and rank, leave them to Heaven's will,
For marriage bonds are made in past incarnations.
Be sure not to break such bonds lightly
With every shift in the winds of fortune.*

As they say, in one lifetime, seas may change into mulberry fields. The wealth or poverty of the moment may not last. People of today's world are so snobbish that as soon as a man passes the imperial civil-service examinations and becomes eligible for government service, suitors for his daughter or son will appear suddenly at his door. But if his position turns out to be of a low grade with meager remuneration or if he dies prematurely, his son or daughter will be as impoverished as before. (MC: *Medicine for the ills of our times*.) Regrets on the part of the parents-in-law will be too late by that time. In the case of a poor scholar making a marriage proposal to a rich and eminent family, he will be laughed at as a toad in the sewers wanting to eat the

flesh of a swan. But when, all of a sudden, the young man passes the exams with high distinction, the parents-in-law will be seized with remorse, blaming themselves for their lack of discernment and lamenting their daughter's unhappy lot. This explains why those in ancient times who were good at picking sons-in-law turned down marriage offers from rich and eminent families and married their beloved beautiful daughters to, of all people, scholars as worthless as sour pickles and spoiled tofu. Everyone ridiculed those parents-in-law, calling them idiots who wasted the choicest chunks of lamb on dogs. But then, one fine day, the emperor issued a decree to enlist the services of worthy men. The poor scholars soared to the azure clouds of the highest government posts with all their trappings, and their wives suddenly found themselves living in the lap of luxury—all proof of the prophetic vision of the parents-in-law. Verily, a man cannot be known by his looks, nor can the sea be measured with a dipper. What matters is the son-in-law's personal qualities, not the size of his family fortune. Wei Gao and Lü Mengzheng are cases in point.¹

Now let me tell of a highly placed official, Grand Master Xu Wufan, who lived in the state of Zheng during the Spring and Autumn period [770–476 BCE]. His parents had died, leaving him with only a young sister. Sixteen years of age, the young lady had a fair complexion, rosy cheeks, jet-black hair, and well-marked eyebrows. She also excelled in poetry, music, chess, calligraphy, painting, and needlework. Another of her exceptional qualities was that, with her sparkling eyes, she was quite a physiognomist. (MC: *As was Miao-shi, Wei Gao's mother-in-law.*)² When government officials were visiting her brother, she would steal glances at them from behind a screen and tell their backgrounds and their futures with unerring accuracy. This fortune-telling skill added to her reputation. A high-level official, Gongsun Chu, proposed marriage to her, but before the wedding took place, a cousin of his, Gongsun Hei by name and a senior grand master, heard about the young lady's beauty and engaged a matchmaker to make a marriage offer to the Xu family. Grand Master Xu replied that his daughter was already spoken for.

But this Gongsun Hei was a villain. Abusing his power, he arranged a wedding procession complete with all its paraphernalia and a band of *sheng* pipes, *xiao* flutes, and drums. Regardless of whether the Xus were willing or not, he led the procession to the Xu residence. Not knowing what to do, Grand Master Xu resignedly invited both suitors, Gongsun Chu and his cousin, to a feast at his house the next day, so that his sister could make her own decision. (MC: *A wise move.*)

This being an occasion when he was to be judged for his qualifications as a son-in-law, Gongsun Hei went to the feast extravagantly arrayed in all his finery, and, in a show of his wealth, he brought with him enough gifts of gold, silver, and bolts of colorful silk to fill the reception hall. Gongsun Chu, on the other hand, went in his everyday clothes, nor did he bring many gifts. (MC: *The way Wang Xizhi presented himself to his potential father-in-law.*)³ All the onlookers broke out in praise of Gongsun Hei (IC: *They lack insight.*) and felt sure that he would be the chosen one, although they did not give voice to that thought.

After the feast was over, the two candidates said their thanks and went their separate ways. Having observed them from her own room, the young lady said to her older brother, "Gongsun Hei may be a high-ranking official and a handsome man, but there's a certain air of doom about him. A natural death is surely not in his fate. I'd better marry Gongsun Chu. He may be in for a few setbacks, but in the long run, he'll be able to enjoy sustained wealth and distinction." Her brother the grand master agreed. He turned down Gongsun Hei's offer and betrothed his sister to Gongsun Chu, and the wedding took place on a chosen auspicious day.

With resentment festering in his heart, Gongsun Hei came up with another idea, an evil one. One day, he put on his armor and donned everyday clothes over it. Then he went to Gongsun Chu's house intending to kill him and get his wife. Someone promptly informed Gongsun Chu about it. Without a moment's delay, Gongsun Chu picked up his lance and rushed out. Caught off guard, Gongsun Hei was hit by the lance. In pain, he fled through the gate and went straight to the residence of the prime minister Gongsun Qiao to make accusations against Gongsun Chu.

When all the grand masters were called together to discuss this case, Gongsun Chu also attended the meeting and spoke at length in his own defense. In the end, Gongsun Qiao the prime minister said, "The allegation that Gongsun Hei harbored murderous intentions against a younger member of his clan has not been substantiated. But in terms of official ranking, junior officials should submit to the senior, and in terms of age, the younger should yield to the older. The unauthorized use of force by Gongsun Chu, lower in official ranking and younger in age, is punishable by exile." Then and there, Gongsun Chu was convicted of a crime and demoted to a post in the state of Wu.

When Gongsun Chu returned home, he and his wife Xu-shi fell on each other's shoulders and wept. After Gongsun Chu was gone, Gongsun Hei

savored his victory and threw his weight around with greater abandon. Everyone felt sorry for Xu-shi for having missed the chance to marry him. Even Grand Master Xu himself was not exempt from this vulgar, worldly view. The young lady herself, however, thought nothing of it and waited in a peaceful frame of mind for her husband's return.

Now, in the state of Zheng, there was a Senior Minister You Ji, who was next in line for the post of prime minister after Gongsun Qiao. But Gongsun Hei plotted day and night to replace Gongsun Qiao himself. The rebellion was about to take place when Gongsun Qiao got wind of it. Acting quickly in a preemptive move, he dispatched officials to charge Gongsun Hei with multiple crimes, and the accused was forced to hang himself. This bore out Miss Xu's prediction that he was not to die of natural causes.

As for Gongsun Chu, after living in the state of Wu for three years, he was offered amnesty, so he returned to the court and took the senior grand master post that had been vacated by Gongsun Hei, thus reaching the height of wealth and status. He and Miss Xu remained a devoted couple to the end of their days. If Miss Xu had been enamored of the status of a senior grand master and married Gongsun Hei, she would have become a rebel's wife destined for decades of widowhood. It can thus be seen that one's status at the present moment does not count.

Storyteller! You've got it wrong again! The world abounds in good people who remain paupers all their lives. Do you mean to tell us that every one of them will rise to become officials? A popular saying puts it well, "The here and now is what counts." What's the harm in marrying your daughter to a rich man so she can enjoy life's pleasures, even if only for now?

Gentle reader, I'm afraid it's not as you imagine. Even those who know how to pick good sons-in-law must follow the dictates of Heaven. Everything, including every intake of food and beverage, is determined by fate. When all is said and done, the best option is to marry a scholar, because a scholar always has a chance to go far.

Let me now tell of a rich man, one with a daughter, who used his wealth to bully the poor and tried to back out of his daughter's betrothal. It was thanks to a wise and upright prefect that the marriage materialized. The couple later gained riches and honor, and their story became the stuff of legend. There is a poem in testimony:

*Consider the case of Hongfu of yore:⁴
She fled the harem and married Li Jing.*

*Few can rival her in wealth and honor—
All because she found a hero for herself.*

Our story takes place in the Zhengde reign period [1506–21] of this dynasty [Ming]. In Tiantai County of Taizhou Prefecture, Zhejiang, there lived a scholar named Han Shiyu, courtesy name Ziwen. His parents had both passed away, and he had no siblings. He lived all by himself. He had tested into a government school at age twelve and become an erudite scholar. Truly,

*In talent, he outshone Cao Zhi;⁵
In appearance, he equaled Pan An.⁶
Steeped in learning, he will surely pass the exams,
But for now, he remains a humble student.*

For all his talent and learning, he lived in reduced circumstances and supported himself by hiring himself out as a tutor. Living from hand to mouth, he remained unbetrothed at age eighteen.

One day, when the Dragon Boat Festival [on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month] was drawing near, Han Ziwen asked for leave from his school and returned home. After he had spent several days at home, a sudden thought struck him: “It’s time I should be thinking about marriage. With my kind of learning, the daughter of a rich family won’t be shortchanged. But who in this world of ours would want to marry their daughter to me?” After another few moments of reflection, he said to himself, “That may be true, but I shouldn’t be a poor match for the daughter of a scholar like me.” Right away, he opened a gift box that contained payments from his students, weighed out five maces of silver, wrapped up the money, put it in another box, ordered his page boy to carry it, and went with the boy to see Madam Wang the matchmaker.

Han Ziwen’s look of an impoverished man did not exactly fill the matchmaker with enthusiasm. After finishing a cup of tea, Madam Wang asked, “When did you return home, sir? And what brought you here?”

“I came home five days ago. I’m here because I have a favor to ask of you.” So saying, he took the sealed packet from his page boy and presented it to Madam Wang with both hands, saying, “Kindly accept this little gift from me. After your mission is accomplished, you’ll be amply rewarded.”

After some of the usual obligatory words of demurral, Madam Wang accepted the gift and asked, “Could you be looking for a match, sir?”

“Exactly. Being a poor man, I don’t aspire to a marriage alliance with a rich family. I’ll be content with a scholar’s daughter who can cook for me and continue my family line. I have about forty to fifty taels of silver saved from years of teaching, which shouldn’t be too shabby as a betrothal gift. Please find a match for me that fits my status.”

Madam Wang knew that when it came to seeking matches, poor scholars were a picky lot, apt to find candidates either too highly placed or too lowly for them, but she could not very well reject him out of hand. So she said, “I thank you, sir, for your gracious favor. You may go home now and wait while I do a search for you. It may take time. I’ll report to you as soon as I have news.” And so Ziwen went home.

Several days later, Madam Wang walked into Han Ziwen’s house and cried out, “Is the young master home?”

Ziwen went up to her and asked, “How is your search coming along?”

Madam Wang replied, “I wore out a pair of shoes, running here, there, and everywhere for your sake! Well, I just found someone for you. She’s the daughter of Scholar Xu, whose house is near the county yamen. She’s seventeen. Scholar Xu passed away two years ago. His widow isn’t rich, but the family gets by. I told the mother about you, and she seemed to be willing. She said, ‘It’s a good thing for my daughter to marry a scholar, although we women know nothing of literature. The education commissioner will soon be coming to Taizhou to preside over the ranking examination for students at the prefectural school. If the honorable young gentleman can score high on the exam (MC: *How could that be taken as proof? This is but woman talk!*), I’ll give you the eight characters that determine my daughter’s natal chart.’”⁷

Confident in his own talent, Ziwen felt quite sure about his chances for success. He said to Madam Wang, “In that case, we can talk about the marriage proposal after the exam.” He treated Madam Wang to a few cups of wine at a wineshop and took leave of her.

Ziwen went back to his school and stayed there for more than a month before the education commissioner’s imminent arrival was announced. A native of Jiangxi, the commissioner was named Liang Shifan. He got to Taizhou several days later. Han Ziwen—wearing a torn cap, a threadbare gown, a tattered ribbon around his waist, and a pair of ragged shoes—joined the procession of government students to welcome the commissioner to the city. After the commissioner offered incense at the local Confucian temple and gave a lecture, a poster was put up announcing that students of the prefectural and county schools of Tiantai and Linhai were to be tested first.

At the examination, Ziwen finished his essays with never a pause of his writing brush and was quite pleased with himself. After he left the examination grounds, he wrote out his essays from memory and showed them to some learned elders and friends. Everyone was impressed. He himself read them over and over again and exclaimed, with a slap on the table, "What graceful prose! I'll surely be placed in the first rank, if not as an alternate number one!" Then he held the sheets to his nose, sniffed them, and said, "I do detect the fragrance of a wife!"

It so happened that Education Commissioner Liang was a man with precious little learning but an insatiable appetite for taking bribes, and he toadied to both local officials and his superiors. (MC: *What kind of an education commissioner is that?*) He had recently presided over examinations in Hangzhou, Jiaxing, and Huzhou, where everyone cursed him. In fact, he narrowly escaped the scholars' angry fists. There is a doggerel quatrain about him:

*Liang in the commissioner's office
Loves nothing but deep pockets.
He sells diplomas for profit,
To the delight of his patrons.*

Another one says,

*Sons of the rich laugh with good cheer,
Their brethren all passed, far or near.
Other examinees worry and chafe,
Hating their forebears for their lack of fame.*

Another doggerel makes fun of lines from the Four Books and says,⁸

*When a gentleman studies the Way,
People are content, for there is fair play.
When a petty man studies the Way,
He believes everything his books say.
For one ignorant of poetry and the rites,
His father and brothers help him pass the exams.
For one who knows poetry and the rites,
A good man but poor, he stands not a chance.*

As poor as he was, Han Ziwen had nothing with which to grease itchy palms. When the list of successful candidates was released ten days later, it was seen that the first and second ranks were all occupied by sons of the rich. You may ask, where is Han Ziwen's name? Well, it was in the third rank. There is a *ci* poem, to the tune of "Yellow Oriole," that describes the woes of one who falls into that rank:

*His essays, no better or worse than others,
Deserve neither honors nor disgrace.⁹
The flourishes of the drumbeats
Dash his fanciful dreams.
He has the talent but not the luck,
While the mediocre rise through the ranks.
He has tarried too long in his subsidized status;
He should qualify for the provincial exams.
But for now, relax, get out of the way
And watch others bask in their glory.*

Having received only a third-rank rating, Han Ziwen felt so insulted that he stood petrified, eyes unblinking and mouth agape. Then he lashed out at Education Commissioner Liang with the most scathing expressions in his vocabulary, after which he thought it prudent not to mention his marriage proposal anymore, nor did Madam Wang approach him again. (MC: *How disappointing!*) With considerable effort, he tried to make himself feel better and said with a sigh, "Curse not the lack of a good matchmaker; within book covers are faces as fair as jade."

The results of the examination having been announced, Han Ziwen returned to his school, his morale broken. When he saw his employer and his pupils, he blushed furiously and felt overwhelmed with humiliation.

More than a year went by. Emperor Zhengde died [without issue], and at his behest, Prince Xing [his cousin] succeeded to the throne and became Emperor Jiajing [r. 1522–67]. When he was summoned to the palace from his own residence, he was only fifteen years of age. As preparations got under way to select girls from respectable families for the imperial harem, word got around Zhejiang that the imperial court would be picking girls from Zhejiang to serve as palace ladies. The local people, as gullible as they were, swallowed the rumor and rushed to marry off their daughters. In their haste, they ignored proper decorum. (MC: *They always embrace such nonsense.*

The benighted are all alike. Why?) Those who benefited from this flurry of activities were the owners of general stores, musicians, maidservants for the brides, sedan-chair carriers, and hosts of wedding ceremonies. What you will find most ridiculous was the fact that even old widows in their seventies and eighties hastened to remarry because it was said that “every ten palace ladies must be escorted by one widow.” Behold:

*Thirteen- or fourteen-year-old boys marry
Twenty-four- or twenty-five-year-old women.
Twelve- or thirteen-year-old girls marry
Thirty- or forty-year-old men.
A crude, stupid, and dark face
Gets passed off as a great beauty.
A wide-hipped squaw
Is taken as a tender blossom.
Those claiming to be chaste widows
And vowing never to remarry
Rush recklessly into marriage,
Even though they will soon be claimed by death.*

There was also this poem, interesting but anonymous:

*All because of a rumored imperial decree,
Weddings took place with three cups of watery wine.
Those watching the moon through the windows,
Marveled that only Chang'e [the Moon Goddess] remained single.*

(MC: This is a poem by Bo Ziting, a Yuan dynasty monk. See *Records Compiled After Retiring from the Farm.*)¹⁰

Han Ziwen happened to return to his hometown at this time. Intrigued by the wave of panic spreading across the town, he went for a leisurely walk in search of amusement. Suddenly, someone tugged at him from behind. He turned around and saw that it was Squire Jin from Huizhou, owner of a pawnshop. Squire Jin saluted him and said, “I have a daughter, now sixteen years old. If a scholar like you doesn’t find her too lowly, I propose marrying her to you.” So saying, he produced a card with his daughter’s natal chart on it and rammed it into Ziwen’s sleeve, oblivious of whether Ziwen wanted it or not.

“Don’t make fun of me!” said Ziwen. “I’m an impoverished scholar. I’m not worthy of your daughter!”

With a frown, Squire Jin said, “How can you say such a disappointing thing in this emergency situation! The slightest delay and she’ll be a palace lady. She’s all my wife and I have. Should she be taken to faraway Beijing, we won’t be able to see her again. How can we bear to part with her like that? If you’ll deign to take her, you’ll be saving our lives!” With that, he made as if to drop to his knees.

Ziwen knew all too well that the rumor was baseless, but he was in need of a wife. So instead of talking sense into the man, he quickly took hold of him and said, “I have only forty to fifty taels of silver with me. Even if you overlook my destitution and promise your daughter to me, I won’t be able to come up with money for the wedding.”

“That’s all right!” said Squire Jin. “The imperial court won’t take girls who are already spoken for. We need only hold a betrothal ceremony for now. After this thing blows over, we can take our time preparing for the wedding.”

“That sounds fine,” conceded Ziwen. “But I need to make it clear that you must not back out of it later.” (IC: *Important point.*)

As desperate as he was, Squire Jin said, “I swear to Heaven that if I back out of the commitment, let me be put to torture in the Taizhou prefectural yamen!”

Ziwen said, “That’s quite uncalled for, but a spoken promise is no guarantee. You can go home now, sir. I’ll bring two friends of mine to your honorable shop (MC: *Meticulous.*), first to see your daughter and then to ask for a marriage contract from you, so that my friends can affix their signatures on the paper as witnesses. After I present my betrothal gifts, please give me something that belongs to your daughter—a piece of her clothing, a lock of her hair, or fingernail clippings—so that I have something to hold on to should you change your mind.” (IC: *This may not be necessary.*)

Eager to seal the deal, Squire Jin readily gave his promise, saying, “Why doubt me? Of course I’ll do as you say. I only hope you’ll be quick about it!” As he went away, he kept saying, “I’ll be waiting for you! I’ll be waiting for you!” And so he returned to his pawnshop.

Han Ziwen went to the county school, where he found two friends, Zhang Siwei, courtesy name Anguo, and Li Junqing, courtesy name Wencai. After he told them what had happened and drew up their visiting cards, the three of them went to the pawnshop. Squire Jin greeted them and had tea served. After the obligatory exchange of amenities, the squire called his daughter,

Morning Cloud, to the reception room. You may well ask, how did she look? Behold:

*Her eyebrows are shaped like spring willow leaves,
Her eyes pools of sparkling autumn water.
Her cheeks are as rosy as peaches,
Her feet tiny bamboo shoots under her skirt.
She may not have the face to topple a state,
But she is certainly a beauty first-rate.*

Miss Jin's looks delighted Ziwen. After she greeted the visitors one by one, she returned to her own room. Ziwen asked a fortune-teller to tell him if his horoscope and Miss Jin's matched. The fortune-teller said, "It's a most auspicious match. But before the wedding takes place, you'll have to put up with some nonsense."

Squire Jin, in his eagerness to bring off the marriage, said, "What can be better than an auspicious match? 'Some nonsense' shouldn't be anything to worry about!" With that, he produced a full-size foldable red sheet on which was written the following:

This marriage contract is signed by Jin Sheng, a native of Huizhou, whose daughter, Morning Cloud, age sixteen and never before betrothed to anyone, is now engaged to Han Ziwen, scholar of Tiantai County, Taizhou Prefecture. This engagement, made with mutual consent, is irreversible as of this day. The signing of this contract is witnessed by Mr. Zhang and Mr. Li.

Date: The __th day of the __th month in the first year of the Jiajing reign period [1522]

*Signatures: Jin Sheng, the engaging party
Zhang Anguo and Li Wencai, the witnesses*

After the contract was drawn up, the three of them affixed their signatures on it and gave it to Ziwen for safekeeping. Ziwen made this move out of a desperate wish for self-protection, little knowing that a breach of the contract was in store for him, but I am getting ahead of myself.

To resume: An auspicious day was chosen for the betrothal ceremony. When that day was drawing near, Ziwen bought a few items of clothing and jewelry, packed them with what remained of his savings of a little more than

fifty taels of silver, and wrote a card that said, "Betrothal gifts from son-in-law Han Shiyu with a hundred kowtows." He also gave Zhang and Li one tael of silver each by way of thanking them for serving as matchmakers, and the three of them went to Squire Jin's pawnshop to complete the ritual.

Squire Jin and his wife, Cheng-shi, with their vast wealth, were not impressed with Ziwen's shabby gifts, but with the rumor of the selection of palace ladies still in circulation, they felt obliged to accept them. Their return gifts, however, were quite gracious, and, complying with Ziwen's request, they gave him a lock of their daughter's fine hair. Ziwen said to himself as he put everything away, "If it were not for the rumors, I wouldn't have been able to get myself a wife so soon, and a rich wife at that." Let us leave him with his happy thoughts and move on.

Time flew like an arrow, and the sun and the moon shot back and forth like the shuttle on a loom. Summer gave way to autumn, and the better half of a year went by. By the time the second year of the Jiajing reign period rolled around, rumors about the selection of palace ladies had died down. Now that all was well, Mr. and Mrs. Jin began to regret their daughter's betrothal to a scholar without a penny to his name. As for Han Ziwen, having spent all his money on the betrothal gifts, he was not yet ready to bring up the subject of the wedding ceremony.

One day, Squire Jin was going over his accounts in the pawnshop when a man came in, followed by a boy seventeen or eighteen years of age. The man cried out, "Are my brother-in-law and my sister home?" The visitor was Squire Cheng of Huizhou, Squire Jin's brother-in-law. With his son A-shou in tow, he had come from Huizhou to enter into a partnership with Squire Jin in the pawnshop business. Squire Jin promptly greeted them and summoned his wife, Cheng-shi, and daughter, Morning Cloud, to meet them. After the usual exchange of pleasantries, heated wine was served.

In a measured and easy tone, Squire Cheng said, "So, my niece has grown into quite a beauty! Is she engaged? I may be speaking out of turn, but my son isn't engaged yet. If you, my brother-in-law, don't look down on us, it would be a good thing to marry them to each other and add another bond to our family ties."

With a sigh, Squire Jin said, "Yes, you make perfect sense. Why would I be unwilling to marry my daughter to my wife's nephew? But last year when it was rumored that the court was picking palace ladies, I hastily promised her to a certain Scholar Han, or whatever he's called. He's so poor that hunger is written all over his face. Judging by my reading of his face, he'll never

make anything of himself. When Education Commissioner Liang was here the year before last, that pauper placed in the third rank on the exam. (MC: *Still tied down to the third rank.*) I don't think he'll ever do better than that. How can I marry my daughter to such a man? Well, I suppose it's all because my daughter was born under the wrong star, and now it's too late to do anything about it."

Squire Cheng thought for a moment before saying, "So you and my sister really don't want to marry your daughter to him?"

"I wasn't lying!"

"If you're willing to marry my niece to him, let's drop the subject. But if you're not, I have a plan to make the yamen rule for canceling the betrothal. That shouldn't be hard to do."

"But how do we do it?"

Squire Cheng replied, "Tomorrow, I'll lodge a complaint with the Taizhou Prefectural yamen against you, saying that my son and your daughter, as cousins, have been engaged since childhood, but because I remained in Huizhou on business all these years, you backed out of the engagement and betrothed your daughter to someone else. I'll then ask the yamen to rule in my favor. However unworthy my son is, he's better than that hungry pauper."

"Sounds good, but he can produce the marriage contract that I had drafted with my own hand and a lock of my daughter's hair as evidence. How will the yamen rule in your favor? I'm in the wrong after all."

"My brother-in-law!" said Squire Cheng. "You're so ignorant about the way the yamen does things! You and I are both natives of Huizhou, and we're related. So if we claim that my son and your daughter have been engaged since childhood, people will easily believe us. As the saying goes, 'With money, you can make even the devil turn the millstone for you.' Since we're flush with cash, we can well afford to pay bribes high and low. We can ask a local official to approach the prefect and have him declare the marriage contract null and void. (MC: *The right approach if the prefect is a fool.*) About the lock of hair, it can be anybody's. We'll surely get our way! With our deep pockets, you won't be shortchanged."

Clapping his hands, Squire Jin exclaimed, "Bravo! Bravo! Let's get started tomorrow!" That evening, they retired to their rooms after the wine feast was over.

Squire Cheng rose bright and early the next morning, washed and did his hair, and ate his breakfast. Then he engaged a scholar well versed in law,

consulted him on the wording of the letter of complaint, and asked a Mr. Zhao to sign the paper as a witness. Squire Cheng and Squire Jin then proceeded to Taizhou prefectural yamen. As a consequence,

*Before long, the beauty married the scholar;
Then and there, the plotters were put to torture*

The new prefect, Wu Gongbi, had just opened his court session when the two arrived. Without delay, a board was put up in front of the yamen, announcing that the prefect was ready to hear complaints. Squire Cheng went in, as indicated by the board. The prefect asked a civil litigation clerk to take the letter of complaint and hand it to him, and he read it from the beginning:

To Your Honor the Prefect:

I, Cheng Yuan, plaintiff, hereby accuse Jin Sheng, an evil man, of breach of a contract of matrimony.

Jin Sheng betrothed his daughter Jin-shi to my son Cheng Shou. After all the six preliminaries were completed, that evil man moved to Taizhou and broke the betrothal.¹¹ In the _th lunar month of last year, he acted on his own and re-betrothed his daughter to Han Shiyu, a scholar of Tiantai County, as witnessed by Zhao Xiao and others. This is a case involving morality and decency. I beseech Your Honor's wise ruling so that the original betrothal will be upheld.

Respectfully,

Cheng Yuan, plaintiff, from She County, Huizhou Prefecture

Versus

Defendants Jin Sheng, from She County, Huizhou Prefecture, and Han Shiyu, from Tiantai County, Taizhou Prefecture

Witness: Zhao Xiao, from Tiantai County, Taizhou Prefecture

After reading the complaint, Prefect Wu called Cheng Yuan to him and asked, "Who is Jin Sheng to you?"

With a bow, Cheng Yuan answered, "Your Honor, he's my sister's husband. Because we're close relatives, and my son and his daughter are about the same age, we betrothed the children to each other."

"Why did he dare to break the commitment?"

“Since he moved to Taizhou and I remained in Huizhou, we came to be separated by a great distance. Last year, Jin Sheng believed rumors about the imperial court selecting palace ladies, and so he promised his daughter to Mr. Han instead. I came to Taizhou recently to visit relatives and was about to take care of the wedding when I learned about the breach of the betrothal. I understand that he did this wrongful thing out of desperation, but how can I let another man take my daughter-in-law for no good reason? (MC: *He does have a clever tongue.*) If I didn’t appeal to the government, Scholar Han would never return her to me. I beg that Your Honor do right by me!”

Somewhat convinced by his reasoning, the prefect accepted the letter of complaint and announced, “Interrogation of all parties will take place in ten days.”

Cheng Yuan kowtowed and took himself off.

The very day after he heard that the complaint had been accepted, Squire Jin went to see Mr. Zhang and Mr. Li and said in feigned alarm, “What’s to be done? What’s to be done? Back in the days when we were in Huizhou, I promised my daughter to my brother-in-law’s son. After we moved to this prefecture, that emergency situation about the selection of palace ladies came up. Since distant water cannot put out a nearby fire, we betrothed her to your honorable friend in a moment of desperation, with the two of you serving as matchmakers. But as it turns out, my brother-in-law has come here and filed a complaint against me with the prefectural yamen. Now what’s to be done about it?”

Mr. Chang and Mr. Li grew livid with rage. “You senseless old ass!” said one of them. “At the time of the betrothal, goodness only knows how many vows you made. Who wrote that marriage contract? You did! And now you give us this shit! We know what this is all about: You came up with this devious plan because you find Mr. Han too poor. Now, Mr. Han is a talented scholar. He won’t stay poor for the rest of his life. If we call on all our friends in the county, subprefectural, and prefectural schools and go together to the yamen, we can assure you that you’ll be beaten until your ass legs are broken, and your daughter will never have a husband!” (MC: *The scholar may be raving mad, but these words do sting.*)

Before Squire Jin could defend himself, the two men turned their backs on him, went in a huff to Han Ziwen’s home, and told him about everything that had happened.

Ziwen was so shocked that he stared blankly at them for the longest time, unable to get a word out. In their anger, Zhang and Li wanted Ziwen to

join them in rallying friends at his school to lodge a plea with the authorities. But Ziwen, of all people, stopped them, saying, "My two brothers, please don't! To my way of thinking, if that old ass doesn't want this marriage to happen, even if we win back the girl, there will be no peace. (MC: *Words of profound wisdom*.) If scholars like us make our mark in the world, there will be no lack of old and eminent families seeking us out for marriage alliances. He's but a rich merchant with no distinguished background. What's so special about him? What's more, with his kind of money, the yamen will surely judge in his favor. As poor as I am, how can I come up with the money to engage him in a lawsuit? If I make something of myself in the future, I'll surely have a chance to vindicate myself. Now please go and tell him that if he returns my fifty taels of silver and doubles that amount as compensation, I'll be willing to withdraw from the engagement."

Zhang and Li agreed. Ziwen took out the marriage contract, the girl's natal chart, and the lock of her hair from his box and went with Zhang and Li to the pawnshop. After Zhang and Li repeated Ziwen's message to Squire Cheng, the latter said jubilantly, "As long as the engagement can be canceled so that I'll be spared the trouble, I won't mind parting with the silver." Right away, he weighed out two ingots of silver worth one hundred taels on the scales and gave them to Zhang and Li. Then he asked Ziwen to write a note announcing his withdrawal from the engagement and demanded the return of the marriage contract and lock of hair.

Ziwen said, "I'll have enough time to write the disengagement note and return the contract after the case is settled at court. But the case is still pending, and these things shouldn't be rushed into. I can collect the silver at a later time."

Squire Cheng gave Zhang and Li two taels of silver and asked them to act on Ziwen's behalf and request a dismissal of the lawsuit. The two men asked for writing implements, drafted the letter, and went to the prefectural yamen with the plaintiff, the defendant, and Mr. Zhao the witness.

Prefect Wu had just declared the afternoon session of the court open. After the letter was presented to him, the prefect read:

*From Zhang Siwei and Li Junqing, students at the Tiantai County School,
requesting dismissal of the following case:*

*Briefly stated, Jin Sheng, a native of Huizhou, had betrothed his daughter
to Mr. Cheng before he moved to Tiantai. Having lost touch with Mr. Cheng due
to the distance between them, Mr. Jin had no alternative but to betroth his*

daughter to Mr. Han when she came of age, hence Mr. Cheng's institution of legal proceedings. However, since Jin Sheng is now willing to return Mr. Han's betrothal gifts and Mr. Han is willing to withdraw from the betrothal so that the marriage alliance with Mr. Cheng can be maintained, we the undersigned, as relatives, respectfully submit this request so that this lawsuit between relatives can be dismissed peacefully.

Now, this Prefect Wu was from a distinguished family of the Min region [Fujian]. A fair-minded and honorable man, he was drawn not to money but to talent. (MC: *Whatever gave him the idea?*) It intrigued him that two local landed gentlemen had written to him so soon after he accepted that case. After reading the letter, he raised his head to take a look at Han Ziwen. More than a little impressed by the young scholar's prepossessing looks, the prefect told him to approach the bench. After Han Ziwen came up and dropped to his knees, Prefect Wu said, "With your kind of impressive looks, I don't think you'll be trapped in poverty for long. You could even be a worthy son-in-law of mine. Why did you so lightly accept Mr. Jin's daughter, and why did you just as lightly withdraw from the engagement?"

Han Ziwen was a man with a most perceptive mind. He had already given up all hope, but on detecting the prefect's unexpectedly sympathetic tone, he changed his tack and said, "How in the world could I bear to break the engagement? Back when the betrothal was made, even though Jin Sheng vowed to the high heavens, I still doubted his sincerity. So I made him draw up a marriage contract in his own hand, with Mr. Zhang and Mr. Li serving as witnesses. The contract contains the phrase about his daughter being 'never before betrothed to anyone.' Then he gave me a lock of his daughter's hair. I carry it with me at all times and often hold it in my hand, feeling as if my future wife is by my side. Now that I'm to be jilted, how could I take it lying down? Nothing has ever been said about the Jins' marriage alliance with the Chengs! It's only because a poor man stands no chance against a rich one that they stirred up these problems where none existed." Tears rolled down his cheeks as he retrieved Miss Jin's natal chart, the marriage contract, and the lock of hair from his sleeve and presented them all to the prefect.

After examining each item closely, Prefect Wu ordered the guards to take Cheng Yuan and witness Zhao Xiao to the far side of the courtroom. He then asked Jin Sheng, "Did you betroth your daughter to the Cheng family?"

"Yes, Your Honor, I did indeed," said Jin Sheng.

"In that case, you shouldn't have promised her to Mr. Han," said the prefect.

"It was only because of the rumored selection of palace ladies that I rushed into the engagement with Mr. Han in the haste of the moment, without a second thought. It was out of necessity more than choice."

"Did you write the marriage contract in your own hand?"

"Yes."

"The contract contains the phrase 'never betrothed to anyone.' How do you explain that?"

"In my eagerness to seal the deal, I agreed to everything he wanted. So I didn't mean what I wrote."

His inconsistency enraged the prefect.

"What's the exact date on which you entered into the betrothal with Mr. Cheng?" asked the prefect.

Unable to answer that question on the spur of the moment, Jin Sheng reflected for a moment or two and said falteringly, "The nth day of the nth month of the nth year."

Prefect Wu sharply ordered Jin Sheng to withdraw and then called Cheng Yuan to him and asked, "What evidence do you have to prove the engagement between your son and Mr. Jin's daughter?"

Cheng Yuan replied, "The fact that the six preliminaries have been completed is sufficient evidence."

"Where's the matchmaker?"

"The matchmaker is in Huizhou. He hasn't come."

"Show me your daughter-in-law's natal chart."

"I don't have it with me."

With a contemptuous snort, the prefect continued, "When exactly did the betrothal take place?"

Cheng Yuan, too, fell to thinking. Then he said offhandedly, "The nth day of the nth month of the nth lunar year." It did not tally in the least with the date Jin Sheng had given.

Now fully grasping the situation, the prefect called Zhao Xiao to him. "I understand that you're the witness," said he. "But where's your domicile?"

"I live in this prefecture."

"If so, how did you manage to learn about what happened in Huizhou?"

Zhao Xiao replied, "That's because I'm related to both families."

"If so, do you recall the date of the betrothal?" (MC: *The same question crushes all three of them.*)

The date Zhao Xiao came up with differed from both versions given earlier. What had happened was that all three of them thought they should be able to breeze through the proceedings with no preparation because they had asked for dismissal of the lawsuit. (MC: *The will of Heaven at work*.) They little dreamed that the prefect would cross-examine them separately. Those employees of the yamen who had been bribed dared not speak up on their behalf out of fear of the prefect's strictness. And that was why, unsurprisingly, they gave themselves away.

In a blaze of rage, Prefect Wu said, "How dare such scoundrels so brazenly violate the laws! Never mind that the selection of palace ladies was a baseless rumor. Even if he was stupid enough to be afraid, he didn't need to use Mr. Han for protection if he could produce evidence of his daughter's betrothal to Mr. Cheng. (MC: *Very smart*.) Now, the natal chart and the marriage contract in Mr. Han's possession are pieces of hard evidence, whereas Cheng Yuan's testimony is unsubstantiated. In addition, if, as he claims, he came here in order to hold the wedding ceremony, there's no earthly reason not to bring the matchmaker with him. And what's the explanation for the discrepancies in the betrothal dates given by all three of you? The fact that Zhao Xiao is a Taizhou native shows that, in your haste to find a witness, you paid him for his services because there were no other Huizhou natives available. This is a case of conspiracy born out of contempt for Mr. Han's poverty, hence the breach of the previous commitment and the betrothal to Cheng's nephew. Now what more do you have to say?" He took a bamboo slip, a warrant of authorization for punishment, and ordered that Jin, Cheng, and Zhao each be given thirty strokes of the bamboo rod.

As all three howled in pain, Han Ziwen dropped to his knees and pleaded, "With Your Honor standing up for me and preserving the marriage alliance, Mr. Jin Sheng will become my father-in-law. It wouldn't do to make an enemy of him. Please show him mercy." (MC: *Mr. Han keeps the larger picture in mind*.)

The prefect said, "For Mr. Han's sake, I'll show Jin Sheng mercy and reduce the number of strokes by half. But Cheng Yuan and the witness are to be shown no mercy."

And so the thrashings went on. Not having bribed the lictors in advance because they had not anticipated any trouble, all three were beaten until their skin split, their flesh ripped, and they wailed nonstop. In the meantime, Han Ziwen, Zhang Siwei, and Li Junjie stood off to one side and rejoiced inwardly. This bore out the vow that Squire Jin had made earlier.

With his writing brush, Prefect Wu crossed out the letter appealing for dismissal of the case and made the following ruling:

*Han the scholar without a penny to his name
Sought a fair maiden but to no avail.
Jin Sheng in his fabulous wealth
Got a scholar but then threw him away.
With the father-in-law such a poor judge of men,
Another who sought the bride hatched an evil plan.
In the lawsuit, Cheng has no proof of the old betrothal,
While Han holds evidence of the new commitment.
With one hundred taels of silver from the yamen as betrothal gift,
Jin's daughter will be returned to Han.
Jin Sheng, Cheng Yuan, and Zhao Xiao are hereby put under the rod
For their willful flouting of the law.*

After delivering his ruling, the prefect gave Miss Jin's natal chart, the marriage contract, and the lock of hair back to Han Ziwen. Everyone bid farewell to the prefect and left the court. Squire Cheng, having accomplished nothing, smarted from the humiliation, and Han Ziwen threw curses at him all along the way, calling him a stupid old ass and saying, "A fine thing you did! A heck of a fine thing you did! And I thought you wouldn't feel the pain of the strokes!"

Squire Cheng swallowed the insult without venturing one word in response. Moreover, because Zhao Xiao had been subjected to punishment because of him, he was obliged to join Squire Jin in paying the man off in order to seal his lips about the scandal. As he walked along, he kept muttering bitterly to himself. This is indeed a case of Zhou Yu's self-proclaimed wonderful stratagem ending up as a double loss.¹² They then parted company and went their separate ways.

Having gone through all these unpleasant events, Han Ziwen acted quickly to forestall more breaches of promises. He hastily packed the one hundred taels of silver with some presents and asked that the wedding take place on his chosen auspicious day. As before, he enlisted Zhang and Li as messengers. Since Prefect Wu was on Han's side, Squire Jin dared not show him less than proper respect. He thought of joining hands with Cheng to bribe higher-ups, but there was no way he could bypass the prefectural and county

yamens. Choking with silent fury, as it were, he resigned himself to following Han Ziwen's behest in everything.

After the wedding ceremony, when Morning Cloud the bride saw Mr. Han for the first time, she fell for his impressive looks. And with his outstanding talent, which was quite a match for her beauty, she could not care less about his lack of means. As was to be expected, the loving young couple wallowed in unions of delight, and the bride begrudged her father for having unnecessarily made so much trouble. Indeed, if he had known that the lamp flame could have served as a kitchen fire, he would have cooked the rice long ago.

Nothing of note occurred until the next year, when Education Commissioner Tian Hong presided over the preparatory provincial exams. Highly recommended by Prefect Wu, Han Ziwen made it to the top rank on the list of successful candidates. Both at the triennial provincial-level examinations in the fall and, later, at the national-level examinations in the spring, he scored at the top, and his wife, daughter of the Jin family, was made a lady. The father-in-law was full of remorse for what had happened in the past. (MC: *For a man without insight, he couldn't have acted otherwise.*) If he could have foreseen that Han Ziwen would go this far, Jin Sheng would have been willing to give his daughter to him even as a concubine. There is a quatrain in testimony:

Lü Mengzheng was once also an impoverished man;¹³

Do not look at a hero with snobbish eyes.

A man with a sense of justice is hard to come by;

The prefect was as upright and wise as Gu Hong.¹⁴



An Evil Boatman Commits Blackmail with a Dead Body

An Evil Boatman Commits Blackmail with a Dead Body

A Heartless Servant Wrongfully Presses Murder Charges

As the poem says,

*In this vast world on earth,
Under the boundless sky,
Those who harm others bring harm on themselves;
Evil plots come to nothing in the end.*

Let me begin my story with this comment: Nothing can be more momentous in this world than the crime of murder and its punishment—a life for a life. This is no trifling matter. Therefore, the real culprits will eventually be found out and the falsely charged will be exonerated. Real murderers who bribe the powers that be with their ample supplies of money may escape justice for a time, but at the end of the day, divine justice will catch up with them and make them give themselves away in unguarded moments. The falsely charged may be put under torture and be unable to find redress for the wrongs inflicted on them, but eventually their day of vindication will come. If mistakes lead to more mistakes and the guilty live peacefully to a ripe old age whereas the innocent die in prison or by the executioner's sword, could it be that the old man up there has no eyes? The ancients put it well:

*Heaven is not to be fooled;
It knows your mind before you act.
Good is returned with good and evil with evil;
The only difference is in the timing.*

Storyteller, you've got it wrong! The way you put it, no one is sent unjustly to death row, and there is no need for the "City for Victims of Injustice" in the netherworld!

Gentle reader, let me tell you: Unjust deaths or some murderers' escape from justice are mostly retribution from lives of previous incarnations. If not, if murderers don't pay with their lives and the falsely charged die unjustly, both the dead and the living will be so resentful that even if government authorities don't know better, Heaven sees everything and will, in all manner of unexpected ways, create the right opportunities for settling the cases—hence the saying "Villains are feared, but not by Heaven; kind people may be bullied, but not by Heaven." Another saying goes "The net of Heaven is of large mesh, but it lets nothing through."

In olden times, there was no lack of upright and wise judges who assigned the highest importance to cases involving human lives. To complicate matters, the ways of the world are so unpredictable that cases abound in which what sounds incredible turns out to be true and what is easily believable turns out to be false. This is why even those criminal cases with evidence beyond the shadow of a doubt were also reviewed meticulously over and over again so as to make sure that no one was unjustly convicted. But officials of today, in their love of money and their adulation of the rich and powerful, cast integrity and fairness to the winds. They release those who are evidently unpardonable criminals and hastily convict those who are not guilty. They don't stop to consider how reprehensible it is to let killers off the hook. If evil murderers are not convicted and punished, when will the aggrieved souls ever be able to rest in peace? (MC: *All judges should copy these lines and post them to the right of their seats as their motto.*) The unjustly accused are put through endless rounds of interrogation and torture. Unable to withstand the pain, they confess too quickly, even to crimes punishable by dismemberment. Their entire families are ruined, because when one man falls, his family goes down with him. As for those officials who care only about their own careers with never a thought about the misery of others, I wonder if, in some nook or cranny of their minds, they ever entertain the thought of accumulating some moral credit to their names in the next world for the benefit of

their offspring. My sole purpose in telling this story is to offer this advice to all officials of integrity: Every blade of grass, every tree, is a life given by Heaven, let alone human beings with their long lines of ancestors. It behooves you to make mercy the guiding principle, be lenient or firm as the situation demands, uphold justice and punish evil. Only by so doing can you rightly be called "parent-officials." Not only will the populace be grateful to you, but Heaven will also protect and bless you.

Our story takes place in this dynasty [Ming]. A rich man named Wang Jia, a native of Suzhou Prefecture, had an enemy named Li Yi, also a Suzhou native, and the feud between their two families went back generations. Wang Jia had been meaning to do Li Yi harm, but no opportunity presented itself until one windy and rainy night when the night-watch drum sounded the third strike. Li Yi and his wife, having eaten supper quite some time ago, were sound asleep. All of a sudden, more than ten bandits, their faces painted red and black, stormed in. In consternation, Li Yi's wife, Jiang-shi, dived under the bed. From there, she saw that a man with a long beard and a broad face grabbed her husband by the hair and killed him with one blow of his sword. The men did not take anything from the house but left quickly. Having witnessed everything from under the bed, Jiang-shi emerged from her hiding place, still shaking, put on her clothes, and burst into wails of grief beside her husband's corpse.

Neighbors came over to see what the commotion was about. Grief-stricken at the sight, they comforted Jiang-shi with kind words.

"It was Wang Jia, my husband's enemy, who killed him," said Jiang-shi.

"How do you know that?" asked the neighbors.

"I saw everything from under the bed. Wang Jia has always been an enemy, and he has a long beard and a broad face. Even though his face was smeared black, I could still recognize him. If they were burglars, why did they kill my husband without taking anything? If he's not the murderer, who is? Please stand up for me!"

"We do know that he and your husband were enemies. And we do have the obligation to report crimes to the authorities. Tomorrow morning, you can have an indictment drawn up and then go with us to the yamen. But let's call it a day for now."

After everyone left, Jiang-shi closed the door and continued to weep. In no mood to go to sleep, she waited miserably for morning. When morning came at long last, she asked a neighbor to buy an official indictment form. She then filled it out and went to the Changzhou County yamen. As the

county magistrate happened to have just opened his court session for complaints, Jiang-shi went straight to the steps leading to the dais and cried out her grievances.

After reading the indictment and asking some questions about the circumstances, the magistrate promptly accepted the case because it was a serious one involving a murder and a break-in. The local headman also came to report the crime. The magistrate asked the sheriff to check the report, after which he quickly dispatched yamen runners to arrest the accused murderer.

In the meantime, after killing Li Yi, Wang Jia savored his success without staying on guard because he thought no one could have recognized him with his smeared face. To his surprise, a team of yamen runners descended on his place with the suddenness of a thunderbolt. With no place to hide in the rush of the moment, he was trussed up with a rope and taken to the county yamen.

The county magistrate asked, "Why did you kill Li Yi?"

Wang Jia replied, "Li Yi was killed by bandits. What does it have to do with me?"

The magistrate turned to Jiang-shi and asked, "Why do you accuse him?"

Jiang-shi replied, "I saw him from my hiding place under the bed."

"How can you be so sure when it was dark?" pursued the magistrate.

"I not only recognized him but also deduced that burglars would not have killed and then gone away without taking anything. If it wasn't a long-time enemy, who could it have been?"

The magistrate called forth the neighbors and asked them, "Were Wang Jia and Li Yi indeed longtime enemies?"

The neighbors said in chorus, "Yes, they were. And it's true that they killed him but didn't take anything."

Thereupon, the magistrate sharply ordered that the ankle-squeezer be applied to Wang Jia. Being from a rich family, Wang Jia could not hold out under the pain. In resignation, he confessed, "I do have a grudge against Li Yi, and I did make myself out to be a bandit and killed him."

The magistrate made him write down the statement in his own hand and sent him to death row. (MC: *The magistrate should also interrogate Wang's followers. With a few witnesses, Wang would not be able to elude the punishment of the law in the future.*)

Although he had confessed, Wang Jia did not stop thinking about retracting his statement, but no idea came to him. Then he thought, "There's that Old Man Zou in my neighborhood who makes a living out of helping people

with their lawsuits. He's a most crafty man and quite friendly to me. He gets the worst criminal off the hook. When my son comes to deliver my meal, I'll tell him to go and talk with Old Man Zou."

Soon, Wang Xiao'er, his son, came to deliver his meal. Wang Jia gave him detailed instructions as to what to do, adding, "Don't skimp on payment! My life is at stake!"

Xiao'er promised to do as he was told. Straightaway, he went to Old Man Zou's home, gave him an account of what had happened to his father, and asked the old man for ideas on getting his father exonerated.

The old man said, "Your father has confessed, and the county magistrate is new to his post and tried the case himself. Wherever your father may go to defend himself, the original verdict made at the local yamen won't be reversed, nor will the magistrate concede that he's in the wrong and nullify the confession. Why don't you give me two hundred or three hundred taels of silver? I'll take a trip to Nanjing and look for an opportunity. I'll surely come up with something to get him out."

Xiao'er said, "What idea do you have?"

"You just give me the money and leave it to me. Wait until I show you a thing or two. I can't let on about anything as yet."

After returning home, Xiao'er put together three hundred taels of silver and delivered the money to Old Man Zou. When he urged the old man to be on his way, the old man said, "With so much money, I'll surely find a way to do it. You just relax and wait."

Xiao'er thanked him and went home.

That very night, the old man packed and departed for Nanjing. Before many days had passed, he arrived in Nanjing and went to the Ministry of Justice to make detailed inquiries. He found out that Mr. Xu, director of the Zhejiang Division, was prone to stretching the rules and liked to entertain. Losing no time, Zou obtained a letter of recommendation and went to call on Mr. Xu, carrying lavish gifts.

Mr. Xu took a liking to the old man with his glib tongue and his easy laugh. Henceforth, they saw a great deal of each other, and a familiarity began to grow between them. Old Man Zou was fretting that no opportunity to help Wang Jia had presented itself when, one day, more than twenty pirates were taken under guard from the yamen to the Ministry of Justice for conviction. Old Man Zou went there to find out more about them. On learning that there were two Suzhou natives among them, he nodded in delight and said to himself, "I've got it!"

The next day, while preparing a feast, he sent an invitation card to Mr. Xu. Before long, the feast was ready, and Mr. Xu arrived in a sedan-chair. The old man greeted him, all smiles. After sitting down, they chatted about nothing in particular, and it was not until late at night that the old man dismissed all the servants and presented the hundred taels of silver to Mr. Xu. (MC: *So, a hundred taels is enough to get him out. If made earlier, this request might not have been granted. The old man knows how to bide his time and wait for the right moment.*)

Much taken aback, Mr. Xu asked why he was doing this. The old man said, "I have a relative, Mr. Wang, who's in the local county jail on a false charge. Could you do something for him?"

Mr. Xu said, "If there's anything I can do, of course I'll do it, but I'm afraid there's little advice I can offer you about a case that's in another location."

"But it shouldn't be hard to do. Mr. Wang and Mr. Li were enemies. Now Mr. Li has been murdered, and the murderer is still at large. So Mr. Wang is in jail on a false charge. Yesterday, I saw more than twenty pirates taken under guard to your yamen, two of whom are Suzhou natives. Now, these two can be forced to confess that they murdered Mr. Li. They'll be sentenced to death anyway, and one more murder won't make any difference. But my kinsman Mr. Wang will be given a new lease on life, for which he'll be ever so grateful to you."

Mr. Xu agreed. Calmly, he took the silver, put it into his portfolio, called his servants back, thanked the old man for the feast, and departed in his sedan-chair.

Then the old man went secretly to see the two pirates' families. He promised them hefty rewards and presented them with one hundred taels of silver on the spot as an initial payment. (MC: *He leaves no stone unturned.*) The two pirates accepted the deal.

When the court trial began, Mr. Xu ordered the two pirates to approach the bench and asked them, "How many people have you killed?"

The two men immediately confessed that they had killed so-and-so on such and such a date at such and such a place, and that one night on such and such a date they went to Li Yi's house and killed him. Mr. Xu took note of their confessions, sent the pirates to jail, and prepared a file on the case.

Old Man Zou then asked a scribe to copy the confessions and addressed them to the Changzhou County magistrate. Carrying the document with him, he took leave of Mr. Xu, returned to Suzhou, and delivered it to the

Changzhou County yamen when the court was in session. The magistrate opened the seal, and seeing that the murderers of Li had already been identified, he thought that Wang Jia must have made a false confession under duress. He was about to summon Wang from jail for further questions when, suddenly, Wang Xiao-er came in, crying, "Injustice!" All the more convinced of Wang's innocence, the magistrate barked out an order that Wang Jia be taken out of jail and set free immediately.

Jiang-shi was shocked when she learned of this development. Wondering if her eyes had played tricks on her the night of the murder, she saw no alternative but to call it quits.

Let us follow Wang Jia as he triumphantly sauntered his way home. Just as he reached the gate of his house, a sudden gust of chilly wind sprang up. He cried out, "Oh no! Brother Li Yi is here!" With that, he collapsed to the ground. Attempts to revive him failed, and quickly he breathed his last. (MC: *Hurrah!*) There is a quatrain in testimony:

*The foreign-looking Yama King means business—
For cases of murder, a life for a life.
Underhand deals do not deceive Heaven;
How laughable—that crafty Old Man Zou!*

The above story is about a real murderer escaping the law. Our next story is the other way around: Over a trifling matter, an innocent man fell prey to an evil plot, with tragic results. If it had not been for the intervention of divine will, he would have died a violent death. Verily,

*Good fortune or bad is up to divine justice;
Those who mean harm first bring harm on themselves.*

Our story goes that in the Chenghua reign period [1465–78] of this dynasty [Ming], there lived in Yongjia County of Wenzhou Prefecture, Zhejiang, a Mr. Wang Jie, courtesy name Wenhao. He and his wife, Liu-shi, had only one daughter, two years old at this point in our narrative. They had several servants, male and female, but they were not very rich. Although Mr. Wang pursued Confucian studies, he had never had any formal education but pursued his studies at home. Sometimes he also went out and compared notes with his friends. Liu-shi ran the household frugally. With her many wifely virtues, she and her husband enjoyed a peaceful conjugal life.

One day in late spring, a few friends took Mr. Wang out to the suburbs to enjoy the sights of spring. Behold:

*It is a glorious and sunny day in spring
With soothing and gentle breezes.
Purple swallows and yellow orioles
Look for companions among the willows.
Busy bees and flitting butterflies
Seek friends among the peach blossoms.
Scions of the noble, when fancy takes them,
Visit the wineshops day after day.
Beautiful girls with desires stirring
Cannot suppress the urge to venture out.
Those feeling the wine's effects can be helped to their feet;
How fortunate that the fallen petals are as yet unswept!*

The wonders of spring filled Mr. Wang with such joy that he drank until he was slightly tipsy before he started on his way home. Upon arrival, he saw two of his servants quarreling with a man carrying a bamboo basket. What happened was that the man, a Mr. Lü from Huzhou, was peddling ginger, and Mr. Wang's servants were trying to slash the price. After finding out what the problem was, Mr. Wang said to the peddler, "The price they asked for is very reasonable. Why did you have to kick up such a row in front of my house? You really have no sense!"

The peddler happened to be an outspoken man. He said, "Do you really think it necessary to take advantage of a peddler like me? You, sir, should have a bigger heart. Don't be so cheap!"

Still under the influence of the wine, Mr. Wang flew into a rage. "Where did this old ass come from? You've got a lot of nerve, talking back to me like that!" So saying, he walked up, showered blows on the man with his fists, and pushed him with one thrust of his hand. As it turned out, the middle-aged peddler had an ailment caused by excessive phlegm and internal heat. That one push made him collapse, unconscious, to the ground. Truly, he was

*Weak as the waning moon at the third watch
And feeble as the spent oil lamp before dawn.*

As a general truth, outbursts of anger should be the first thing to avoid. (MC: *Words of wisdom.*) What's more, all this rumpus was for the sake of one or two puny coins. What was the big deal? We often witness situations in which some servants, made presumptuous by their connections with the powerful families they serve, all too often bully the poor and the humble. Once things get out of control, they bring disgrace to their masters. This is why good masters must strictly discipline their servants. In this case, though, Mr. Wang was at fault for losing his temper and striking the peddler. He was to suffer the consequences later.

But I digress. To get on with our story, on seeing the peddler collapse to the ground, Mr. Wang was shocked into sobriety and promptly ordered the servants to carry him into the main hall. They laid him down and forced warm tea down his throat. Soon he regained consciousness. Mr. Wang apologized to him, had wine and food served to him, and offered him a bolt of white silk to pay for his recuperation. (MC: *He should be given credit for switching from violence to graciousness. But he overplays his hand by offering a bolt of silk, and this will cause disaster later.*) The peddler's anger turned to joy. He thanked Mr. Wang and went off in the direction of the ferry crossing. If Mr. Wang had been a prophet, he would have immediately thrown his arms around the peddler from behind, turned him back, and gladly let the man recuperate in his house for two to six months. That way, he would have averted the grim calamity that was to befall him. Now that the peddler was gone, it was as if

*He had cast out hooks and lines
And drew out of the water not fish but trouble.*

After the peddler was gone, Mr. Wang's heart was still pounding violently. On entering the bedchamber, he told his wife about what had happened, adding, "I almost got myself into big trouble. I'm a lucky man!"

The hour being late, his wife, Liu-shi, asked a maidservant to serve a few dishes and warmed wine to help him recover from the shock. After he had downed several cups, they heard violent knocking on the front gate. Mr. Wang was again seized with fear. He picked up a lantern and went out, only to see Zhou Si, the boatman from the ferry crossing, with a bolt of white silk and a bamboo basket in his hands. In consternation, he said to Mr. Wang, "Sir! You're in trouble! You took a human life!"

His face drained of all color, Mr. Wang asked what had happened.

"Do you recognize the white silk and the bamboo basket?" asked Zhou Si.

"Yes. The silk is my gift to a ginger peddler from Huzhou who was here earlier today, and the basket is his, for carrying his ginger. Why are they in your hands?"

"Earlier this afternoon, a Mr. Lü from Huzhou hired my ferry boat. As soon as he got into my boat, he fell violently ill with too much phlegm and internal heat. As he lay dying, he told me that it was your blows, sir, that brought on the attack of his disease. He gave the silk and the basket to me, so that they could serve as evidence, and he asked me to take legal action against you on his behalf. He also wanted me to go to Huzhou to tell his family about this so that they can come here to seek justice and demand your life. After he finished saying that, he closed his eyes and died. The body is still in my boat, and my boat is now moored by the bank in front of your house. Please go to my boat to see for yourself, sir, so that you can decide what to do."

Mr. Wang was so terrified that his eyes popped wide open, his jaw dropped, his hands tingled, his legs went weak, and his heart thundered against his ribs as if a small deer were there, dashing about. But aloud, he said, trying to sound defiant, "This is impossible!" Yet he quietly sent a servant to the boat to investigate. Sure enough, there lay a dead body. (MC: *The investigation was not thorough enough.*) With his guilty conscience, Mr. Wang ran into the bed-chamber in a panic and told Liu-shi about it.

"What's to be done?" she asked.

Mr. Wang said, "Now that things have come to this, we have no time to lose. Let me pay the boatman and ask him to dispose of the corpse under cover of night. That's the only way to avoid trouble."

Mr. Wang stuffed a packet of more than twenty taels of loose silver into his sleeve, went out, and said to the boatman, "Please keep this thing quiet. Let's consider what course would be best in the long run. I'm indeed at fault, but it wasn't intentional. You and I are both Wenzhou natives, so we have something of a bond between us. I don't see why you have to seek revenge for an out-of-towner. Also, what's in it for you? The best thing to do is not to tell anyone about this. I'll give you a reward to show my gratitude, and you can dump the corpse elsewhere. Who's to know in the darkness of the night?"

"Where am I supposed to dump it? If it's ever found and identified, and the investigations start, I'll be implicated, too."

"My father's grave is just a few *li* away. It's very quiet there. You know where it is. Please take the body there tonight when there's no one around and quietly bury it. No one will know."

"Good idea," said Zhou Si, "but how are you going to thank me?" (MC: *That's what this is all about.*)

Mr. Wang produced what he had in his sleeve, but the boatman objected to the paltriness of the amount, saying, "Don't tell me a human life is worth so little! Look! That man happened to die in my boat, and I take it as a little windfall sent by Heaven. Anything less than one hundred taels of silver won't do."

Eager to put this thing behind him, Mr. Wang dared not say no. With a nod, he went to the interior of the house. Before long, he came out with clothes, jewelry, and more silver. Handing them to Zhou Si, he said, "They add up to about sixty taels of silver. I'm a poor man. Please accept it as such and forgive me."

Mollified by the sight of the many gifts, Zhou Si said, "Oh well, you're an educated man. I'll be content if you could take care of me from time to time. (MC: *This is even worse. Mr. Wang's bad luck has not run its course.*) I'm not going to haggle."

In his desperation, Mr. Wang found these words reassuring. It was indeed a case of "His consent is my luck." He treated the boatman to wine and food and then told two servants to find hoes, iron harrows, and such. One of the servants, Hu, was nicknamed "Hu the Tiger" because he was vicious and had a strong build. After everything was ready, they boarded the boat together and went to the Wang family graveyard, where they picked an empty spot, dug a grave, and buried the corpse. Then they boarded the boat again and returned home. By this time, night had given way to dawn. Mr. Wang treated the boatman to breakfast before bidding him good-bye. After the boatman was gone, Mr. Wang told the servants to close the gate, after which they went to their own rooms.

On entering his bedchamber, Mr. Wang said to his wife, Liu-shi, "Being a respectable man from an old family, I never imagined I'd land myself in such a mess and end up being extorted by such a petty rogue."

As tears rolled down his cheeks, Liu-shi said in a soothing tone, "You're just meant to experience a shock or two at this time in your life. Don't be upset about the loss of money and other valuables. Now that the trouble is over, thanks to Heaven, you should count yourself lucky. You must be tired

from all the work you did throughout the night. You need a good rest." She ordered tea and food for him, and they went to bed.

Several days later, relieved that nothing untoward had happened, Mr. Wang bought some sacrificial articles and offered them to the gods and his ancestors. Zhou Si often came to visit, allegedly to express his goodwill. Mr. Wang waited on him hand and foot, always trying not to get on his wrong side. And he forced himself to grant every small loan that Zhou Si asked for. In fact, Zhou Si had sold his ferry boat and opened a shop and was doing quite well. Peace was restored in Mr. Wang's life.

Gentle reader, mark this: Mr. Wang was, after all, a bookish gentleman with little knowledge of the ways of the world. Since he had already paid the boatman and carried the corpse to his family graveyard, he should have gathered dry firewood and burned up the corpse so as not to leave any trace. Wouldn't that have made a clean end to the business? But no good idea came to him in the rush of the moment, and he chose to have the body buried. This is a case of weeds not uprooted coming back the next spring.

One year went by. As the saying goes, "Frost kills only rootless grass; disaster hits only luckless people." Mr. Wang's three-year-old daughter fell gravely ill with smallpox. Prayers to the gods, divinations, and doctors' prescriptions all failed to work. Deeply pained by their beloved and only child's suffering, Mr. and Mrs. Wang stayed at her bedside day and night, shedding bitter tears.

One day, a kinsman of Mr. Wang's came with a gift box to see the young patient. Mr. Wang greeted him and offered him tea. When Mr. Wang told him that the girl was on the verge of death, the kinsman said, "There's a pediatrician in this county, named Feng, who has the skill to bring life to the dying, and this is no exaggeration. He lives thirty *li* from here. Why don't you send for him?"

"Yes, I will!" said Mr. Wang. As darkness had already fallen, he kept his kinsman for supper. After his kinsman left, he told his wife about this, wrote an invitation card, summoned Hu the Tiger that very night, and said to him, "I want you to take this card and leave at the fifth watch of the night, to bring Dr. Feng here to see my girl. I'll set out lunch and wait for you. Go and be quick about it!" Hu the Tiger acknowledged the order and departed. Nothing further happened that night.

The next day, Mr. Wang prepared lunch and waited until late in the afternoon, but still the doctor did not show up. Another day passed. When he went to his daughter's side to check on her, he saw that her condition had

worsened. At midnight, the girl stopped breathing. She had taken leave of her parents and gone to the netherworld. Indeed,

*Cicadas are the first ones to feel the autumn wind;
Death comes to those who least expect to die.*

Having lost their greatest treasure, Mr. Wang and his wife cried themselves into a stupor. The body was then encoffined and cremated. Hu the Tiger did not return until noon the next day. He said, "Dr. Feng wasn't at home, and I waited for most of the day, which is why I'm back only now."

Tearfully, Mr. Wang said, "This means that my daughter was fated to die at this time. Nothing more need be said about this."

Several days later, one of Hu the Tiger's friends let out the truth. Hu had been drinking all along the way and, in his tipsy state, had lost the invitation card. So he dragged his feet and did not return until the day after the girl's death. His justification for his delay was an outright lie. On hearing this, Mr. Wang, still heartbroken over the death of his daughter, was furious. (MC: *Again he lets his fiery temper get the better of him.*) Without a moment's delay, he summoned Hu the Tiger and took out a bamboo rod. When the rod was about to land on him, Hu the Tiger said, "I'm not guilty of murder. (MC: *Mr. Wang is indeed too harsh.*) Why do you have to do this?"

All the more enraged at these words, Mr. Wang ordered other servants to haul him away and beat him. Only after the man had been given more than fifty strokes of the rod did Mr. Wang call them off and go inside.

Badly lacerated, Hu the Tiger limped to his room and said savagely to himself, "All this humiliation, and for what? His daughter's case was beyond cure. She would have died anyway. Don't tell me I killed her because I didn't bring the doctor! I don't deserve such a vicious beating. How hateful!" After another moment's reflection, he said, again to himself, "It's all right. I know what will do him in. After my wounds heal, I'll show him a thing or two. We'll see who comes out the winner! I'm going to keep quiet for now, so he won't have a chance to prepare." Truly,

*When your luck turns, even your servant steps on you;
When fate is against you, demons will have their way.*

Let us leave Hu the Tiger at his evil plotting and come back to Mr. Wang. More than a month had gone by since his daughter's death. With relatives

and friends comforting him with frequent offerings of meals and wine, he gradually began to feel better. One day, when he was taking a stroll in his front yard, a team of arresting officers barged in. Before he could protest, they threw hempen rope and iron chains around his neck. Giving a violent start, he said, "I'm a Confucian scholar. How can you insult me like this?"

With a snort, one of the officers said, "A fine, murderous Confucian scholar you are! If the yamen wrongs you, don't blame us! You can tell it to the magistrate!"

Liu-shi and the women servants heard the commotion but had no idea what was happening and could do no more than stare at them without daring to take a step forward.

Over Mr. Wang's protests, the officers, as ferocious as wolves and tigers, dragged him to the Yongjia County yamen and made him kneel to the right of the dais. The plaintiff was on his knees to the left of the dais. When Mr. Wang raised his head and saw that the plaintiff was none other than his servant Hu the Tiger, it dawned on him that Hu was accusing him out of a personal grudge.

Ming Shizuo, the magistrate, asked, "Mr. Hu Hu has accused you of having beaten a Mr. Lü of Huzhou to death. What do you have to say to that?"

Mr. Wang said, "Your Honor, don't listen to his lies. I'm a scholar of delicate constitution. How is it possible for me to beat someone to death? Hu Hu is a servant of mine. I punished him severely the other day for his trespass. He initiated these proceedings against me out of resentment. I await Your Honor's judicious judgment."

Hu the Tiger kowtowed and said, "Your Honor, don't listen to his story. It's common for masters to beat their servants. Why would I be so resentful? The fact is, the dead body is buried to the left of his family graveyard. Please send men to dig it up. The presence of the corpse will bear me out, but if the corpse isn't there, I'll plead guilty to making a false accusation."

Accordingly, the magistrate dispatched officers to dig up the corpse. With the detailed information Hu provided about the location and the size of the burial site, the officers soon accomplished their mission and came back to the yamen, carrying the corpse.

The magistrate rose from his seat and personally examined the corpse. Turning to Mr. Wang, he said, "With the corpse as evidence, what more do you have to say?"

He was about to order torture for Mr. Wang when the latter said, "Your Honor, the corpse has already decomposed. It cannot be the body of the man

I allegedly beat to death only recently. And if the man died a long time ago, why was the death not reported until today? All too clearly, Hu Hu found a corpse somewhere and conjured up a case against me out of thin air."

The magistrate said, "You do have a point."

But Hu the Tiger said, "The man was beaten to death a year ago. I didn't have the heart to report against him at the time out of consideration of the bond between master and servant. What's more, since it's an offense for a servant to accuse his master of wrongdoing, I kept the secret to myself. (MC: *What a smooth talker!*) But I never thought that my master would again resort to force. I was afraid that I'd be implicated if something horrible happens, so I had to report what had happened. (MC: *How can such an unscrupulous man be entrusted with anything? Mr. Wang is no judge of character. It is fitting that he has come to this.*) If you don't believe me, Your Honor, you need only call in the neighbors and ask them if they knew about the beating death on such and such a date last year. The truth will then be established."

Again, the magistrate accepted his suggestion and soon had the neighbors brought to the court. The magistrate questioned them one by one and indeed established the fact that, on such and such a date the year before, a ginger seller was beaten at Mr. Wang's house until he fell unconscious, although he was quickly revived. But the neighbors said they did not know what happened to the ginger seller thereafter. While they were stating the facts, Mr. Wang turned pale. As he tried to get by with evasive answers, the magistrate said, "Your guilt has been clearly established. What more can you say? This wretch will confess only if he's beaten!" Right away he picked out a bamboo slip, a warrant for the authorization of the use of torture, from its container and thundered, "Beat him!"

With a mighty shout, the runners standing on either side of the dais along the walls flung Mr. Wang on the floor and gave him twenty merciless thrashings. Pity the scholar with his delicate constitution going through such torture! Unable to hold out, Mr. Wang resignedly confessed.

After the confession was duly recorded, the magistrate announced, "Although Wang's guilt in the death of the peddler is clearly established, a conviction is premature in the absence of word from the family of the deceased. My ruling for now is to put Wang in jail, to await further decisions by the court after family members of the deceased come forward to identify the corpse."

Thereupon, Mr. Wang was sent to jail, and the corpse was reburied. Orders were given not to cremate the corpse without authorization but to

preserve it for identification and further examination. With the court session declared closed, everyone in the courtroom was dismissed, and the magistrate returned to the residential quarters of the yamen. Hu the Tiger felt triumphant for having given vent to his personal grievances, but he could not bring himself to return to the Wang residence to face Liu-shi. Instead, he moved elsewhere.

In the meantime, servants of the Wang family were asking for information at the county yamen. On hearing that their master had been put in jail, they were so horrified that even their ears were drained of color. After they ran all the way back and reported the news to their mistress, Liu-shi felt as if her three souls had taken flight from her body. Letting out a cry, she fell backward on the floor.

*Alive or not, it was yet hard to tell,
But her four limbs were all deathly still.*

In a panic, the maidservants kept shouting her name, desperately trying to revive her. Gradually, Liu-shi came to. With a cry, "My husband!" she burst into loud wails of grief and went on wailing for a good four hours. Then she hurriedly put together some loose pieces of silver and changed into black. Carrying the money, she told a maid to accompany her and a male servant to lead the way and proceeded straight to the Yongjia County jail. On seeing each other, husband and wife wept their hearts out.

"It's that scoundrel Hu the Tiger who did this to me!" said Mr. Wang tearfully.

Gnashing her teeth, Liu-shi called the man the worst names. Then she took out the loose pieces of silver and handed them to Mr. Wang, saying, "Give them to the wardens so that they'll take good care of you and spare you from the hardships of life in jail." Mr. Wang accepted the money.

Darkness had fallen, so Liu-shi resignedly took leave of her husband and returned home, weeping as she went. After eating a perfunctory supper, she went to bed in low spirits. Saddened by the thought that she and her husband had been sharing the bed only the night before but had now been driven apart and were in the grip of such a disaster, she again burst into sobs. Let us leave her in her misery as she drifted off to sleep and come back to Mr. Wang.

After he was thrown into jail, even though his bribes to the wardens spared him from flogging, he found himself among prisoners with unkempt

hair and grimy faces. How could he possibly be otherwise than melancholy? In addition, his case was still pending, and he had no idea whether he was to be given the death sentence or not. Although clothes and food were delivered solicitously to him, he had his share of suffering, as was only to be expected, and he grew emaciated. Liu-shi paid bribes high and low, planning to have him freed on bail. However, given that murder was a serious charge and a murder suspect would not be lightly freed on bail, Mr. Wang continued to languish in jail.

Time flew like an arrow, and the sun and moon shot back and forth like the weaver's shuttles. After spending about six miserable months in jail, Mr. Wang was so weighed down by his worries and hardships that he fell gravely ill. Liu-shi called on physicians and brought medicine to him, but all to no avail. It looked like he did not have long to live.

One day, when a servant came to deliver his breakfast, Wang said to him, while keeping an eye on the warden, "After you go back, tell the mistress that I'm so gravely ill that I'm going to die anytime now. Tell her to come quickly to see me so that I can bid her farewell for the last time."

At the servant's report, Liu-shi shuddered with fear. Losing no time, she hired a sedan-chair and was carried to the county yamen with the speed of the wind. She alighted a few steps from the gate and walked to the jail. We need hardly say that husband and wife dissolved into tears on seeing each other.

Mr. Wang said, "Your foolish and unworthy husband took a human life by accident and landed in jail. I brought disgrace to you, my good wife. My condition is getting worse. Now that I've seen you for the last time, I'll die content. As for that scoundrel Hu the Tiger, I won't let him off easy when I'm in the netherworld!"

With tears in her eyes, Liu-shi said, "Don't say such unlucky things! Just relax and focus on your treatment. It was an accident, and no family member of the deceased has come forward. (MC: *Right on!*) In the worst-case scenario, I'll sell off all our land and other property in order to have you released so that we can be together again. Divine justice will catch up with that villain Hu the Tiger. The day of revenge will come. Don't worry about it."

"With you, my good wife, trying so hard to get me out, I already feel a little better. But still, my constitution is weak to begin with. I'm afraid my number will soon be up."

Liu-shi gave him more words of comfort before she took tearful leave of him. Back at home, she sat in her room, woebegone and glum.

The servants were playing card games in front of the main hall when they saw a middle-aged man enter the gate carrying a box on each end of a pole borne on his shoulders. As he put down his load, he asked the servants, "Is your master home?" Thanks to this man,

*The poor scholar found the Emperor of Qin's mirror;¹
The killer could not escape Xiao He's penal code.²*

There is a poem in testimony:

*The peddler of Huzhou lived a world apart;
The boatman, unprovoked, was the cause of the havoc.
Mr. Wang will soon be cleared;
His woes will change into bliss.*

Taking a closer look at the visitor, the servants screamed, "A ghost! A ghost!" And they fled pell-mell every which way. You may ask, who was that man? He was none other than Mr. Lü, peddler of ginger from Huzhou. He seized a servant and said, "I'm here to see your master. Why call me a ghost?"

Hearing the noise, Liu-shi went to the main hall to see what was going on. Mr. Lü walked up to her, called out a greeting, and said, "Madam, this old man is Lü Da, seller of ginger from Huzhou. When I was here last time, the master of the house treated me to wine and food and gave me white silk as a present. I'm ever so grateful. After I bade him good-bye, I returned to Huzhou, and in the past year and a half, I've traveled to other places to ply my trade. And now, I'm here again with some products from my hometown, to visit the master of the house. (MC: *A kind and honest man.*) I wonder why these gentlemen call me a ghost."

A servant off to one side shouted, "Madam! Don't listen to him! He must have heard that you're eager to get Master out of jail and has come here in human form to reclaim his life!"

Liu-shi ordered sharply that he withdraw. Turning to the visitor, she said, "So, this means that you're not a ghost. But how you've made my husband suffer!"

Startled, Mr. Lü asked, "Where is your husband? And how did I make him suffer?"

Thereupon, Liu-shi gave him a detailed account of what had happened, about how Zhou Si had brought a corpse to their house, how he had produced the silk and the basket as evidence, how her husband had bribed the boatman and buried the body, how Hu the Tiger had accused her husband of murder, and how her husband had confessed and been clapped into jail.

After hearing her out, Mr. Lü thumped his chest and said, "How sad! How sad! How can there be such injustice in the world! Last year, after I left your house and boarded a ferry boat, the boatman asked me how I had come by the white silk. I shouldn't have told him about how I almost died from Mr. Wang's blows and how he treated me to wine and gave me the gift of silk, but I did, and in detail. Then he offered to buy my silk. I agreed because he offered a good price. He also wanted my bamboo basket, so I gave it to him as payment for the boat ride. I had no idea he'd use those two things of mine for such an evil purpose! Because I didn't come earlier to Wenzhou, your husband was made to suffer. I'm to blame!"

Liu-shi said, "If you hadn't come today, even I wouldn't have known that my husband was falsely charged. So he tricked you out of the silk and basket, but what about the dead body?"

Mr. Lü thought for a moment before answering, "Oh, I see now. When I was telling the boatman about what had happened to me, there was a dead body floating on the water by the bank. I noticed that he was staring at it, but I didn't put any meaning to it. Who would have thought that he'd get such an evil idea! What a vicious man! Now, we have no time to lose. Please put my present away first, Madam. Then you and I will go together to the Yongjia County yamen to state Mr. Wang's innocence so as to get him out of jail. I think this is the best thing to do." (MC: *A kind and honest man.*)

Liu-shi agreed to do as he said. She put the present away and treated Mr. Lü to dinner. The daughter of a Confucian scholar, she was quite literate and did not need the services of a legal counsel. She wrote a petition, hired a sedan-chair for female passengers, and proceeded with Mr. Lü and a few servants to the Yongjia County yamen.

After they waited for some time, the magistrate took his place on the bench in his court. "Injustice!" Liu-shi and Mr. Lü cried out as they handed in the petition.

After reading it from beginning to end, the magistrate told Liu-shi to approach the bench and give her testimony. She gave a detailed account of how her husband had turned violent while haggling over price, how the

boatman had brought a dead body and received a windfall, and how Hu the servant had made false accusations out of a personal grudge. She concluded by saying, "I didn't know that my husband is innocent until earlier today when the ginger merchant came."

The magistrate then called Lü Da to him, whereupon Lü Da gave an account of how he had been beaten and had sold the silk.

The magistrate asked, "Could Madam Liu have bribed you into doing this?" (MC: *His suspicions are not unjustified.*)

With a kowtow, Lü Da said, "Your Honor! I may be a native of Huzhou, but I've been plying my trade in these parts for years, and I have many acquaintances here. How would I be able to fool Your Honor? If I had indeed been on the verge of death, why didn't I have the boatman bring an acquaintance of mine and ask the man to deliver my message and seek revenge? Why would I ask a boatman to do the job? Well, it may be said that I couldn't afford to be particular when I was dying, but after my supposed death, why haven't members of my clan in Huzhou done anything? My prolonged absence should have prompted some of them to come and make inquiries. If they found out that I'd been beaten to death, they would have taken the case to the yamen. Why was Mr. Wang's servant the one to initiate legal action a whole year later? I didn't know about the injustice until I came here today. Even though I did no harm to Mr. Wang Jie, I'm the one who caused all this, and I don't have the heart to let him suffer from the injustice. This is why I'm here to plead his case. Please spare his life, Your Honor!"

"You say you have acquaintances in these parts. Name them for me," said the magistrate.

Counting on his fingers, Lü Da named more than ten. The magistrate took down the names. He picked the last four names on the list, summoned two officers, and instructed them, "Bring these four here quietly, along with the neighbors who served as witnesses before." The officers acknowledged the order and went off.

Before long, the officers came back with the two groups of witnesses. Mr. Lü's four acquaintances cried out as soon as they saw him from a distance, "Well, if this isn't Big Brother Lü from Huzhou! Why are you here? So you didn't die, after all!"

The magistrate then told the neighbors to look at Lü Da up close. Appalled, they said, "Maybe our eyes are playing tricks on us, but this is the very ginger seller whom Mr. Wang had beaten to death! Was he brought back to life, or does this man just look exactly like him?"

One of the neighbors commented, "No two people in this world can look so much alike! I never forget a face. This is him all right, and no mistake!"

By this time, the magistrate had gained a pretty good idea of the truth. He accepted the petition, called the witnesses to him, and said, "After you leave the yamen, be sure not to say a word about this to anyone. If you don't do as I say, you'll be brought back here for severe punishment!" (MC: *The magistrate covers every angle.*) The witnesses murmured respectfully and withdrew.

The magistrate then summoned several officers and gave them these instructions: "Go quietly and find Zhou Si the boatman and sweet-talk him into coming here. Don't tell him the truth. The plaintiff, Hu Hu, has a guarantor. Bring both of them here tomorrow afternoon for interrogation." The officers acknowledged the order and went their separate ways.

The magistrate told Liu-shi and Lü Da to return the next afternoon. Liu-shi and Lü Da kowtowed and left the yamen. Liu-shi then took Lü Da to see Mr. Wang at the jail gate and told him everything that had happened. Mr. Wang was so overwhelmed with joy that, as if suddenly enlightened by Buddhist truth and rejuvenated by sweet dew from heaven, his illness was six or seven parts gone. He said, addressing Lü Da, "I blamed the Tiger only, never knowing that the boatman was so vicious. (MC: *It is his lack of discernment that makes him a victim of deception and misfortune.*) If you hadn't come, even I myself wouldn't have known that I was wronged." Truly,

Egrets are seen on snowy days only when they take wing;

The parrots' presence in the willows is not known until they talk.

After taking leave of her husband, Liu-shi left the yamen, mounted the small sedan-chair, and returned home, followed by Lü Da and the servants. Before entering her bedchamber, she told the servants to eat supper with Mr. Lü and put him up for the night in the main hall. In the afternoon of the next day, they went again to the yamen, where the magistrate had opened his session.

Soon, two officers entered with Zhou Si. What had happened was that Zhou Si had opened a fabric store in the county with Mr. Wang's money. The officers sent by the magistrate told him, "The county magistrate wants to buy fabric from you." They were thus able to trick him into following them to the yamen.

As if the man's crime was destined to be exposed at this time, Zhou Si happened to raise his head, and whom should he see but Lü Da! As he reddened to his ears, Lü Da cried out, "Mister! How has your business been since you bought my white silk and my bamboo basket?"

Zhou Si was speechless, and his face turned ashen. A moment later, Hu the Tiger was also brought in. Having moved to another place, he was in the county visiting relatives, and the officers happened to run into him. They said to him, tongue in cheek, "The dead man's relatives have come forward. The magistrate is waiting for the plaintiff to go so as to close the file. We've been looking everywhere for you!"

Hu the Tiger took them at their word. Cheerfully, he followed them to the yamen and knelt down in the courtroom. Pointing at Lü Da, the magistrate asked him, "Do you know this man?"

Upon a closer look, Hu the Tiger gave a start. Not knowing what to say, he remained silent.

Keeping the two men under close observation, the magistrate pointed to Hu the Tiger and lashed out: "You dog with the heart of a wolf! What did your master do to you to make you conspire with the boatman and produce a dead body in order to falsely accuse him of murder?"

Hu said, "My master did beat the man to death. I didn't lie."

In a rage, the magistrate said, "How can you be so brazen! If Lü Da is dead, who is that man kneeling at the foot of the dais?" He ordered the runners to use the ankle-squeezers on Hu and continued, "You'll be let off only if you confess this instant!"

When the ankle-squeezers were applied to him, Hu the Tiger screamed, "Your Honor! I plead guilty to accusing my master of murder out of a personal grudge, but I'd rather die than admit to conspiring with the boatman! My master knocked Lü Da to the ground, something he shouldn't have done, then he poured warm water down the man's throat and revived him, treated him to wine and food, and gave him silk, and the man went to the ferry crossing. At around the second watch that night, Zhou Si came, carrying a dead body, and produced the silk and the basket as evidence, so everyone in the house believed him. (MC: *Why didn't he ask the boatman to serve as a witness the first time around?*) Then my master bribed him and went with me to the family graveyard to bury the body. Later, because my master had me badly beaten, I came to Your Honor to report against him out of a personal grudge. I honestly didn't know that the corpse was someone else. If Mr. Lü hadn't

come, I wouldn't have known that my master was innocent. The boatman is the only one who knows about the corpse."

The magistrate took those words down in writing before ordering Hu the Tiger to withdraw and Zhou Si to approach the bench. In the beginning, Zhou Si tried to get by with evasive answers, but with Lü Da off to one side to bear witness and the magistrate ordering torture, he came out with the truth: "On the nth day of the nth month last year, Lü Da boarded my boat, carrying a bolt of white silk. I asked him how he had come by the silk, just to make conversation. That was how I learned about the beating. It so happened that there was a dead body floating by the bank at the ferry crossing, and that gave me the idea of blackmailing Mr. Wang. So I bought Mr. Lü's silk and got his basket, and I fished out the dead body, brought it into my boat, and went to the Wang residence. To my surprise, he readily believed my story. (IC: *The beginning of all the troubles to come.*) Then I got silver from Mr. Wang and buried the body in the graveyard. Everything I said is the truth."

The magistrate said, "That may very well be so, but there are still a few things unclear to me. Do you mean to say that there happened to be a dead body floating on the surface of the water and that it happened to resemble Lü Da? You must have killed a man so as to use the corpse to rip off Mr. Wang." (MC: *He is not entirely unjustified in his suspicions.*)

Zhou Si shouted at the top of his voice, "No, Your Honor! That's not true! If I had wanted to kill, why didn't I kill Lü Da then and there! It was the sight of the dead body on the water's surface that gave me the idea of getting hold of the silk and the basket. Because the corpse didn't look like Mr. Wang, I doubted that I could pull off the trick. But then I thought that, first, Mr. Wang must have had a guilty conscience, and, second, he had seen Lü Da only briefly, and who would be able to see a corpse's features clearly in the dark by lamplight? Third, since the silk came from Mr. Wang himself and the basket belonged to the ginger seller, no one would have any doubt. That's why I was emboldened to pull the trick. To my own surprise, I succeeded. No one saw through the hoax. As for that corpse, the man might have lost his footing and fallen into the water. I have no idea whatsoever."

Lü Da moved forward on his knees and said, "Your Honor, when I was in his ferry boat, I did see a floating corpse. That's the truth."

The magistrate recorded every word.

Zhou Si continued, "I meant only to hit Mr. Wang up for money. I didn't mean to do him such harm. Please be lenient with me!"

The magistrate roared, "You ruthless villain who defies divine justice! Your greed almost ruined his entire family. Such evil schemes of yours must have brought ruin to goodness knows how many other people. I'm going to rid Yongjia County of a scourge. (MC: *This is what's meant when they say "a case repugnant to reason."*) As for Hu the Tiger, as a servant, he betrayed his master and pressed an unsubstantiated charge against him. Such abominable behavior deserves severe punishment." He promptly ordered that both men be pulled back and beaten with the rod, Hu the Tiger forty times and Zhou Si until he stopped breathing. As it turned out, Hu had not quite recovered from a bad cold and could hardly withstand the torture. Divine justice caught up with the servant who betrayed his master, and he gave up the ghost before he was given forty strokes with the rod. Zhou Si died after more than seventy strokes. How pathetic that the two evil men perished by the rod!

Seeing that both men had died, the magistrate ordered that their family members come to claim the bodies. Mr. Wang was released from jail and set free then and there. Zhou Si's fabric store was searched, and all the fabric bolts were confiscated. Valued at one hundred taels of silver, the fabrics that had been bought with money wheedled out of Mr. Wang should have been government property, but considering the fact that Mr. Wang was a scholar who had been languishing in jail for quite some time on a false charge, the magistrate took pity on him for the gross injustice he had suffered and gave the fabrics to him. This goes to show the magistrate's goodwill.

After the corpse was dug out of Mr. Wang's family graveyard, the coroner found sand under the fingernails, which meant that the man had drowned. Since no family members came forward to claim the body, the coroner was ordered to have the body buried in the public graveyard.

Mr. Wang, his wife, and Mr. Lü thanked the magistrate and returned home. Mr. Wang and Liu-shi fell on each other's shoulders and had a good cry before they went into the main hall and greeted Mr. Lü anew. Lü Da apologized to Mr. Wang for causing him suffering, and Mr. Wang thanked Lü Da for coming to his defense and clearing him. This is a case of "Out of blows, friendship grows."

Henceforth they kept up a never-ending stream of mutual visits. Mr. Wang's hot temper mellowed, and he became all affability, even to beggars. Aggrieved over his recent experience, he decided to win some honor for himself so as to wipe out the disgrace. So he cut himself off from society and devoted himself to his studies. In ten years, he became a *jìnshi*.

The moral of the story is that government officials must never treat human life as a child's game or as if it were not worth a straw. Let's consider Mr. Wang's case: The boatman was the only one in full possession of all the facts. If the ginger peddler had not gone to Wenzhou again, the servants would not have known that their master was under a false charge, the wife would not have known that, and even Mr. Wang himself would not have known that. Moreover, a courtroom is not always the place where all crimes are necessarily exposed to light. (MC: *From this we know that cases of injustice abound in the prisons of our empire.*) Gentlemen of kindly disposition, be warned!

*A good ruler has no use for torture;
Entrapping people with the law is most insidious.
Lamebrained, corrupt, and ruthless officials, be warned!
Beware of retribution, to you or your offspring!*



Jiang Zhenqing Gains a Wife with a Jest

Mr. Tao Takes In Strangers Seeking Shelter from the Rain

Jiang Zhenqing Gains a Wife with a Jest

As the poem says,

Every intake of food and drink

Is determined by your lot.

One word said in jest

May lead to a lifelong bond.

Our story makes the point that everything that happens in one's life is predestined. A casual little joke or a playful word may later turn out to be a prophecy that is fulfilled down to the last detail. Only then does one realize that even at the time of the jest, the ghosts and the spirits were already in action. Nothing happens by accident.

Let me give you an example: In the Chongning reign period [1102–6] of the Song dynasty, a Mr. Wang who lived in the Western Circuit of Zhejiang, having passed the provincial-level examinations at a young age, went to the capital to sit for the triennial national civil-service examinations. Early one evening, he was passing a small house on his way to a banquet in Yanqiu Lane when he saw a ravishingly beautiful girl pacing to and fro by the gate and looking around, as if waiting for someone. As he gazed at her, Mr. Wang saw a boisterous group of men on horseback drawing near. Quickly, the girl slipped back into the house. Mr. Wang hastened to press on without stopping to ask about the family's surname.

Darkness had come on when Mr. Wang left his banquet in a tipsy state. While passing the same house on his way back, he peered through the tightly closed gate and found the house quiet. Mr. Wang rounded the left corner and kept to the wall as he went along, meaning to see if there was another gate at the back of the house. Several tens of paces away, he did see a small gate, also closed, in front of which was an empty lot about ten feet wide. He said to himself, "The beauty I saw earlier in the day must be inside, but how will I be able to see her again?" He was lingering around the back gate, unable to tear himself away, when something was tossed over the fence wall and fell to the ground with a thud, barely missing him. He picked up the object and saw that it was a piece of tile. The moon had just risen, and it was as light as day. He saw six characters written on the piece of tile: "Wait here under cover of night."

Feeling somewhat intrigued, young Mr. Wang smiled in his slightly inebriated condition and said to himself, "I wonder who proposed such a tryst. Let me play a prank on them." He scraped some lime from the fence wall and wrote this line on the back of the piece of tile with the fallen powder: "Come out after the third watch." After tossing the tile over the fence wall back into the courtyard of the house, he took about ten steps away from the gate and stood there to see what would happen. A few moments later, a young man appeared, walking toward the fence wall. He kept his head lowered and walked back and forth, as if looking for something. Failing to see anything after a while, he sighed as he stood facing the wall and walked away from the house dejectedly, dragging his feet.

Having seen everything clearly from his hiding place in the shadows, young Mr. Wang thought, "This man must be here to keep the appointment. I wonder who asked him to be here. Well, whoever asked him here will surely come out. Let me wait some more."

It was now the third watch of the night, and the moon was high in the sky, but a mist had gathered. Mr. Wang had sobered up from his wine and felt sleep overtaking him. He stretched, yawned, and thought self-mockingly, "What a busybody I am, poking my nose into other people's business when I should be in bed, asleep!"

Just as he was about to head for his lodging, he heard a creaking sound from the small gate. It opened, and a woman passed through it. By the light of the moon, Mr. Wang saw that she was quite a beauty. She was followed by an old maidservant carrying a large bamboo suitcase on her back. As they

ventured forth, Mr. Wang drew nearer and saw that the girl was none other than the one who had stood at the gate earlier in the day. The girl did not try to shy away from the approaching male figure, but when Mr. Wang was right in front of her, she gave a start and said, "Oh no! It's not him!" She turned around to look at the old woman.

The old woman rubbed her eyes, stepped up, and peered at Mr. Wang. "No! It's not him! Let's turn back!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Wang blocked their way and seized the young woman with one hand. "Wishing to go back inside, eh? Is it right for an unmarried young lady to meet a lover under cover of night? If I make a fuss about this and take you to the authorities, your whole family won't be able to live down the scandal! The very fact that I happened to run into you at this moment means there's a predestined bond between you and me. You might just as well go with me to my place. I'm a *juren*, here in the capital to sit for the exams. You won't be shortchanged."

Tears gushing down, the young woman shook with fear and did not know what to do. The old woman said to her, "If he does make a fuss about it, the consequences will be grave. Since he's a *juren*, I think it's all right if you follow him to his place for the time being. There's no other way. It will soon be daybreak. We'll be in serious trouble if we're seen."

With Mr. Wang tugging at her, the young woman followed him submissively to his lodging, weeping all the way. He put her up in a small upstairs room and kept the old woman on as her servant.

After the young woman had calmed down, Mr. Wang asked her to tell him about herself. She said, "My surname is Cao. My father died early. I'm an only child, so my mother loves me dearly. She is about to find a match for me, but I want to marry my handsome and brilliant cousin whom I have known since childhood. This elderly lady here is my nurse. I asked my cousin to plead with my mother, but she refused because his father isn't a government official. So I asked my nurse to tell him to toss a piece of tile at night as a signal for us to open the gate, so that I can elope with him. He did toss one piece and told me to come out at the third watch. But you're the one I saw after I went out the gate. I wonder why he wasn't anywhere in sight."

Much amused, Mr. Wang told her how he had written his message on the piece of tile and how a young man had looked for something in vain and left with a drawn-out sigh.

"That was him all right," said the young woman with a sigh.

Gleefully, Mr. Wang said, "And I came along! Shall I contribute my luck to a marriage bond that was made between us five hundred years ago?"

The young woman was unable to see a way out of her difficulties. Not unimpressed by Mr. Wang's refined looks, she submitted herself to him, and their newfound love ran deep.

When the results of the examinations were announced, Mr. Wang saw that his name had not made the list of successful candidates (MC: *How disappointing! This could be retribution for his misconduct.*), but deeply in love with Miss Cao, he was not bothered by his failure and continued to devote himself to the delights of their union day after day. The girl's bamboo suitcase was filled with gold and silver, and she paid his expenses when he ran out of money. (IC: *Pathetic.*)

Several months went by, and Mr. Wang forgot all about returning home. In the meantime, Mr. Wang Senior looked forward eagerly to his son's return but got no word from him. After an extended wait, he began to ask people who had returned from the capital, and they all said, "He's living so happily with a woman that he's definitely in no rush to return home!"

Mr. Wang Senior was livid with rage. He wrote a harshly worded letter and dispatched two servants to the capital to urge him on his way. He also wrote a letter to a good friend in the capital who had passed the exams the same year he had, asking him to force young Mr. Wang to leave the capital without delay and grant the young man permission to use horses from government courier stations. (MC: *What a killjoy!*)

Much against his will, young Mr. Wang took leave of the girl, saying, "I have no alternative but to go, but I'll come back as soon as I get a chance. I may be able to explain the situation to my father and return here to take you to my home. (MC: *Their farewell is too casual. Mr. Wang is not of a kindly disposition.*) Be patient and wait for me with your nurse in this place."

After they took tearful leave of each other, Mr. Wang returned home. His father had just been promoted to a position in Fujian and was on the point of departing for his post. So Mr. Wang Senior took his son along. As no opportunity to talk about Miss Cao presented itself, Mr. Wang Junior dejectedly followed his father to Fujian, but his thoughts were with Miss Cao day and night.

Let us now come back to Miss Cao and her nurse as they remained in the lodging, waiting for Mr. Wang's return. Before his departure, they had already used up about half of what they had brought with them, and now,

with no income to pay for their daily expenditures on room and board and other miscellaneous items, their means dwindled. With no word from Mr. Wang, Miss Cao began to panic. She asked her nurse to find out how her mother was, hoping to return home. As it turned out, her mother had wept from morning to night after her disappearance and had died of illness some time earlier. As for her cousin, when he heard the news the day after she left, he also did a disappearing act, afraid that he would be implicated. (MC: *If he had not fled, she would not have given up all hope.*) Miss Cao cried her heart out at her nurse's report and said to the old woman, "Now I have no one to turn to for help. It's not far from Bianjing to the Western Circuit of Zhejiang. While I still have something left to use as travel money, let's go to his home. This is the only thing to do." At her request, the nurse hired a boat, and they left Bianjing.

By the time they got to Guangling, their money had run out. At her advanced age, the nurse caught a cold when it turned chilly one day, and soon she succumbed to her illness and died. Left all alone now, Miss Cao spent all her time weeping.

Guangling is now Yangzhou, a prosperous and glamorous city. The ancients had these lines about it: "Go to Yangzhou in the misty month of flowers" and "With the bright moon over the twenty-four bridges, / Where is the sweet girl who played the *xiao* flute for you?" All eminent officials and sons of the rich wishing for beautiful concubines descended on Guangling to make their selections. So the streets of the city were filled with matchmakers bumping into one another. Noticing an attractive young woman weeping in a boat, the matchmakers gathered around her to find out what was going on. Miss Cao said, "I'm here from Bianjing to look for my husband, but my nurse died in this place and I've run out of money. That's why I'm crying."

One of the matchmakers, an elderly woman, said, "Why don't you go and talk with Su Da?"

"Who's Su Da?" asked Miss Cao.

"He's a local hero who makes it his business to help people."

In her desperation, Miss Cao did not know better. Without thinking, she said, "Please find him for me, please!"

Off went the old woman. Before long, she came back with a man. The man approached Miss Cao's boat, asked her detailed questions, and brought back a group of laborers who carried the nurse's body up the shore for burial.

Then he paid the boatman and said to Miss Cao, "Get your things ready and stay at my home for a few days before you decide what to do next." He also hired a sedan-chair for Miss Cao.

Impressed by the orderly way he got things done, Miss Cao thought he was a man of good character. Since she had no other person to rely on anyway, she felt safe leaving everything to him. Little did she know that he was a crime boss in the Yangzhou region who ran brothels and was the number one procurer. As soon as Miss Cao arrived at her destination in the sedan-chair, several prostitutes emerged from inside to greet her. Only then did she catch on. With nowhere to appeal for help, Miss Cao found herself trapped. Henceforth, she called herself "Su Yuan" and became a prostitute. (MC: *Retribution for her misconduct*.)

Mr. Wang stayed with his father at his father's duty station in Fujian for two years before returning to Zhejiang. When the triennial national-level exams came around again, he packed and went north. As he passed Yangzhou, which lay on his way, the chief of the local police department, who had passed the provincial exams the same year as Mr. Wang, invited him to dinner. At the dinner table, one of the licensed courtesans respectfully offering wine stole many a glance at Mr. Wang. Mr. Wang also looked closely at her, wondering, "Why does this woman look so much like Miss Cao of the capital?"

He asked someone who she was and was given a completely different name, but the more he looked at her, the more convinced he was that she was Miss Cao. When he stood up about halfway through dinner, Su Yuan approached him with a flask and plied him with wine. When she saw him up close, old memories saddened her but she dared not say anything out loud. As the tears fell into his cup like two strings of pearls, no doubt was left in Mr. Wang's mind. His eyes also moistening, he said, "I thought it was you, and indeed it is! But why are you here?"

Miss Cao told him about what had happened after his departure, including how she had left Bianjing in search of him and had exhausted her means and ended up a courtesan. As she broke down in tears of grief, Mr. Wang felt overwhelmed with self-reproach. Tearfully, he declined her offer of wine and rose from his seat, pleading illness. Then he invited her to his lodging, where they poured out their hearts to each other and spent the night together.

The next day, he discreetly asked the police chief of Yangzhou to charge Su Da with the crime of forcing a decent woman into prostitution. Su Yuan

was thus taken off the registry of courtesans and allowed to join Mr. Wang on his journey. Later, she bore Mr. Wang a son, and Mr. Wang rose to be secretary of a department. What began as a prank, with Mr. Wang tossing a piece of tile, turned into a long-standing marriage. Miss Cao's life was almost ruined, but, luckily, all turned out well.

My next story is about how a jocular word led to misidentification on both sides and a long-standing, perfect marriage, making it an even better story than the preceding one. There is a poem in testimony:

*A word that was said in jest worked wonders;
None expected it to bring him a pretty wife.
A fake son-in-law became a real one;
A loss turned out to be a gain after all.*

Our story takes place in the Chenghua reign period [1465–87] of this dynasty [Ming]. In Yuhang County of Hangzhou Prefecture, Zhejiang, there lived a Jiang Ting, courtesy name Zhenqing. Although the son of a Confucian scholar, he was quite carefree and fun-loving and never bothered with petty conventions. His favorite pastime was touring mountains and rivers. His excursions could last days and even months, and he hated the idea of staying at home, doing nothing. One day, he thought, “It’s always been said that Shanyin [in Shaoxing, Zhejiang] is a must-see with its beautiful mountains and valleys. Shaoxing Prefecture is not far from here. Why don’t I take a trip there?”

It just so happened that two traveling merchants who lived in his hometown were about to go south of the Qiantang River on business, so Jiang Ting joined them on their journey. They crossed Qiantang River, boarded an overnight boat at Xixing, and arrived at Shaoxing the next morning. (MC: *A romantic experience for the romantic*.) The two merchants went off to do their trading, and Jiang Ting toured the Orchid Pavilion, the Mausoleum of Yu,¹ Mount Ji, and Mirror Lake and thoroughly enjoyed himself. The two merchants having also done what they were there to do, the three of them started on their journey back.

When they were taking a leisurely stroll in Zhuji Village, evening was closing in, and all that met their eyes were green fields, with no farmhouse in sight. Soon it began to rain. As the raindrops began to fall thicker and faster, the three of them had to break into a run because none had brought an umbrella. Panting and flustered, they caught sight of a house looming

in the woods. Gazing into the distance, they said, "Good! Let's take shelter there!"

Taking two steps in one, they reached the house and saw that it had rain-proof double eaves. One leaf of the double gate was closed; the other was standing ajar. Jiang Zhenqing went up and was about to push the gate open when the two merchants said, "Mr. Jiang, you're being as rude as you always are! We can stay out of the rain right here. We don't know what kind of household this is. Why knock on their gate?"

Jiang Zhenqing, with his love of joking, said at the top of his voice, "What's the harm? This is my father-in-law's house!"

The two merchants said, "Don't talk nonsense! You'll only get yourself in trouble!"

After a while, as the rain intensified, both leaves of the gate swung wide open. An elderly man emerged. Behold:

On his head, a square-cut cap with diagonal angles;

In his hand, a cane with a fancy handle.

His square-cut cap with a bamboo lining

Covers his sparse and unkempt silver threads.

On the dragon whiskers on the cane handle

Rest five fingers as wrinkled as dried ginger.

In his billowing sleeves and long robe,

He walks with the grace of a crane.

In his high-soled and thick shoes,

He moves as slowly as a turtle.

He is the very image of Yellow Stone Sage;²

He has the look of the hoary Shangshan hermits.³

This elderly man, a Mr. Tao, was one of the wealthiest men in Zhuji Village. A straightforward and honorable man, he was also a generous host and a champion of justice, and he did things in good faith. As it was getting dark, he was about to go out and have a servant close the gate when he heard voices outside. Realizing that there must be people at his gate taking shelter from the rain, he stopped in his tracks and happened to hear Jiang Zhenqing's words of jest all too clearly. He turned back into the house and told his wife and the rest of the family about what he had heard. (MC: *The plot thickens*.) They exclaimed, "What an insolent man! Let's ignore him!" But now that the rain was pouring down, Mr. Tao felt sorry for the men trying to stay

out of it, so he wanted to go and invite them inside, and yet he resented the man who had made those insulting remarks. After a few moments of hesitation, he decided to go out. Seeing three men, he asked, "Who among you just said that this old man is his father-in-law?"

At this question, Jiang Zhenqing realized his faux pas and reddened to the roots of his ears. In one voice, the two merchants grumbled, "That was indeed outrageous!"

Rightly surmising that Jiang was the offending party, the old man addressed the two merchants: "If you two gentlemen are not disdainful of this humble old man, please come inside and sit for a while. As for that young man, since he's allegedly a junior member of my household, he's no guest, and therefore he's not to come inside. He can wait here." (MC: *The oldster is serious and stubborn. Little does he know that he is in fact doing the young man a favor!*)

Before the two merchants could say the obligatory words of demurral, the old man seized them by their sleeves and dragged them into the house. As soon as they stepped over the threshold, he closed the gate with a bang.

The two merchants had no choice but to follow the old man into the main hall, where they greeted their host, sat down, introduced themselves, and told the old man that they were in the neighborhood when they happened to be caught in the rain. The old man, still bristling, said, "That friend of yours who's traveling with you—he's so disrespectful! He can't be someone who knows how to keep himself out of harm's way. You'd do well not to associate with him anymore."

Offering an apology on Jiang's behalf, the two merchants said, "Mr. Jiang is indeed a young man lacking in discretion. But he didn't mean what he said on the spur of the moment. Please forgive him for that offensive remark."

The old man's anger did not subside. Soon, a feast was set out, but no mention was made of the man outside the gate. The old man's hospitality exceeded the two merchants' expectations. With their host in such high dudgeon, it would be unseemly for them to ask him to invite Jiang inside for dinner. They saw nothing for it but to enjoy their meal and let the old man have his way.

In the meantime, outside the gate, Jiang Zhenqing was feeling low and regretted having blurted out an indiscreet remark. By his forlorn self, he fidgeted under the eaves in the dark shadows, feeling woebegone. He wanted to be on his way so as to salvage his pride, but, partly because of the rain and

the darkness and partly because he was alone, after all, he dared not venture out. (MC: *An awkward moment.*) So he swallowed the humiliation and waited patiently.

Gradually, the rain let up, and a ray of moonlight shone through the fleecy clouds. He strained his ears for sounds inside but heard nothing. He said to himself, "They must have all gone to bed. Why should I continue to wait like an idiot? I'd better start on my way while there's some moonlight to light the way." Then he thought, "That old man is understandably angry with me, but the two of them can't just enjoy themselves and leave me in the lurch. They may have worked out something for me. Let me wait some more."

While he was thus weighing his choices, he heard someone say in a subdued voice from within, "Don't go yet."

He thought, "I just knew they wouldn't forget me!" Aloud he said, "All right! I won't go!"

After a while, he heard the same voice again, saying softly, "I have some things for you. Pick them up." (MC: *Where bitterness ends, sweetness begins.*)

Jiang Zhenqing thought, "Those two double-dealers! They enjoyed his hospitality, ate his food, and then stole his things!" But aloud he said, "All right!"

He stood still, waiting for the next thing to happen. When two objects were tossed over the wall and landed on the ground, he rushed forward and saw that they were two bedrolls. He lifted them and found them to be quite heavy. Then he pinched them with his fingers and found them to be lumpy, as if they were filled with ingots of gold and silver or other metalware. Afraid that someone would come out in pursuit of the valuables, he quickly slung them over his shoulders and took to his heels. After taking about a hundred steps, he looked back and found himself at a safe distance from the gate, so he stopped to see what would happen. As he watched from afar, two human figures jumped over the wall. Jiang Zhenqing said to himself, "Ah, here they come! In case someone gives chase, let me go ahead first. I don't need to wait for them." So thinking, he resumed his march. Those two followed behind in unhurried steps.

After getting quite a head start on them, Jiang thought, "When they catch up with me, they'll surely demand an equal division of the contents of the bedrolls. While they're still way behind me, let me open the bedrolls to see what's inside. If it's ill-gotten stuff, I'll be justified in pocketing some of

it for myself first.” (MC: *There he goes again, coveting what is not rightfully his.*) So he stopped and opened the bedrolls. He scooped up the ingots of gold and other items of the highest value, wrapped them up in a separate parcel, stuffed cash and lengths of fabric back into the bedrolls, and put the bedrolls over his shoulders again. As he went ahead, he saw that the two people were still a safe distance behind. What happened was that those two stopped when he did and started walking again when he did. And the two black shadows tailed him at a distance without ever attempting to draw near him. The trio continued on their way in the same manner throughout the night, with about an arrow’s-shot distance between them.

It was only when the sky was turning light that the two began to quicken their pace. When they were about to catch up with him, Jiang Zhenqing said, “Good! It’s only right that we should be traveling together!” But when they drew level with him and he shot them a glance, he was stunned to see that they were not the two merchants, but two women. (MC: *Wonderful!*) One was quite a beauty, wearing a Linqing bandanna and a blue silk blouse; the other looked like a maidservant, with a loose hair-bun and wearing a blue cotton jacket. On getting a close look at Jiang Zhenqing, they were also aghast. As they hastily dodged him, Jiang Zhenqing took a step forward and blocked the way of the beautiful one, saying, “Where do you think you’re going? If you join me, I’ll be nice to you. If not, I’ll take you back to your home and expose you!” The young woman lowered her head, speechless, and resignedly complied.

When they reached an inn, they went in, and Mr. Jiang picked a secluded corner suite. He lied to the owner of the inn, saying, “My wife and I are on an incense-offering pilgrimage. We’d like to have breakfast.”

The owner of the inn, seeing a couple followed by a maidservant, readily believed him and went off to prepare breakfast for them.

In a low voice, Jiang Zhenqing asked the young woman about her background. She replied, “I’m Tao Youfang, daughter of your friends’ host. My mother’s maiden name is Wang. I was promised to the Chu family of the same county when I was small. But as it turned out, my fiancé went blind. I didn’t want to marry a blind man. I like my cousin, handsome, young Mr. Wang. I made a pledge to him quite some time ago, and we arranged to meet last night and elope. I heard nothing from him during the day yesterday, but toward evening, my father came in and cried, ‘A man at the front door claimed to be my son-in-law. (MC: *Heaven is making this match.*) How preposterous!

How abominable!’ I said to myself, this must be my man. So I hurriedly collected the valuables around the house, picked a maid as my companion, and climbed over the wall. When I saw you in front, carrying the bedrolls on your back, I thought, ‘Of course this is him!’ I was afraid of being seen, which was why I didn’t dare go near you. I had no idea I’ve been following the wrong man all this time. But now that I’ve lost him and I can’t go home anymore, I have no other choice but to put myself at your disposal.”

Jiang Zhenqing said in delight, “This is Heaven’s will! What I said has turned out to be true! Luckily I’m not married. Now, don’t panic. Just follow me to my home.”

Mr. Jiang had breakfast with her, and after the maid had also eaten, he paid the bill, hired a boat, and set out without waiting for the two merchants. They changed boats along the way and arrived at Jiang’s home in Yuhang. To his family members’ queries, he replied that he had married on the road through proper channels. After joining the Jiang household, the young woman proved herself to be a good and capable wife. She got along well with everyone high and low and was tenderly attached to Jiang Zhenqing.

After one year went by, she gave birth to a son, but every mention of her parents sent tears down her cheeks. One day, she said to Jiang Zhenqing, “I broke the rules out of resentment over my engagement to that blind man. Now that I’m yours, I have no other regret than having left my aging parents without support. (MC: *The fact that she remains devoted to her parents means that she will be reunited with them.*) After my departure, they must have been worried sick about me. I haven’t been able to ask after them for more than a year now, but I’ve never forgotten them, even for one brief moment. If I go on agonizing over them like this, I’m afraid my health will suffer. The way I see it, because they love me dearly, they’ll be delighted to see me even if they know what I did. They won’t be angry with me. Can you think of a way to deliver a message to them?”

Jiang Zhenjiang thought for a while before replying, “There’s a Mr. Ruan Taishi in the neighborhood. He’s a teacher and a good friend of mine, and he often takes trips to Zhuji. I’ll talk with him.”

Right away, he went to see Ruan Taishi. After he gave Mr. Ruan a full account of the situation, the latter said, “Mr. Tao is known throughout Zhuji as a very honorable man. I’ve met him several times. I’ll find an opportunity to break the news to him gently. Leave it to me. I won’t fail you.” Jiang Zhenqing thanked him and returned home to tell his wife about it.

Let us turn our attention to the venerable Mr. Tao. That night, he provided accommodations for the two merchants and served them breakfast the next morning. When the two men took leave of him with profuse thanks, he escorted them to the gate, saying affably, "I wonder where that unruly young man spent the night. It's only right that he should go through some tribulations and learn not to be so flippant in the future." (MC: *No tribulations for him!*)

The two merchants said, 'He must have run out of patience waiting for us. When we catch up with him, we'll give him a good talking-to. You can dismiss him from your thoughts.'

Mr. Tao said, "I lost my temper yesterday and treated him badly enough. How could I still keep him in my thoughts?" With that, they took leave of one another.

As soon as Mr. Tao went into the house, a maidservant walked up to him and said, shaken and panting for breath, "Master! Trouble! The young mistress has disappeared!"

"What!" the old man cried out in horror.

When he went stumbling and lurching into his bedchamber, he saw that his wife, Wang-shi, had collapsed onto the floor, calling for her daughter with all kinds of terms of endearment and wailing at the top of her voice. To Mr. Tao's questions as to the details of what had happened, she replied, "Last night, she went to bed in her room as usual. This morning, because I was taking care of breakfast preparations for the houseguests, I didn't see her get out of bed. It was after the guests had left and I called her for breakfast that her trunks and chests were seen to be wide open. And even her maid Shicui is also missing."

Aghast, Mr. Tao said, "But why?"

A female domestic said, "Could those two houseguests have been bandits and kidnapped her in the night?"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Tao. "They were passing through, and after spending the night here, they said good-bye properly. How could they have been kidnappers? About the third one: I was so angry with him that I didn't even let him in. He's even less of a suspect. (MC: *The culprit is none other than the one who was denied admission.*) My guess is that she must have arranged a tryst with someone, so she took advantage of the presence of guests and fled while everyone was busy. Have you ever noticed anything unusual about her?"

One of the female domestics said, "Ten to one Master has the right idea. The young mistress often weeps over her engagement to the blind man. But the young master of the Wang family gets along well with her and often asks Shicui to act as messenger. The young mistress must have eloped with him."

This conjecture made sense to Mr. Tao. He sent a servant on a secret mission to the Wang residence to find out how things stood, and the servant found Mr. Wang Junior at home and everything as it should be.

Not knowing what to do, Mr. Tao said, "A family scandal must not become known to the public. Be sure not to let on about any of this to outsiders. As for the Chu family's blind son, let's call off the engagement. If that can't be done, let's find another girl for him, if worst comes to worst. But without our dear girl around the house, it's so cheerless!" At this point, he and his wife broke down in uncontrollable sobs.

Later, the Chu family's blind son died. Mr. and Mrs. Tao again dissolved into tears of grief. They said, "If he had died one year earlier, our daughter wouldn't have done what she did."

One day, more than a year later, their doorkeeper delivered an invitation card on which was written "Ruan Taishi of Yuhang." Mr. Tao went to the gate and greeted him, adding, "What wind brought you here?"

Ruan Taishi replied, "I've been out of touch with my friends in Zhuji for too long. Now that I've got some free time, I decided to cross the river and pay you a visit."

Mr. Tao set out a feast for the visitor. In the course of drinking, they exchanged news of the region, some credible, some less so. Ruan Taishi said, "Something newsworthy happened about a year ago in my own village, and it's a true story."

"What happened?" asked Mr. Tao.

"A young friend of mine went out on a pleasure trip. On his way back, he got himself a wife, thanks to some words said in jest. And they're still man and wife to this day. It's said that the woman is from this place. Do you happen to know her?"

"What's her surname?"

Ruan Taishi replied, "They say she's also a Tao."

Mr. Tao gave a start. "Could she be my daughter?"

"She's called Youfang. She's eighteen, and she has a maid called Shicui."

His eyes popping wide, Mr. Tao said, "She is my daughter! Why is she there?"

Ruan asked, "Do you still remember that a young man knocked at the gate in the rain and called himself your son-in-law and that you shut him out of the house?"

"Yes, all that did happen. But we never knew that man, and he was shut out with no one serving as a messenger. How did my daughter manage to elope with him?"

Ruan Taishi relayed Mr. Jiang's tale to him and added, "One let his tongue run away with him, one flew into a rage, and one made a false identification—all contributed to the outcome. What an unusual event this is! They have a baby son now. Do you want to see them?"

"Yes, of course!" exclaimed Mr. Tao.

Mrs. Tao, hiding behind the screen, had heard everything, loud and clear. Unable to contain herself any longer, she jumped out and, wailing with abandon and not caring whether she knew the visitor well enough to warrant such behavior, prostrated herself at Ruan Taishi's feet. "She's our only child," said she. "Since her disappearance, we almost died several times from weeping. To this day, we still find life too hard to bear without her. If you, sir, can really bring about a reunion between us and our girl, we'll surely reward you well!"

Ruan Taishi said, "You would of course want to see your daughter, but I'm afraid you may have a grudge against your son-in-law. If so, he won't dare come and see you."

"We'll be only too happy if a reunion is possible," said Mr. Tao. "We won't bear him a grudge."

"Your son-in-law is also from an old family of distinguished lineage. Your beloved daughter hasn't been shortchanged. Since you won't hold him to blame, I'd like to invite you, sir, to your son-in-law's home to meet them." Joyfully, Mr. Tao changed his clothes and went with Ruan Taishi to Yuhang.

When they reached the Jiang residence, Ruan Taishi went in first and reported to Mr. Jiang about his mission. Then he came out with Jiang to greet Mr. Tao. The daughter, having missed her father for so long, was also led into the main hall. Ruan Taishi discreetly removed himself from this scene of reunion. Father and daughter fell on each other's shoulders and broke down in a flood of tears.

Mr. Tao wanted Mr. Jiang and his daughter to go to the Tao residence, and so, since the daughter was also eager to see her mother, they set out together

for Zhuji Village. On seeing each other, mother and daughter wrapped their arms around each other and said between violent sobs, "I thought I'd never get to see you again the rest of my life. I never expected this to happen!" There was not a dry eye among the women servants around them.

After they had a good cry, Mr. Jiang bowed in proper greeting to his parents-in-law and, with a kowtow, asked for forgiveness, saying, "Your humble son-in-law was joking with my companions outside the gate, little knowing that my father-in-law was taking my words seriously and was seized with anger. And then, who could have predicted that your beloved daughter would mistake me for another man and thus fulfill my wish? Looking back on these happenings, I assure you that I didn't have the foggiest idea we'd get to where we are today. Everything happened by chance. Please forgive me, my father-in-law."

Bursting into hearty laughter, Mr. Tao said, "It was Heaven that put those words in your mouth, my good son-in-law, to bring about such a happy outcome. Since this is all the workings of destiny, what's there to forgive?"

In the midst of their conversation, Ruan Taishi came back to the front gate with gifts and shouted words of congratulations. Offering lengths of colored silk and ingots of silver, Mr. Tao asked Ruan Taishi to be the matchmaker. A grand feast was laid out for members of the clan, and a formal wedding ceremony was held for Jiang Zhenqing and his wife before they were allowed to return, laden with a lavish dowry, to the Jiang residence. The couple lived happily together to a ripe old age. (MC: *She sets an example: Give birth first and marry later!*)

If Mr. Jiang had not uttered those jocular words, if he had not been shut out of the house, he would have partaken of the dinner with the two merchants. How would he have managed to get this wife for himself? He would have ended up with another woman. It is thus evident that the power of predestination and Heaven's will were behind it all.

This story is taken from Zhu Zhishan's *Anecdotes of a Woodcutter on the Western Mountains*.⁴ It is an interesting story as it is, but someone who didn't know better made it into a story called "Mandarin Duck Bedrolls," which was in fact a combination of the Yuan dynasty play "Mandarin Duck Bedrolls Delivered to the Wrong Man at Yuqing Nunnery," the story about Xu Da, a comb maker of Jiading, kidnapping a woman and making her his wife, and a couple of other stories. It became such a hodgepodge that it makes little sense. This is why I have followed the original plot so as to spread the

story anew and make it an entertaining read with a leaner structure. There is a poem in testimony:

*One word got him a wife in a strange bond;
Stories like this should be spread far and wide.
Out of jumbled and error-filled versions
Comes this one, to put the story right.*



Mr. Zhao Spoils His Son and Dies as a Result

Mr. Zhao Spoils His Son and Dies as a Result

Magistrate Zhang Sentences an Unfilial Son to Death in an Ironclad Case

As the poem says,

*The bond between father and son is eternal;
Unfilial acts are never defensible.
Since adult crows regularly feed their mothers,
They should be taught to curse unfilial humans.*

Our story makes the point that filial piety has a vital place in the fabric of human life. Average parents go through goodness only knows how many mental and physical tribulations from the earliest three years of nursing to the child's coming of age. They worry day and night that he may fall prey to all manner of illnesses. At all times, they expect him to be intelligent and make something of himself. There are no lengths to which they will not go in raising him with love and care. As *The Book of Songs* puts it,

*My suffering parents gave their all in raising me;
Their kindness, vast as the sky, is more than I can repay.¹*

As far as repayment is concerned, even the paragons of filial devotion—including the one who prostrated himself on ice in order to use his body heat

to thaw the ice and find fish with which to feed his starving mother, the one who wept in a bamboo grove because no bamboo shoots were to be had for his mother until a bamboo shoot grew, and the one who fanned his parents' pillows in summer and warmed their bed in winter before they went to sleep—can hardly pay off one ten-thousandth of their indebtedness to their parents. What is worse, many live in the lap of luxury but leave their parents hungry and cold, treating them as strangers or, worse, as enemies. Even dogs and pigs are not capable of such violations of proper family relationships and heavenly principles.

Let me now tell a story about an unfilial son, a story that has no match in all of history. In the Zhengde reign period [1506–21], there lived in Songjiang [in present-day Shanghai] a rich man, Mr. Yan, and his wife. Still childless when they were in their thirties, they prayed to gods and the Buddha for a son. At all times of the day and night, wherever they were, the idea of having a son took full possession of their minds. One night, as she was drifting into sleep, Mrs. Yan heard a voice saying from midair, “The prayed-for son will find an ear missing. You who gain an heir will lose a few teeth.”

Mrs. Yan heard the words loud and clear. The next day, she repeated them to her husband, but they found the meaning of the two lines quite baffling.

Soon thereafter, Mrs. Yan began to experience changes in her appearance. Her breasts swelling and her belly protruding, she found that she was pregnant. After all the trials and tribulations of a full-term pregnancy, she gave birth to a baby boy with well-formed brows and bright eyes. Husband and wife were overwhelmed with joy. Their only wish, to the exclusion of everything else, was that he grow up well and healthy.

Time was on the wing. Three years flashed by. The boy turned out to be quick and clever. His parents satisfied his every whim and never said no to him. They bent over backward to find him anything he asked for. Even if he had wanted to have things that were out of this world such as the stars or reflections of the moon in the river, they would gladly have climbed to the sky to pick the stars or dived into the water to scoop up the moon. (MC: *The way doting parents usually are.*) Examples of their indulgence of the boy were too numerous to cite.

As the saying goes, “Apply the rod and you have a filial son; spare the rod and you get a rebel.” Thus spoiled by his parents, Yan Junior grew up to be a man with the high and mighty airs of a son of heaven. (MC: *This is only to be expected.*) With the riches of his parents, he cultivated friendships with some

vicious, sly, and depraved yamen runners. (IC: *Falling in with the wrong crowd.*) Therefore, most people dared not get on the bad side of him but humored him at every turn. He had a passion for gambling and fell in with a group of expert gamblers who, with designs on his deep pockets, showered him with honeyed words and made much of him in order to wheedle money out of him. Believing that those people genuinely liked him and truly showed him every consideration, he gambled with abandon, losing gold and silver as if they were water without ever bothering his head with the figures. His father tried desperately to talk him out of gambling, but, as doting as ever, he limited his admonishment to only a few words and gave up the attempt when his son turned a deaf ear. However, the family wealth was not boundless, and the son's excesses over the span of three years gradually drained it.

Having built his fortune by scrimping and saving, Mr. Yan Senior was distressed to see his pile of money dwindle. One day, when he was out on business, he passed a gambling house where a crowd was gathered at the door, making a clamor. Mr. Yan Senior walked up to them and, craning his neck, saw that the crowd was demanding payment of a gambling debt from his son. Ignoring the young man's protests, they pulled and tugged at him. Mr. Yan Senior began to fear that they might hurt him. His heart aching, he parted the crowd and, shielding his son with his own body, announced, "I'll pay you whatever he owes you. Please go away now and come to my humble house tomorrow to claim your money." So saying, he angrily hauled his son home.

On reaching home, he closed the gate, grabbed the young man by the hair, hardened his heart, and made as if to hit his son, but the young man struggled free. Mr. Yan Senior ran after him and took firm hold of him, but the young man turned around and landed a fist on his father's face. As stars danced before his eyes, the old man fell down unconscious. (MC: *Doting parents, be warned!*) The son panicked and felt obliged to help him up. As it turned out, two of the old man's front teeth had been knocked out, and blood was streaming down to his chest.

Realizing that he was in trouble, the son showed a clean pair of heels and ran out of the house. On waking up a good while later, Mr. Yan Senior was consumed with rage. He thought, "I've spent my life pinching and saving, but this vile son of mine squandered my fortune and almost killed me. He's worse than a beast! Why would I want to keep him!" He went straight to the prefectural yamen, where he wrote an accusation paper and submitted it to the prefect who happened to be holding a court session. With the two front

teeth as evidence, Mr. Yan Senior charged his son with filial impiety. The prefect accepted the case before adjourning the court session, and the old man returned home.

Now, Mr. Yan Junior's best friend, a certain Qiu San, worked in the prefectural yamen as a lictor. He was a most cunning and treacherous man. (MC: *Serviceable at this time!*) Noticing that the accusation paper had been accepted, he rushed out of the yamen, found Mr. Yan Junior, and told him about this development. In alarm, Yan asked Qiu San for a plan for getting him out of trouble, but Qiu San deliberately sounded hesitant, whereupon Yan said, "I have on me three taels of silver for a gambling game. Take it for now and use it to save my life."

Again, Qiu San calculatedly fell silent and said a good while later, "It's too late now. Let's meet tomorrow morning in front of the yamen. I'll have something to say to you." Mr. Yan Junior agreed, and they parted ways.

The next morning, when they met in front of the yamen, Yan asked, "What wonderful plan do you have for saving me?"

Qiu San motioned him to a quiet spot, saying, "Come! Come! Let me have a word with you."

Yan turned his head so that his ear was aligned with Qiu's mouth. As he waited for Qiu to speak, he heard an appalling sound. With a loud cry, he covered his ear and said bitterly to Qiu San, "I begged you to save me. Why did you have to bite off my ear? (MC: *That's the wonderful plan!*) I'm not going to let you off easy!"

With an icy smile, Qiu said, "What makes you think your ear is so precious and your old man's teeth so worthless? (MC: *Very funny.*) Take it easy and listen to what I'm here to say. You just stick to the story I'm going to give you." He went on with his instructions and said in conclusion, "That will surely get you off the hook."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Yan. "In exchange for a little pain, I get to stay out of harm's way."

When the prefectural court session began, Mr. Yan Junior was brought into the presence of the prefect, who said, "What an unfilial son you are! Because of your addiction to gambling, you resented your father's admonishment and knocked out his front teeth. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Tearfully, Yan said, "With all due respect, Your Honor, how could this humble man dare talk and act in improper ways? The fact is, the other day I happened to witness a fight at the gambling house. I stopped to watch. It so

happened that my father was also there. He suspected me of having taken part in the wager and dragged me home for a good thrashing. Unable to take it anymore, I raised my head. I shouldn't have done that, but as I did, my father bit me savagely and chewed off my ear. At his age, his teeth are wobbly, and with that angry bite, two teeth fell out. (MC: *Nice!*) It wasn't my doing. Please use your wise judgment, Your Honor."

The prefect told him to approach the bench for an examination. Sure enough, one of the young man's ears was mutilated, and what remained of that ear bore fresh tooth marks and dried blood. Believing the young man's story, the prefect said with a slight smile, "It's true. There's no need for further questions. But watching a gambling fight does arouse suspicions of improper behavior. In addition, your father did lose two teeth after all. You're to be given ten strokes of the rod and thrown out of the court. No further action need be taken."

Delighted that he was released unhurt, the son pleaded with his parents after returning home, "I'm willing to mend my ways and take care of you. Since the government has already punished me, you can do whatever you want to me, Father!" (MC: *There is still some hope for him.*)

Mr. Yan Senior had gone to the prefectural yamen the day before in a moment of anger, but now that one day had elapsed, and especially after his son had been beaten at court and was now so conciliatory, his heart softened. After all, he and his wife loved their son to excess. Recalling what had happened in the past, he thought, "When he was first conceived, the mother heard this in her dream: 'The prayed-for son will find an ear missing. You who gain an heir will lose a few teeth.' And now I've lost two teeth, and he one ear. The prophecy has been borne out. This is all predestined. No more need be said."

Henceforth, the son, true to his word, turned over a new leaf and served his parents with devotion. Later, he was blessed with a natural and peaceful death. This is a case of Heaven forgiving those who mend their ways.

My next story is about an unrepentant wayward son who received divine justice later in life.

In a certain county of a certain prefecture in a certain dynasty, there lived a man with the surname Zhao. Being his parents' sixth child, he was called by all and sundry Zhao the Sixth. He had a spotless reputation and was laden with riches. He and his wife had only one child, a son, whom she had just weaned. The boy was the very breath of their lives and the darling of their hearts. Before his birth, they had already spent more money than they

could count, offering incense and making pledges at one temple after another. Then, all too unexpectedly, the boy contracted smallpox at age three. Unable to sleep night after night, husband and wife went to every famous physician they could find and sought prescriptions everywhere, sparing no expense. Their only wish was that the child recover, for which they would even gladly offer their own lives. In fear and trepidation, they waited for his recovery, and when it did happen, they were more ecstatic than if they had come upon a precious luminous pearl in the darkness of the night.

They nursed the boy back to health, feeding him goodness knows how many doses of medicinal soup, wearing themselves out ministering to his needs and running up prodigious expenses. Solicitously, they took care of him, and, when he reached six or seven years of age, they engaged an experienced and renowned teacher for him. On a chosen day, they led their son to the teacher for a formal introduction. The boy was then given a school name: Zhao Cong. His education began with *Child Prodigy Poems* and *Poetry from a Thousand Poets* and later progressed to *The Great Learning*.² Fearful that their son would have to work too hard and that his health might suffer under the teacher's discipline, Mr. and Mrs. Yan called off the daily lessons before the teacher had gone through many lines. Well aware of his parents' worries, Zhao Cong often feigned illness and shunned the classroom altogether. His parents dared not stop him. (MC: *This is an intractable ailment afflicting legions of benighted parents.*)

Judging from the look of things, the teacher thought, without saying anything out loud, "This is the kind of pernicious love that beasts have for their young. Regrets for such an upbringing will be too late." But he remained a dispassionate observer and let his employers have their way.

After a few months, a matchmaker came with an offer from a family whose head, a Prefect Yin, had passed away. Embracing a marriage alliance with a family of higher status, Zhao the Sixth asked for the girl's natal chart from the matchmaker, picked an auspicious date, and sent over lavish engagement gifts. Thereafter, every festive occasion called for an exchange of gifts between the two families, involving the Zhaos in great expense. (MC: *This intractable ailment also afflicts rich people.*)

Time sped by. The much-pampered Zhao Cong did not finish the required classics until he was fourteen. Still, the father rejoiced, believing his son was head and shoulders above others. At age fifteen or sixteen, Zhao Cong was supposed to start writing essays. By this time, Zhao the Sixth's family fortune had shrunk by more than half. Wishing for his son's success in life, he

gladly went into debt and engaged a learned but expensive teacher for the boy. Tuition amounted to fifty taels of silver per year, and gifts on festive occasions and the provision of food and other amenities were taken for granted. Zhao Cong, with his love of a life of ease, stayed away from his studies nine days out of ten. The teacher was only too happy to be relieved from his duties while enjoying a handsome salary. In consequence, there was no lack of unaccomplished but shameless scholars who offered the Zhao family their services, although there were also proud and honest scholars who turned the Zhaos down. (MC: *The latter are hard to come by.*) One can thus easily tell the difference between the high-minded and the despicable.

Let me not encumber our story with idle comments but come to the preliminary-level civil service examination in the following year. Zhao the Sixth told his son, as unprepared as he was, to go and sit for the exam. At the same time, he pulled some strings and begged for favors, throwing more money down the drain. After the exam was over, he planned to hold the wedding ceremony for his son. But being a little strapped for cash at this time, he had to ask a middleman to draw up a loan contract for four hundred taels of silver. The middleman, Wang San, provided such services to Zhao on a regular basis and had brokered all of the several loan contracts that Zhao had entered into. This time, he obtained four hundred taels of silver from a Squire Liu and delivered the money to Zhao, who then bought gifts for the bride, presented them to the Yin family on a chosen day, and set a date for the wedding ceremony. Two months later, when the wedding day was drawing nearer, Zhao the Sixth found himself short of money for the procession to the Yin residence that would bring the bride to her new home. He saw no option but to scrape some money together on his own. He took a few articles of clothing and jewelry to the pawnshop and got forty taels of silver in exchange, but that amount proved insufficient. So he was obliged to go to Wang San again for another voucher, with which he borrowed sixty taels of silver from Squire Chu. Only then was the procession possible. After Mr. Yin Junior escorted his sister the bride to the Zhao residence, Zhao the Sixth was all humility and deference toward her. The feast lasted for five to seven days before the party broke up.

The young couple fell deeply in love and enjoyed conjugal bliss in a separate apartment next to Zhao Senior's. Miss Yin had many positive attributes, but there was one drawback: She was puffed up with self-importance and considered her parents-in-law beneath her notice. She was also very miserly, looking on one penny as if it were worth a thousand strings of coins, and she

incited her husband to vicious and ruthless behavior. Had she been a kinder person and exhorted him to virtue, the grim calamity that befell them later would not have happened.

*Good wives always bring more weal than woe to their men;
Filial sons give peace of mind to their fathers.*

But these events still lie ahead of us. To get on with our story: Yin-shi had brought with her a lavish dowry worth three thousand taels of silver, but she maintained tight control over the money. Even though Zhao the Sixth went out of his way to please his daughter-in-law, mortally afraid of getting on the wrong side of her, Zhao Cong and his wife still found him a nuisance in more ways than one. (MC: *He is suffering consequences of his own making.*)

Time sped past. Another three years went by. Old Mrs. Zhao's ailment of excessive phlegm and internal heat confined her to bed, so she turned the management of the household over to her daughter-in-law. Yin-shi accepted the responsibilities. In the beginning, she did a good job serving her parents-in-law, but gradually, several months later, she stopped bringing them food or tea. Such negligence was more than they could bear. Sometimes, they forced themselves to speak up and plead for food and tea. On these occasions, Yin-shi would say, "What immense family wealth have you entrusted to me that gives you the right to keep demanding this and that? Why don't you take it all back and run the household yourselves? I don't want this thankless job, being pestered like this all day long!"

Zhao the Sixth swallowed the humiliation. What could he say in his defense when there was indeed little family fortune left to transfer to her? With a sigh, he told his wife about this on her sickbed. She had heard the commotion and witnessed her daughter-in-law's coldness, but the family circumstances were not at all what they had been three years earlier. With debtors gathered at their door demanding payment, she and her husband had given most of their remaining articles of clothing and jewelry to pay for the interest on the loans. The few *mu* of remaining land also went for interest payments. Mrs. Zhao had been no stranger to the comforts of life, but now, in her reduced circumstances, she found herself subject to the icy hostility of her own daughter-in-law, not to mention outsiders. Is it any surprise that these thoughts depressed her? In her exasperation, her head swam, her vision turned blurry, and she began to refuse to eat or drink. Her son and daughter-in-law did not even bother to go to her bedside to see how she was

or to offer her nourishing soup. With nothing but rice with salted and minced vegetables for all three meals of the day, how she suffered! About half a month later, she died in a violent fit of phlegmatic coughing.

Her son and daughter-in-law let out a few tearless wails and went away. Zhao the Sixth stomped his feet and thumped his chest as he wept. After he had his cry, he went to his son's apartment and said to him, "Now that your mother has passed away, I have no money for a funeral. If you cherish your love for her, buy a good coffin, lay her body in it, and then choose a piece of land for burial in a few days. That will go to show your filial devotion."

Zhao Cong said, "How do you expect me to have enough money for a coffin? And I'm not talking about high-quality timber with its high price. Even coffins made of thin, inferior splints of wood cost two or three taels of silver each. How can I afford it? Carpenter Li in the next village has a cheap coffin. Why don't you go get it on credit for now? We'll think of a way to pay for it tomorrow."

His eyes brimming with tears, Zhao the Sixth dared not utter another word. In resignation, he went to see Carpenter Li.

Zhao Cong returned to his own apartment and said to Yin-shi, "The old man has no sense! He wants a nice coffin for Mother. I told him that even poor-quality coffins cost two or three taels of silver each, not to speak of nice ones. I told him to get a cheap one on credit from Carpenter Li and pay him tomorrow."

Without missing a beat, Yin-shi asked, "And who's going to pay Mr. Li, pray?"

"We are. Let's spare ourselves a headache and pay something for the coffin, for better or for worse."

Yin-shi flew into a rage. "Where did you get the money to buy a coffin for someone else? To be able to afford one for yourself would have been good enough! You can pay for it if you like, but I have no money. Your parents never did anything for me. Don't you have better things to do than pester me with this? If we give in to him once, there will be a further ten times. What do you have to fear if we say no to him ten times out of ten?"

Zhao Cong was reduced to silence. When he found his tongue again, he said, "You're right, wife. I'm not going to pay for it."

Soon, two men hired by Zhao the Sixth carried a coffin home and laid Mrs. Zhao's body in it. This was followed by the funeral and the libation of one cup of diluted wine.

The coffin remained in the house, but the son and the daughter-in-law neither kept vigil by its side nor prepared any food for the shrine of the

departed. Every day, they offered nothing but the usual bowlfuls of salted and minced vegetables. At night, Zhao the Sixth kept vigil at the coffin, alone and forlorn. The distraught Zhao the Sixth burst into tears whenever his thoughts turned to the deplorable way things stood.

Fourteen days after Mrs. Zhao's death, Carpenter Li came to demand payment for the coffin. Zhao the Sixth said, "Go ask my son for it."

And so Carpenter Li went to see Zhao Cong and said to him, "Could you please pay for the coffin that your family bought from me on credit?"

Throwing him a withering look, Zhao Cong said with a snort of disgust, "Are you seeing a phantom? You're not blind, are you? Who went to your house the other day to get the coffin on credit? You should talk to him instead of me!"

"It was your father who bought the coffin on credit, and he told me just a moment ago to talk to you."

"Don't listen to his nonsense! Shame on him! He does have the money for the coffin. How can he expect others to foot the bill? (MC: *Like a bickering wedded couple.*) Off you go now, before I get angry!" With his hands clasped behind his back, he returned to the interior part of the house.

On coming back to Mr. Zhao Senior, Carpenter Li repeated Zhao Cong's words to him. The old man broke down in sobs. (MC: *Too late.*) Li offered him these words of comfort: "Mr. Zhao, don't cry. If you don't have silver, you can pay me in kind. Anything will do."

And so, Zhao the Sixth went into his room, rummaged through his trunks and cases, and found three articles of winter clothing and a piece of silver jewelry, which he then offered to Craftsman Li.

Soon, the forty-nine days of mourning were up. Zhao the Sixth did indeed lack sense. The unpleasantness surrounding the purchase of the coffin should have taught him not to ask favors of his son under any circumstances. But now that the mourning period was over, that episode passed completely from his memory, and he said to his son, "I'd like to find a piece of burial land for your mother. The decision rests with you."

Zhao Cong retorted, "Why should it be up to me? (MC: *The son is of course infuriating, but the father is also a fool. Exactly the kind of father who deserves such a son.*) I'm no feng shui master. What do I know about burial places? Even if I go around looking for a piece of land, would anybody give one to me free of charge? I propose cremation to the east of the village on a chosen day. That would be the best thing to do."

Speech was beyond Zhao the Sixth. As tears fell from his eyes, his son stopped talking and took himself off. The old man thought, "She spent the better half of her life as the wife of a rich man. Little did she know that she would end up being denied even a burial place. Oh well, why plead with such a vile son! Let me go through the trunks again and see if there's anything left to pawn that can pay for a piece of land and a burial ceremony."

Again, he opened the trunks and went through the contents until he had picked two suits of clothes and a gold hairpin. Out of the six taels of silver he got from the pawnshop, he bought one-fifth of a *mu* of land with four taels and used the remaining two taels to engage four monks for a prayer service and a few carriers to carry the coffin to the burial ground. After everything was done, Zhao the Sixth returned home, quite pleased, and began to relax and take things as they came.

Before long, winter rolled around. Feeling cold, Zhao the Sixth bought one *jin* of silk floss on credit. With no money for repayment, he could not do otherwise than take out a piece of summer clothing and say to his son, "I've got a piece of clothing here. If you want it, you can buy it from me. If not, I'll pawn it with you for a couple of maces of silver."

Zhao Cong said, "Buying summer clothes in winter? This is just as they say, 'Who will waste money on filling up the holes of a bamboo strainer?' Won't this be mine if it sits around long enough? Why would I want to buy it now? No, I'm not buying or accepting it as a pawn!"

"If that's the way it's to be, let's drop the idea!" said Mr. Zhao Senior as he took back the piece of clothing.

When Zhao Cong told his wife about what had happened, she said, "This time, you're the fool. Since you turned him down, he'll surely take it to a pawnshop, and you'll never see it again. You'd better take it from him and give him a few maces. It will be a good deal for you."

Zhao Cong promised to do her bidding. He went to his father and said, "My wife wants to take a look at that piece of clothing. Maybe she'll be able to pawn it."

"All right, you can take it. If she pawns it, seven maces of silver will do."

When Zhao Cong showed it to his wife, she said, "Give him four maces. Tell him he can take it or leave it. If he demands more, give it back to him."

When Zhao Cong gave the four maces to his father, the latter gladly accepted the money, knowing all too well that he was in no position to haggle. Thereupon, Zhao Cong wrote a note, saying that if not redeemed in five

months, the pawned item was to be his property. (MC: *Wonderful*.) He handed the note to his father and went off. On reading the note, Zhao the Sixth felt the blood rush into his face. Tearing that piece of paper into shreds, he gave a drawn-out sigh and said, "I must have sinned in a previous incarnation, hence this retribution from my own son. This is all a matter of destiny!" And so he went on bewailing his fate.

The next morning, when he was washing and doing his hair after he got out of bed, Wang San the middleman suddenly barged in. Zhao the Sixth gave a start, and his face was drained of all color. Truly,

*Ask not the ups and downs in someone's life;
Just read his face and you will know.*

After saluting Zhao the Sixth, Wang San said, "Mr. Zhao, don't think ill of me for disturbing you, but it's about the sixty taels of silver you borrowed from Squire Chu. Even though you've paid interest every year, you've paid in kind and not always in the most forthright manner. This year, Squire Chu asks for settling the interest as well as the principal, but I don't know what to say to him in response. Could you please bite your lip, do the math, and pay off everything? That will save us a lot of breath, and you'll clear all outstanding debts."

With a sigh, Zhao the Sixth said, "I ran up several large debts for my wayward son's wedding, and with the interest growing year after year, I've run out of money. I was hoping to borrow from my son in order to pay back Squire Chu, but nothing will ever make him and his wife part with a penny. As for this old man, I don't even have enough for my daily expenses. How am I going to get money to pay off Squire Chu? Mr. Wang, please help me out and put in a good word for me. If I can be granted an extension, I'll be ever so grateful."

Wang San's face hardened. "Mr. Zhao," said he, "what do you mean by that? I've talked myself dry in the mouth on your behalf to Squire Chu. You have no idea how often his men come to my house to press for repayment. The harassment I've suffered isn't worth the little commission I received. But the mistake has been made, and there's nothing I can do about it. While Squire Chu sends his men every so often to press me for repayment, you do nothing but talk nonsense. Even if you're short of cash at this time, you can borrow from your son since you spent the money on him in the first place.

What can be wrong with that? (MC: *He is not in the least sympathetic.*) Since I have no good reply for Squire Chu, I'll just sit here."

His eyes filled with tears, Zhao the Sixth did not know how to respond. Humbly he said, "You're absolutely right, Mr. Wang. I'll talk to that disobedient son of mine. Please go home now. I'll surely have an answer for you tomorrow morning."

Wang San said, "All right, I'll go, but you must not put this business on hold as soon as my back is turned. I never asked you for a bowl of tea or half a cup of wine. What do I get out of all this?" (MC: *Spoken like a middleman.*) So saying, he went jauntily out of the house without even bidding the old man good-bye.

In his despair, Zhao the Sixth thought, "If I relay this message to Zhao Cong, I'll only be asking for an insult. But if I don't, there's absolutely no other way out. Old Wang was right. It was for Zhao Cong's sake that I ran up this debt in the first place. He may be able to do something." Reluctantly, he dragged his feet to Zhao Cong's apartment.

Seeing a busy scene with smoke rising from the kitchen chimney, Zhao the Sixth asked, "What's all this bustle about?"

Someone answered, "Young Master Yin is staying for lunch. That's why we're all busy."

Crestfallen, Mr. Zhao Senior saw nothing for it but to turn back. But then he said to himself, "Since he's keeping his brother-in-law for lunch, let me see if he's going to give his father a treat as well."

After a while, his lunch was delivered. It was the usual fare of two bowls of coarse brown rice. Zhao the Sixth was choked with rage and lost all appetite. With Zhao Cong and Young Master Yin spending the rest of the day wining and dining, Zhao the Sixth could not bring himself to intrude. Resignedly, he turned in for the night.

The next morning, he went to his son's apartment again but was told that Zhao Cong was still in bed. The old man waited motionlessly for about two hours before Zhao Cong emerged from inside and asked, "What do you have to say to me so early in the morning?"

Managing a smile, the old man said, "It's not that early anymore. Well, I have something important to say to you. I'm only afraid that you may not agree with me."

Zhao Cong said, "Say it if you think I'll like it, and don't say it if you think I won't like it. Simple as that!"

Haltingly, Zhao the Sixth said (MC: *Poor thing.*), "I borrowed sixty taels of silver from Squire Chu for your wedding, and I've been paying him interest every year since then. This year, however, he asks for repayment of the principal as well, but how can I do so? Repayment of the principal is out of the question. I can afford only the interest, as before. I truly and honestly am penniless. I wouldn't have told you about this if it hadn't been a loan I took out for your sake. So I had to come to you to borrow some money just to pay off the interest."

Zhao Cong's face fell. Spreading out his hands, he said, "Isn't this a joke? The way you put it, the bridegroom is supposed to pay for his own wedding. Let me ask around. If that's the way it should be, I'll pay." (MC: *Exactly the tone of a wayward son.*)

Zhao the Sixth said, "I don't mean for you to repay the loan. I just want to borrow a little from you for now."

"What do you mean by borrowing a little for now? Chu wouldn't have been dunning you if he believed you were going to repay him. Well, yesterday my brother-in-law gave me a gift of five maces of silver. If my wife approves, you can take it to treat the middleman to a meal and ask him for more time." Having said that, he went inside.

"What can I do with five maces of silver?" thought Zhao the Sixth. "And he has to consult his wife. This looks hopeless."

After waiting for some time without seeing Zhao Cong reemerge, the old man had to return to his own apartment. To his surprise, Wang San was already sitting there and saw him before he could avoid the encounter. Walking up to him, Wang San said, "How's the plan we agreed on yesterday coming along? Squire Chu has been sending one man after another to my house."

A shamefaced Zhao the Sixth said, "That vile son of mine wouldn't hear of it. Repayment of the principal is quite impossible. I'll have to find some more things to pay for this year's interest. Please allow this old man more time and grant me this request." So saying, he found himself sinking to his knees.

Turning his head away, Wang San stretched out a hand to help the old man rise to his feet and said, "How did it all come to this? If you can find things that are acceptable, I'll take them to Squire Chu. He can't do anything to me, and I'll tell him to wait a bit longer." (MC: *It's easier to talk to the middleman.*)

So Zhao the Sixth went to his own room, opened his trunks, took out all of his wife's remaining articles of jewelry and clothing plus his own clothes until there was nothing left in the trunks and offered them all to Wang San.

Assessing the items at greater value than they were worth, Wang San determined that they added up to the full amount of the owed interest—20 percent of sixteen taels of silver.³ After Wang San departed with the laden trunk, Zhao the Sixth was left with nothing but the clothes on his back.

Let us skip irrelevant details and come to the time when Wang San appeared again two days later to demand interest on the four hundred taels of silver borrowed from the Liu family, a much larger loan than the previous one. At a loss as to what to do, Zhao the Sixth resorted to lying: “I’ve borrowed two ingots of silver from my son and was about to have them melted and made into smaller pieces. You may go home now. I’ll deliver the money to your house tomorrow morning.”

Wang San had always known Zhao to be an honest man. In addition, there was little likelihood of the old man taking refuge elsewhere, so Wang San thought it best to return home.

Zhao the Sixth thought, “I’ve managed to get rid of him for now, but any boil will come to a head sooner or later. How can I get out of this mess?” Again, he went over to Zhao Cong and said, “Wang San came again today, this time to demand repayment of interest owed to the Liu family. I have nothing left except my life. Out of sympathy for your poor father, help me!”

Zhao Cong said, “The way you scare people when nothing is happening! If I had money, I would have paid for you, all right? If you want to die, go ahead! You’re not doing anything useful anyway!”

On hearing these words, the father grabbed the son and burst into loud wails. (MC: *Too late.*) Zhao Cong struggled free and disappeared into his own room. Someone managed to restrain Zhao the Sixth, who then returned to his own quarters.

Back in his own room, Zhao Senior racked his brains about what to do should Wang San come again. Flashes of inspiration come to those in desperation. After a good deal of thought, he suddenly said to himself, “I’ve got it! This is the only way to do it. Otherwise, even if I die, I will have died in vain.” As it was getting dark, he ate a perfunctory supper and went to sleep.

Meanwhile, Zhao Cong and his wife, having finished supper and washed their hands and feet, blew out the lamps and retired for the night. Zhao Cong was long in getting to sleep (IC: *The way rich men are.*) and was lying awake in bed when he heard footsteps nearby. He suspected a thief but made no sound. The fact was that the well-heeled Zhao Cong was always on the alert for burglars. He listened for a while longer and heard the door creak open and a rustling sound approach his bed. He remained silent.

When the sound got right up to his bedside, he noiselessly reached a hand under the bed, picked up an ax that he had hidden there, and swung it. With a thud, a man fell by the bed. Zhao Cong quickly rose, planted a foot on the body, and swung the ax at the man two more times. Hearing no sound from the man, Zhao Cong believed he was dead. Immediately, he woke up Yin-shi, saying, "I've hacked a burglar to death!" Then he lit a lamp, and afraid that the burglar's accomplices might be lurking outside, he went out and woke the neighbors, many of whom came over to offer help. There, for all to see, was a large hole in the wall to the left of the gate. Having already heard Chao Cong cry, "I've hacked a burglar to death! The body is in the house!" they swarmed in.

Sure enough, there was a corpse with its head cut in half. Someone with a keen eye cried out, "Isn't this Zhao the Sixth?"

The others gathered for a closer view and said, "Yes! It's him! But why would he want to steal from his own family? And he ended up being killed by his son! How very strange!"

Someone said, "I don't think he was here to steal. Maybe he was a dirty old man here to fornicate with his daughter-in-law, and the angry son bumped him off, making him out to be a burglar."

Someone more experienced objected, "What a load of nonsense! Zhao the Sixth was no dirty old man!"

However mean and crafty they were, Zhao Cong and his wife were petrified with fear on this occasion, because they truly had no idea what could have led to this. Shedding insincere tears, Zhao Cong said in his own defense, "I honestly had no idea it was my old man. I thought it was a burglar, so I killed him without bothering to question him. You've all seen that hole in the wall, which goes to show that I didn't plan it. I thought it was a burglar, so I killed him without thinking twice. Just look at that hole in the wall, and you'll know that I didn't do it on purpose."

The neighbors said, "No, you're not to blame because this is a case of burglary and you couldn't see well in the darkness. But this is a serious matter. We'll have to report it to the authorities."

The commotion lasted throughout the night. At daybreak, the neighbors took Zhao Cong to the county yamen. Yin-shi, unnerved, surreptitiously put together some valuables for use as bribes.

The county magistrate, Zhang Jin, was an incorruptible and upright official endowed with a sharp intellect. After the neighbors escorted Zhao Cong into his court session, he asked questions about the case and ordered a

coroner to examine the body. His conclusion was, "A son committing patricide deserves the most severe punishment."

At this point, a scribe approached the bench and said, "Zhao Cong does deserve severe punishment for patricide, but he thought he was fighting a burglar in the darkness of the night. He didn't know it was his father. The death penalty may not apply in this case."

The local headman and the neighbors made the same plea. (MC: *Sounds fair, but not enough as punishment for the crime.*) Ignoring their arguments, Zhang Jin picked up his writing brush and wrote the following verdict: "Zhao Cong is hereby pardoned for his killing of a burglar, but he still deserves the death penalty for the crime of filial impiety. The son has money to spare but reduced his father to poverty and drove him to an act of burglary. (IC: *Very perceptive.*) The crime of filial impiety having been established beyond the shadow of a doubt, capital punishment is fully justified." (MC: *The satisfaction derived from this verdict outweighs concerns about its severity.*)

After the judgment was delivered, Zhao Cong was given forty heavy strokes of the rod at the magistrate's order. He was then sent to jail, wearing a cangue that marked him as a death row convict.⁴ Who would dare raise objections? Moreover, Zhao Cong's lack of filial devotion had been known to the neighbors. Therefore, Zhang Jin's ruling struck them as fair. Zhang Jin also ordered that Zhao Cong's family fortune be used to pay for a coffin and funeral for Zhao the Sixth. Whatever Yin-shi's powers, whatever riches she possessed, there were no strings she could pull this time. The best she could do was to bribe the jailers into letting her visit her husband in jail more often. As it turned out, however, after many visits, she caught a contagious disease that was going around the jailhouse (MC: *By the will of Heaven.*) and died in less than one month. As for Zhao Cong, he had always lived the good life. How could he withstand the hardships of life in jail? After Yin-shi's death, with no one to deliver food to him, he died in jail after starving for three days. His body was dragged out of the jailhouse and thrown into a mass grave. Such is the retribution for an unfilial son!

Zhang Jin then ordered that all of Zhao Cong's possessions be confiscated. When Squire Liu, Squire Chu, and others who had ever lent money to Zhao the Sixth presented their loan contracts to the yamen, Magistrate Zhang ruled that every one of them be repaid in full. What remained after the payments was turned over to the county treasury.

Zhao Cong and his wife had kept a close watch on their money for all those years, denying even one penny to their own parents in their wish to

leave it to their offspring. Little did they know that they were to be left without a penny to their names and without a proper burial place. It can thus be seen that heavenly principles had been at work and that divine justice never misses its mark. Truly,

*The net of Heaven is of large mesh,
But it never lets the guilty pass through.
The law of the land calls for careful judgments,
And the deities make no errors.*

To Steal Money, Yu Dajiao Does Violence to a Drunken Man

To Confront the Culprit in Court, Yang Hua Attaches Himself to a Woman's Body

As the poem says,

*The soul lives on after the body dies,
Especially if the death is unjust.
To see ghosts bear witness in the courts of the living
Is to know that in both worlds justice reigns.*

Our story is about a farmer in Shandong whose name escapes my memory. One day, when he was tilling his own field, he encroached on the path leading to a neighbor's family graveyard. When the neighbor protested, he burst into angry words, for which he was given a vicious beating until he died right there on the spot. His relatives took the case to the authorities, and the accused was sentenced to death after the coroner's report confirmed that the death was caused by severe wounds inflicted on him.

One day, a year later, another neighbor's baby son, who was just learning to speak, told of what had happened to him in his previous incarnation: "I was a farmer, Mr. So-and-So, beaten to death by a neighbor. Yama, King of the Underworld, felt sorry for me because I wasn't guilty of any capital offense and ordered that I return to the mortal world. But as my body was in very bad shape, I was to be reincarnated as another neighbor's son instead.

And two *yakashas* were ordered to take me to that neighbor's house, where we saw a woman about to give birth in her bed. 'She's to be your mother,' said the *yakashas*, 'and you'll enter her body through the top of her head.' Then they left, but they soon returned as they heard no sound of a crying baby. 'He's gone!' they exclaimed. I was hiding under a clothes rack, but they sought me out and thrust me into her skull. The next moment, I was born."

The boy went on to give a full account of what had happened in his previous lifetime, down to the last detail. He also went to the dead farmer's field and repeatedly examined the boundary. His parents and everyone else present gasped in amazement, realizing full well that he was none other than the farmer reincarnated.

When the news reached the jail, the incarcerated neighbor appealed to the authorities: "I was sentenced to death because I killed the farmer. Now that he's come back to life, my death sentence should be overturned. (MC: *Preposterous!*) Otherwise, if I'm going to die but he has regained life, which life will I be paying for?"

Intrigued by the bizarre story, the magistrate summoned the villagers who had served as witnesses in the case. They said, one and all, "The boy is indeed a reincarnation of the farmer." The magistrate then sent for the boy and questioned him, only to find that everything he said about the dead farmer was true.

Still, the magistrate overruled the appeal, saying, "The death sentence still holds, to make you pay for the taking of a life. How can I let you off because of a reincarnation?" Inwardly, however, the magistrate was awestruck, realizing now that the human body, formed from the four basic material elements of earth, water, fire, and air, is just an illusory entity. It may disappear at any time, yet its spirit keeps on living. How could the spirits of those who died of injustice vanish at the time of death?

There is another extraordinary story that illustrates the same point. It takes place in the Jiajing reign period [1522–66] of this dynasty [Ming]. A native of Shandong named Ding Shu was on his way to tour Beijing when he met a stalwart man named Lu Qiang. Ding Shu was quite impressed with his expansive personality and high aspirations. They got along so well that they swore an oath of brotherhood.

But before long, Lu Qiang was arrested on a charge of robbery. When Ding Shu went to visit him in the prefectural jail, Lu Qiang said to him, "Unfortunately, I got involved in this criminal case, and now nobody can

help me out. Since you've been kind to me, I have something strictly confidential to tell you."

"It's a great honor for me to be so trusted," said Ding Shu. "I'll make every effort to do whatever you want me to do."

"With your promise, I shall leave this world without regrets," said Lu Qiang. "I have more than one thousand taels of silver hidden at such and such a place. Take it and use it to buy favors and help set me free. (MC: *The cause of his death.*) If that doesn't work out, I beg you to make sure only that I'm not short of food and clothes while in jail and that I'm buried properly after I die. What's left of the money will be entirely at your disposal. This is my only request." Having spoken these words, he broke down in a flood of tears.

"Don't you worry!" said Ding Shu. "I'll do my best to help you." Then he bid Lu Qiang a solicitous farewell.

The truth of the matter is that human nature, however good originally, changes quickly at the sight of money. As the ancients put it so well, "White liquor reddens the face; yellow gold blackens the heart." (MC: *Words of profound truth.*) When Lu Qiang trustingly asked him for that favor, Ding Shu was indeed sincere in his promise. But when he went to that hoarding place and laid his hands on so much silver, he changed his mind and thought, "So, he is a robber, with so much money hoarded at this place. Luckily, it's all in my hands now. This little windfall can last me the rest of my life. Since it's ill-gotten money anyway, if he can use it, why can't I? It shouldn't be a sin for me to take it. Now that the money is in my hands, why should I bother to get him out of jail?" On second thought, however, he hit on another idea. "If I don't try to help him, I'll have no excuse to offer if he sends someone to question me. If he grows desperate, he may let the cat out of the bag, and get me into trouble. Why don't I finish him off so as to silence him for good?"

Verily, the more he thought, the more vicious he became. (MC: *In most cases, it's the second thoughts that lead to crime.*) So he approached two of the jailers, bribed them with thirty taels of silver, and had Lu Qiang killed.

Thus, Ding Shu landed a windfall of more than a thousand taels of silver, with no one any the wiser. Parading his wealth, he lived high in Beijing. Three years later, when he had used up 70 or 80 percent of the money, he boarded a boat to return by the Lu River [the northern section of the Grand Canal] to his home in Shandong. While engaged in an idle conversation with fellow passengers in the cabin, he suddenly collapsed onto the floor, but he quickly rose to his feet and, his eyes popping wide open, shouted, "I'm Lu

Qiang, the famous robber of Beijing! That evil man Ding Shu took one thousand taels of silver from me and had me killed. It's payback time now!"

Surprised that these words were coming out of his mouth in a different voice, the passengers realized that Ding Shu must have betrayed someone, and the wronged person's ghost was demanding his life. Trembling with fear, they all dropped to their knees and pleaded, "Ding Shu indeed did wrong and destroyed you, but this has nothing to do with us. If you, mighty hero, take his life right here in this boat, we'd all be implicated in an unsolvable case. Please let your anger subside and wait until we've all gone ashore before you do whatever you want to him."

The ghost said through Ding Shu's mouth, "All right. I'll go to his home first and wait for him there."

With that, Ding Shu fell to the floor again. When he woke up the next moment and the men asked him about what had just happened, he looked confused and was unable to recall anything. The passengers all kept their mouths shut and left the boat one by one on reaching their respective destinations.

Three days after he arrived home, Ding Shu suddenly gave a loud cry and started to repeat what he had said in the boat, much to the horror of his servants. He then went and grabbed an iron hammer, with which he began frantically hitting his teeth. The servants quickly held him and wrested the hammer from his grasp. Then he went to get a kitchen knife and began stabbing himself in the chest, but again the servants seized him and snatched the knife away. When nothing else was available with which to hurt himself, he gouged his eyes out with his own fingers, bathing his face in blood.

Passersby who heard the servants' cries rushed into the house, and they spread the news until the street was packed with onlookers. Among them was one of Ding Shu's traveling companions, who had come out of curiosity to find out how things stood. There, for all to see, was Ding Shu beating himself while shouting curses in Lu Qiang's voice.

The more venturesome ones walked up and asked Ding Shu, "How many years ago did all this happen?"

"Three years ago," replied the ghost that had taken possession of Ding Shu's body.

"Since you want revenge, and you have such magical powers, what took you so long?"

"I was imprisoned in the underworld and was unable to seek revenge until recently when I was set free by the Imperial Amnesty." So saying, Ding

Shu continued to beat himself until he died. Only then was the ghost pacified, and nothing was heard from it again.

This happened in the first year of the Longqing reign period [1567–72] when the emperor, newly on the throne, issued a general amnesty to set prisoners free. Those in the underworld were released as well. Lu Qiang was thus able to avenge himself. This shows that the two worlds are in fact governed by the same rules.

Verily,

*The mortal world is not just for humans,
Nor is the underworld only for ghosts.
Between the two realms lies
But a thin sheet of paper.
When it is time to right a wrong,
Even the paper-thin barrier disappears.*

Gentle reader, you may very well ask, why does this storyteller tell you these two stories? It is because some people in this world, having done things that go against their consciences, think they can get away with it because it was done in the dark, with no one the wiser. They also believe that the dead cannot bear witness, and that once their victims are put to death, they can stay out of trouble for the rest of their lives, however atrocious their crimes. Little do they know that justice has long arms, even in the unseen world. The two stories told above—one about a reincarnated person telling about his previous life, and the other about a ghost seeking revenge in his enemy's body—demonstrate that one's spirit survives one's death and can appear right in front of you. (MC: *A warning to everyone.*) Thoughts of this scenario can send shudders down your spine, however bold or hardened you are. In fact, reincarnation as someone else is not rare, nor is taking revenge in one's enemy's body unheard of. There have been more of such stories since antiquity than I can ever tell.

Now let me tell you an even more bizarre story. It is about the ghost of a murdered man that attached itself to another person's body and served as a witness at one court after another until the accused was finally sentenced to death. This is indeed something rarely heard of.

The story takes place in Yu Clan Village, Jimo County, Shandong. Our protagonist is a man named Yu Dajiao, a man registered for military service. The Yu clan had inherited a guard's position at the West Garrison in

Xingzhou [present-day Xinghua, Hebei]. The member of the clan serving at that garrison was Yu Shouzhong. The position was first established in the Hongwu reign period [1368–98]. Although, as a rule, the man who inherited it had to be of direct descent, he was supposed to be subsidized by funds from all branches of the clan and therefore was entitled to travel back to his home village once every few years to collect his due. This had been the practice for many generations.

In the twenty-first year of the Wanli reign period [1593], Shouzhong began to look for someone in the garrison to travel to his home village and get the money. Among his personal guards was a Yang Hua, a native of Jizhen [the area from present-day Beijing to Shanhaiguan]. An honest and outspoken man, Yang Hua was chosen for the mission because he had been to Jimo many times. After taking leave of his wife, Yang Hua set out on a lame donkey that he had raised himself. Before many days had passed, he arrived at Jimo and went straight to Yu Dajiao's residence for accommodations. He then went from house to house, from one branch of the clan to the next, to collect money and was able to collect several tenths of a mace of silver from some and more than a mace from others. Finally, he got a total of two taels and eight maces, which he carried carefully on his person.

On the twenty-sixth day of the first lunar month, Dajiao walked up to Yang Hua and said, "A country fair is being held near Turtle-Mount Garrison. There must be lots of excitement out there. I'd like to go. Will you join me in the fun?"

"I'm not used to sitting at home anyway. Let's go." So saying, Yang Hua tied the money bag to his waist, mounted his donkey, and headed for Turtle-Mount Garrison with Yu Dajiao.

As it turned out, this trip led not only to the murder that reduced a frontier hero to an aggrieved ghost but also to a lawsuit in which a poor village woman was possessed by a ghost in order to act as its mouthpiece.

Truly,

*Like pigs and sheep on their way to the butcher's,
With each step they went nearer to their deaths.*

Let us get on with our story. After Yang Hua toured the fairgrounds with Yu Dajiao, he felt hungry and said, "Let's go to a wineshop for a drink." So Dajiao took him into the town, to a wineshop that was run by a Mr. Yin Three. Wineshops in Shandong normally served no dishes other than plates

of garlic and some steamed buns to go with wine. As a poor soldier from the northern frontier, Yang Hua had a weakness for hard liquor, and much to his delight, the liquor served at Yin Three's wineshop was called "yellow liquor," reputed to be the strongest of its kind. With Yu Dajiao urging him to drink more, Yang Hua drained one big bowl after another until he was roaring drunk. By evening, he was in such a besotted condition that his legs refused to carry him one single step. With much effort, Yu Dajiao helped him mount his donkey and steadied him with a hand as they went along. Swaying to and fro from time to time, Yang Hua almost fell from his donkey several times. When they reached Stone Bridge Valley north of the garrison, Yang Hua dozed off and with a loud cry of "Aya!" tumbled to the ground.

"It looks like you can't ride your donkey anymore," said Yu Dajiao. "You might as well sleep here on the ground for a while." Lying flat on the grassy slope after the fall, Yang Hua immediately fell asleep, snoring thunderously and totally oblivious to everything around him.

What happened was that, knowing that Yang Hua had collected many packages of silver, Yu Dajiao was aflame with desire for the money, although he was not sure how much there was. (MC: *How much can there be if Yang didn't take the trouble to hide it so as not to invite thieves? How sad!*) He looked down on Yang Hua as a poor, lone soldier who was a stranger to both the locals and the routes of travel. He figured that no one would know where he was from or where he was going. In addition, Yang Hua was a nuisance to the Yu clan; his disappearance would be a good riddance as far as they were concerned. Since nobody would be asking after him, why not seize this opportunity to take his money? That's why Yu Dajiao had deliberately plied Yang Hua with such strong liquor and got him drunk.

Biding his time, Yu Dajiao waited beside the sleeping Yang Hua until the first watch of the night. Now if he were a softhearted person, even at this moment when he was consumed with greed for Yang's money, he could have simply taken it from the man's waistband while he was in this drunken stupor and quietly slipped away. By the time Yang Hua woke up and found his silver missing the next day, he might blame himself for having lost it while he was drunk. Even if Yang suspected him, he could still get away with it because there would be no evidence against him. The act of killing was quite uncalled for.

As it turned out, however, Yu Dajiao was one of those cruel and ruthless northerners who preferred to finish off the job once they have started it. They called this "strike before you talk." Whatever the amount of money,

even a small-time robber taking a hat or an article of clothing would kill the victim first. Such was the practice of those men. To their way of thinking, killing a man was like crushing a louse—something not worth a second thought.

Seeing that Yang Hua was still fast asleep and nobody was around, Yu Dajiao untied the reins from the donkey, made a noose with them, and put it around Yang Hua's neck. He then took off Yang Hua's hat, thrust it into his mouth, and, with one foot firmly planted on his face, tightened the noose with both hands with all the force he could muster. How sad that this poor soldier died a violent death because of the meager amount of money in his waistband!

Yu Dajiao put a hand to Yang Hua's nostrils and found that he had stopped breathing. Then he searched for the silver, took the waistband, and tied it around his own waist. "If the body stays here," he said to himself, "it will be seen after daybreak, and that means trouble." So he put the body on the back of the donkey and walked it to the seashore. At a spot three *li* from Yu Clan Village, he tossed the corpse into the sea with a splash before turning around and leaving with the donkey. Then he thought, "But this is Yang Hua's donkey, and some people may recognize it. If I take it home, questions will be asked, and I won't have a good explanation. It's better to get rid of it." So he took it to Huangpushe and set it free on a slope there. Without the reins, the donkey rolled about happily on the ground. The next day, it was led away by someone or other. That night, Yu Dajiao sneaked back home, quite unobserved.

By the eighth day of the second month, twelve days after Yang Hua's death, Yu Dajiao was absolutely sure that the body must have drifted tens of thousands of *li* away. But an uncanny thing happened: The body, after floating up and down for days, was washed ashore by the night tide to a spot right by Yu Clan Village, and there it stayed. Yu Liang, the neighborhood headman, along with others, found the body and reported the matter to the magistrate of Jimo County. Magistrate Li was unable to identify the dead man or figure out how he had gotten into the sea, but he did find rope marks around the neck that pointed to a violent death. So he instructed the local police to keep the body and carry out investigations. Meanwhile, Prefect Li himself abstained from meat in order to show his piety and prayed at the Temple of the City God for a divine revelation, and there we shall leave him.

On the thirteenth day of that month, Li-shi, wife of Yu Deshui, a member of Yu Dajiao's clan, suddenly fell to the ground while husking rice with her husband. Yu Deshui quickly caught her and kept calling her name. After an

hour or so, she sprang to her feet and, with her eyes tightly closed, shouted, "Give back my life, Yu Dajiao!"

Quite taken aback, Yu Deshui asked, "What kind of spirit are you? What are you up to?"

"I'm Yang Hua," said Li-shi in a man's voice. "I came to collect money for the frontier guards. Yu Dajiao got me drunk with yellow liquor at the Turtle-Mount fair, took me to Stone Bridge Valley, and strangled me with the reins of my donkey. He then dumped my body into the sea. I'm here to tell you that Yu Dajiao is the real murderer. I fear that if he gets away, innocent people will be implicated in this case. I have an older brother, Yang Da. My wife is Zhang-shi, and we have two sons and two daughters. But they're all far away in Jizhou, and none of them can come to hunt down the murderer and demand a life for a life. How sad! So I had to come on my own to face off against Yu Dajiao in court. And I'm determined to make the authorities do right by me." (MC: *Yang Hua's ghost is full of fight.*)

"But this has nothing to do with me," said Yu Deshui. "Why do you have to torment my wife like this?"

Li-shi replied, again in a man's voice, "I need to borrow your virtuous wife's body and stay in her for the confrontation at the court. I'll leave once justice is done and will never come back to bother you again. Will you please report this to the authorities for me? If not, I'll stay in your house until you do."

Resignedly, Yu Deshui went out and told Yu Liang the headman about this. Quite incredulous, Yu Liang went to Deshui's house to see for himself, only to find Li-shi there repeating exactly the same words in Yang Hua's voice. Yu Liang hurried away to pass on the news to Mr. Shao Qiang, a village elder, and some yamen lictors. They all rushed to Deshui's house and heard the same story retold to the last detail.

Yu Liang and Shao Qiang, together with other villagers, trooped to Yu Dajiao's house and called him out, saying, "A fine thing you did! Now the aggrieved ghost is at Yu Deshui's home. Go now and meet it head-on!"

Yu Dajiao, with his guilty conscience, was shocked to hear these words, but he said, "How can there be any aggrieved ghost at Deshui's house? Preposterous! Let me go and see for myself. What do I have to fear?" Yielding to the crowd, he followed them sheepishly to Deshui's house.

As soon as he arrived, he heard Li-shi yelling at him, "So here you are, Yu Dajiao! What did I do to make you hate me so much? You took my money and my life and brought me all this suffering!"

Believing that no one would be able to bear witness against him, he tried to brazen it out. "Pfui! Who took your money? You must be fantasizing!"

"How can you deny it!" said the voice from Li-shi's mouth. "You strangled me with my donkey's reins, carried me on its back to the seashore, and threw my body into the sea. You took my two taels and eight maces of silver, to use for your own enjoyment. Give me back my silver! Or I'll beat you and bite off your flesh to give vent to my anger."

Hearing the exact amount of the stolen silver, Yu Dajiao knew that this was indeed Yang Hua's ghost attached to Li-shi's body. Not daring to hide anything anymore, he made a total confession, adding that he had never expected that a ghost could manifest its supernatural power so well in another person's body and that he deserved nothing less than death for his crime.

After hearing these words, Yu Liang and others marched Dajiao home, where they took Yang Hua's waistband with the two taels and eight maces of silver in it out of the kitchen chimney. "Good!" said Yu Liang. "With this as evidence, we can report the case to the authorities for a conviction. Otherwise, the only proof we'll have for this case of a dead body from the sea will be the testimony of a ghost. And then, if the person who's possessed wakes up and the ghost is gone, we'll be guilty of making a false accusation." So he hurriedly took Yu Dajiao and his loot to the county yamen.

"There's no way I can get away with it now," said Yu Dajiao to himself. "And when I'm in jail, nobody will bring food to me. Why don't I implicate a couple of people from my clan, so as to spread the suffering around? And I'll get to share their meals when their families bring food to them." So to Yu Liang he said, "Three of my clansmen—Yu Dabao, Yu Da'ao, and Yu Dajie—did it with me. Why am I the only person to take responsibility for it?"

Yu Liang had all three men arrested without delay, but none of them pleaded guilty. Nevertheless, they were taken to the county yamen over their protests.

The county magistrate accepted the written statement of the case and wrote the following comment on it: "This sounds plausible but uncanny. Li-shi must be summoned to testify." Thereupon, Li-shi was brought to the court to confront Yu Dajiao. Everything she said in Yang Hua's voice pointed to Yu Dajiao as the murderer.

Seeing other names in the statement, the magistrate asked, "What did Yu Dabao and the others do?"

Li-shi replied, "Yu Dajiao is the only evildoer. The others are all innocent. I made this special trip from the underworld to tell you the truth so that innocent people don't get implicated."

The magistrate asked Yu Dajiao sharply, "What do you have to say now?"

Scared out of his wits by the ghost's vivid account, Yu Dajiao saw nothing for it but to kowtow and confess. "Your Honor!" said he. "I wasn't aware until today that you can't deceive ghosts and spirits. The truth is that I'm the only one who strangled Yang Hua and took his money. No one else was involved. I do deserve death!"

Realizing that this major case involving a murder still lacked a coroner's report, the magistrate personally took Yu Dajiao to the seaside where Yang Hua's body was being kept. The coroners examined the body and concluded, from the rope marks around his neck, that the man had indeed been strangled.

After returning to the county yamen with the coroners' report, the magistrate had everyone's testimony recorded and sentenced Yu Dajiao to death.

When all the witnesses, including Li-shi, had signed the statement, the magistrate said to Li-shi, "This case is to be submitted to higher authorities. You can't change your testimony."

"Your Honor, I won't change a word of it."

The magistrate had been afraid that she would tell a different story if Yang Hua's spirit left her body. Little did he know that Yang Hua's ghost was still doing all the talking. The magistrate then put the documents in a file and sent it, along with everyone involved in the case—witnesses as well as the culprit—to the prefectural yamen.

On reading the documents, the prefect found the case bizarre and somewhat incredible. Then and there, he questioned everyone but heard no deviation from the narration in the documents. So he wrote the following judgment:

Yang Hua was a poor soldier from the frontier a thousand li away. The silver he had collected was less than three taels, but it was enough to give Yu Dajiao evil ideas. He got Yang Hua drunk, strangled him with a rope, moved his body to the seaside on the back of his donkey, and dumped it into the sea. Assuming that, with the body consumed by fish, there would be no evidence against him, he thought he could enjoy the ill-gotten money with impunity. Little did he know that divine justice always prevails, and ghosts and spirits are omniscient.

The body floating on the sea did not sink; its ghost found voice in a living person, exposing evil and terrifying the murderer. The line "I'll bite off your flesh to give vent to my anger" is as frightening as a weapon; the sentence about not getting innocent people implicated demonstrates his sense of fairness. Indeed, Yang Hua after death is able to manifest his supernatural power and do it in an honest way. His spirit lives on after his body has perished. Who says one can commit a murder and get away with it? The county magistrate's prayer to the gods for revelation was answered, which deserves honorable mention in the records as an unusual achievement of his administration. The death sentence he pronounced, based on face-to-face interrogation, is fully justified. The facts of the murder, robbery, and the ghost speaking through a living person having been established, the case is now ready for submission to higher authorities for further examination. The final decision rests with the governor of the province.

Having written the judgment, the prefect sent the file, along with the culprit and the witnesses, to Governor Sun.

The governor read the file but was not convinced. (MC: *His suspicions are quite warranted.*) "How can a death sentence be based solely on the words of a ghost speaking through a woman? How can I be sure that there are no tricks behind all this?" So he started to interrogate everyone who had been brought to him. When it was Li-shi's turn, he put down his writing brush and asked, "Where are you from?"

"I'm from Jizhou," she replied.

He summoned the local headman and asked him, "Where's Li-shi from?"

"From Jimo," he replied.

"Why did she say she was from Jizhou?"

"Li-shi is from Jimo, but Yang Hua, who's attached to her body, is from Jizhou."

Governor Sun turned to Li-shi and asked, "What's your name?"

"My humble name is Yang Hua. I'm a soldier under Officer Yu Shouzong of West Garrison in Xingzhou." Then she went on to relate in detail how Yang Hua had come to collect subsidies for the troops and how he had been murdered. It was every bit the voice of a man from the north, not a woman with a local Shandong accent.

Having established the facts, the governor nodded with a smile. "So this really happened! How extraordinary!" Thereupon, he wrote the following commentary on the report: "Yang Hua's soul voiced his grievances through

the mouth of a woman. During my face-to-face interrogation of the said woman, she spoke with a Jizhou accent, to my great surprise. I am therefore respectfully referring this case to the Surveillance Commission for review." The Surveillance Commission in turn referred the case for review to Associate Prefect Liu, who was concurrently in charge of the criminal tribunal.

When the culprit and the others were taken back to the prefectural yamen, the prefect issued a receipt. At this moment, Yu Deshui, Li-shi's husband, went up to him and said tearfully, "My wife, Li-shi, has been possessed by Yang Hua's aggrieved ghost for so long that she's lost her true nature. What's more, since she first got involved in this case months ago, she has been moved around from one court to another for questioning and therefore has been unable to go home to breast-feed our baby, which is bad for both mother and baby. Your Honor! Please do right by us and save her life!"

Feeling sorry for the man, the prefect nodded and said, "It's against nature for a woman to stay away from home for so long. But I find it difficult to deal with a ghost." He then asked Li-shi to approach the bench. "Are you Li-shi or Yang Hua?"

"I'm Yang Hua," replied Li-shi.

"The injustice done to you has already been redressed," said the prefect.

"I'm deeply grateful to you for this infinite kindness, Your Honor."

"Although you're Yang Hua, your body belongs to Li-shi. Do you know that?"

"Yes, I do," replied Li-shi. "However, although I've been avenged, I have no home to go back to. So I might as well stay on."

The prefect was seized with rage. "Nonsense!" he roared. "Since you've been avenged, you should go back to your own body. Why inconvenience another man's wife? Be gone this instant, or I'll give you a good beating!"

As if a little frightened by these words, Li-shi kowtowed repeatedly and said, "All right, I'm off!" With that, she rose and began to exit.

The prefect had her pulled back, saying, "I was telling only Yang Hua to leave. You're Li-shi! Where do you think you're going?" (MC: *A reminder of her identity.*)

Li-shi kowtowed and said, still in Yang Hua's voice, "Off I go now!" Again she got up to go.

The prefect slapped the table and sharply ordered her to turn back. "Are you being stupid, or devious? Yang Hua is to go, but Li-shi must remain here physically. How could you have disobeyed me time and again? Lictors! Apply the rods!"

With a loud cry, the lictors threw their bamboo rods onto the ground, making a deafening sound. Li-shi fell down unconscious. She did not respond when the lictors called her name and then Yang Hua's name. Her eyes were tightly closed, and her face was the color of ash. A panic-stricken Deshui shouted her name again and again into her ear but got no answer. He broke into loud wails of grief, oblivious of proper etiquette in a court of law. The prefect was at a loss as to what to do.

As Deshui held her in his arms, her limbs kept shaking, and she was drenched with sweat. About two hours later, she suddenly opened her eyes. Seeing such a large room and so many strangers, some in uniforms, she exclaimed in surprise, "I'm Mr. Li's daughter. Why am I here?" Then she quickly covered her face with her sleeves.

Knowing that she had regained her senses, the prefect asked her if she remembered what had happened to her. "I was husking rice at home," she replied. "I have no idea what brought me here." And she did not know how many days had elapsed since then. So the prefect wrote four big characters, "Li-shi's True Self," in bright red, put the strip on her back as a protective charm, and affixed his seal to it. (MC: *The prefect is quite a capable man.*) Then he ordered Deshui to take her home for recuperation.

The next day, Associate Prefect Liu summoned everyone involved in the case to the court, including Li-shi, since her name remained on the list. Having seen her so many times in court, Deshui thought nothing of it, but this time she was shy and refused to go to the yamen. When Deshui told her in detail what had happened before, she said tearfully, "It was as if in a dream that I made such a public show of myself. Regrets are too late, but now that I'm fully awake, how can I, a woman, make another appearance in court?"

"The final decision on the case has already been made," said Deshui. "And the prefect granted you permission to go home yesterday. Today you need only go there for the final review, and then the case will be closed."

"Review or no review, what does it have to do with me?"

"If you don't go," said Deshui, "you'll get me in trouble."

Reluctantly, she followed him to the court. But when questioned by Associate Prefect Liu, she just wept copiously without saying a single word. When Associate Prefect Liu asked her husband about this, the latter explained that she had been possessed by Yang Hua's ghost and served as a witness, and that, the day before, the prefect had expelled the ghost and set her free to be her true self. He also showed him the charm the prefect had put on her back and the seal affixed to it. Marveling at these strange happenings, Associate

Prefect Liu sent the file to higher authorities, along with his written judgment: "Yang Hua's ghost having departed, Li-shi is hereby released and exempted from further interrogation. We have sufficient evidence for sentencing Yu Dajiao and are therefore in a position to dispense with indirect evidence for the case. He is scheduled to be executed after the Autumn Assizes."

One night, Yu Deshui had a dream in which Yang Hua came to thank him. "I've troubled your good wife for a long time, but I have nothing with which to express my gratitude. I have only a male donkey (MC: *The case of the donkey is now solved.*), but it got lost after the reins were removed, and someone took it. Now I'll bring it to your gate. Please accept it as a token of my gratitude."

When Yu Deshui opened his gate the next day, sure enough, he saw a donkey standing there. He put a saddle on it for riding and realized that Yang Hua's soul had not perished. It has always been said that ghosts and spirits can see through all deceptions, but no story is as real and awe-inspiring as this one.

*He became a ghost after being killed;
He testified in court in a woman's body.
The human and the ghost received measure for measure;
Enemies can be made but also reconciled.*

With His Merciless Heart, Squire Wei Plots to Seize Another Man's Property

With His Clever Plan, Scholar Chen Wins Back His House

As the poem goes,

*You buzz about, drinking from the Fountain of Greed;
You fear not the law or divine justice.
Why give alms and show repentance
When the best way is to yield to others?*

The above quatrain makes the point that greed is something even a hundred thousand of the Buddha's guardian warriors cannot subdue, something that defies the rigorous laws of the land. There is a line in the *Liezi* that says, "The eyes see not people but only gold."¹ Once desire raises its head, all one's energy and vitality will be directed toward satisfying this obsession, whatever the odds.

Here begins our story: There lived in Hangzhou Prefecture an immensely rich scholar named Jia Shi. He was quick and clever by nature, and, with his heroic aspirations, he cultivated the friendship of men of honor. Whenever he learned that a friend was too poor to get married, he paid for the wedding expenses and just as readily went to the aid of those unable to pay off their debts. Whenever he saw injustices being done, he made it his business to

challenge the perpetrators. When he ran up against bullies who threw their weight around, he devised ingenious plans for bringing them down. Instances of such gratifying experiences for him are too numerous to list here. I shall confine myself to one in which he helped a friend regain lost property.

In Qiantang, there was a Mr. Li who, although a student of Confucian classics, had never been enrolled in a government school. He lived in grinding poverty, but he was a most devoted son to his parents and was friends with Scholar Jia, who often helped him out financially. One day, Scholar Jia invited young Mr. Li for wine. Mr. Li looked dejected when he came. Scholar Jia wondered what could have been wrong and, after a few cups, unable to hold back his questions any longer, asked, "Brother Li, is there something bothering you and killing the joy of drinking? Why don't you tell me about it? I may be able to do something. You never know."

With a sigh, Li said, "There is indeed something preying on my mind. I can't very well confide in other people, but since you asked, I'll level with you. I have a small house to the left of Zhaoqing Monastery by West Lake. It's worth about three hundred taels of silver. I owed Monk Huikong fifty taels of silver. Three years of interest brought the total to one hundred taels. That monk has such a voracious appetite for money (MC: *All monks are like this. Huikong is not alone.*) that he is always on my back, pressing for repayment. In desperation, I offered him the house for four hundred taels of silver minus the one hundred taels I owed him. Knowing I had no other option, he rejected my offer of the house and demanded repayment of the debt in silver only. Against my will, I let him buy the house on the cheap. With witnesses present, he gave me thirty taels of silver. Hardly had I signed the house over to him than he moved in. My mother and I had to rent a house in the city. And now, because I owe years of rent, my landlord wants to evict us. My mother is worried sick. That's what upsets me."

Scholar Jia said, "So, that's what it is. Why didn't you tell me about this earlier? May I ask how much rent you owe your landlord?"

"I owe him three years' rent at four taels per year."

"Nothing to it! Enjoy the evening! I'll take care of this tomorrow morning."

They took leave of each other only after they had finished drinking.

Scholar Jia rose bright and early the next morning, went to his vault, took a scale, weighed out 142 taels of silver (MC: *Who else would be willing to do this?*), and, with a servant in tow, headed straight for Mr. Li's house.

Having just gotten out of bed, Li hurriedly combed his hair and washed and asked his mother to make tea. But without enough firewood, she simply could not get a fire going, not even after she worked at it for a good long while. Although no tea was served, Scholar Jia acknowledged their kindness and told his servant to ask Li to come out for one quick word with him.

Once in the reception room, Li said, "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Scholar Jia took a small box from the servant, retrieved two packets of silver from it, and said to Li, "One of the packets contains 12 taels of silver. Use it to pay your landlord. The other packet has 130 taels. Offer it to Reverend Huikong and redeem your house with it. Your landlord's harassments will stop, your mother will be spared the worry, and you'll have a permanent home. Such are my wishes."

"What kind of talk is this, my brother? I have only myself to blame for my poverty and my inability to support my mother. Your frequent gifts of money have already exceeded my expectations. And now that I've lost my house, here you go again, offering me such a hefty sum to redeem it. But even if I do move back into the house, I won't enjoy peace of mind. In acknowledgment of your friendship, I'll venture to accept twelve taels to pay for rent. I firmly decline the rest." (MC: *He should take all or nothing. The amount makes no difference.*)

Scholar Jia said, "You've got it all wrong, my brother! Our friendship is based on loyalty. Why give any importance to monetary matters? Take the money and redeem your house. Don't turn me down!" With that, he placed the packets of silver on the table and exited the house.

Li quickly ran after him, crying, "Brother Jia! Come back! Let me thank you properly!" Ignoring his pleas, Scholar Jia continued on his way.

Mr. Li thought, "Such a loyal friend is hard to come by in this world. He'll only be offended if I don't accept the money. Oh well, let me use it to redeem my house. If I ever make something of myself, I'll repay him richly." He put the silver away, consulted his mother, and went to redeem his house.

Upon arrival at his old house to the left of Zhaoqing Monastery, he entered the gate and asked, "Is Reverend Huikong in?"

Assuming that a donor was at the entrance, the monk rushed to the gate with alacrity, but on seeing Mr. Li, his deference vanished. Grudgingly, he greeted Li and offered him a seat but did not bother to serve tea.

After Li stated the purpose of his visit, Monk Huikong's face darkened slightly.

"At the time of sale, no mention was made of future redemption," said the monk. "If there's to be a redemption, even though the original price was only 130 taels of silver, we've added many rooms, and the cost of the construction materials adds to the value of the house. If you, sir, pay the full amount, you can surely take the house back." Knowing all too well that Li could not come up with so much silver, Huikong was deliberately trying to put him on the spot. When did the monk ever add any rooms?

Just as the saying puts it, "A poor man is short on wits." Mr. Li took the monk at his word. He thought, "I can't go to Brother Jia for more money to make up the amount. I didn't want his money in the first place, and now I've got an excuse. I'll just say that the monk asked for an exorbitant price and refuses to let me redeem it. I'll have peace of mind after I return the silver to Brother Jia." (MC: *This man will make a good friend. That's why Scholar Jia is so generous with him.*)

So he took leave of the monk, went to Scholar Jia's house, and told him in detail about what the monk had said. Scholar Jia was incensed.

"That bald man be cursed!" said Jia. "A Buddhist monk is supposed to have no worldly desires, but this one is so treacherous and grasping! A redemption shouldn't cost more than the original sale price. How can he raise the price for no good reason! The money may not come to much, but it's definitely not the right thing to do. Now that he's crossed my path, I'll find a way to deal with him. There's little chance he'll be able to stop me from redeeming the house!" He kept Li for a meal before letting him go.

With two page boys in tow, Scholar Jia went straight to the house to the left of Zhaoqing Monastery. Seeing Huikong's gate open, he walked in. Upon his inquiry, a young acolyte told him, "His Reverence has just finished drinking with a guest this morning and is now taking a nap upstairs." Thereupon, Scholar Jia told the page boy to stay downstairs while he himself went noiselessly up the stairs.

Hearing snores, he raised his eyes and saw Huikong sound asleep without his hat and his robe. The room upstairs had windows on all sides, but most of the windows were closed. Scholar Jia went to a closed rear window and peeked through a chink in the window frame. There, across from the monk's house, sat a young woman doing needlework in a room that, to all appearances, belonged to a wealthy family. Scholar Jia hung his head and reflected for a moment or two. Then he said to himself, "I've got an idea!" He walked up to Huikong's side, put on the monk's hat and robe, stealthily opened the rear window, and began to make passes at the woman in every way he

knew how, until the woman was so irritated that she left her seat and went downstairs in anger. Scholar Jia then took off the hat and robe, put them where he had found them, quietly went downstairs, and returned home.

Before long, Huikong was wakened by loud banging downstairs. About ten big men had forced their way into the house. "You lousy bald ass!" they cursed. "You've got a nerve! You were insolent enough by never doing anything about the window that directly faces the inner quarters of our house. We've never complained, have we? But that only emboldened you and made you go so far as to make passes at the lady of our house! If we take you to the yamen, you'll be beaten to death. But we'll stop short of that and just drive you out of here!"

Huikong was paralyzed with fear. In a trice, the men stormed up the stairs, smashed all the furniture they saw to smithereens, and tore Huikong's clothes to shreds. Huikong said in his defense, "This humble monk has never even dreamed of taking a peek at your honorable house."

But the men ignored his protests and showered him with blows while cursing, "You filthy baldy! Get out of here! If not, we'll beat you up every time we see you. Don't even think about setting foot in here!" And so they threw him out the door. Knowing full well that the men's master was Squire Hao, Huikong dared not say another word of explanation but dashed off like a puff of smoke and disappeared into the monastery.

Scholar Jia chuckled to himself when he learned about this, for he knew that his plan had worked. Two days later, he went to see Mr. Li and told him about this development, to the latter's great mirth. Equipped with 130 taels of silver, Scholar Jia went with Mr. Li to see Huikong and demanded redemption of the house.

Huikong had treated Mr. Li with scorn because Li was undistinguished in speech and appearance. But confronted now with Scholar Jia, with his looks of a rich man and a servant in tow, and at a moment when he had just suffered humiliation from the Hao family, Huikong said to himself, "If I hold on to this house, I won't be left in peace. With that window facing the Haos' inner quarters, they'll be constantly on my back. I'd better let him redeem the house and be spared trouble." So he gave his consent right away, took Li's 130 taels—the original sales price—returned the deed to him, and put the house at Li's disposal.

Huikong, who was always eager to gain undue advantage, ended up the loser. This is a case of greed getting its due. Later, Scholar Jia passed the civil service examinations and rose to be secretary of the Grand Secretariat.

Mr. Li also passed the examinations and received an appointment as a government official. The two men's friendship lasted until the end of their days. Truly,

Good luck favors those with big hearts;

Misfortune dogs those with evil plots.

Monk Huikong's foul deeds caught up with him;

Scholar Jia Shi's virtues paid off in the end.

The above is not our story proper. I shall now tell a story that takes place in the capital, Jinling [present-day Nanjing], where drastic ups and downs in life are nothing out of the ordinary. The city of Jinling is also called "Stone City" because it was built at the foot of a stone mountain. The city has a water gate through which flows the Qinhuai River, and the towers and structures that stretch for ten *li* on both banks of the river add glamour to the city.² The Qinhuai River was dug in the days of the First Emperor of Qin [r. 246–209 BCE], hence the character *qin*. The Qinhuai River flows into the Yangzi River. Everything borne on the currents of the bigger river, the Yangzi, flows into the smaller one with the tides that occur twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. On the Qinhuai River float painted boats in which courtesans sing and play *sheng* pipes. The air resonates with the merry sounds of young men and women. The river is flanked by willow trees, and towers on both banks vie with one another for greater glory. Poets often lean on flower trellises and bamboo fences to improvise poems together. Fair faces sometimes appear behind elaborately carved windows and their beaded curtains. With its many wineshops and teahouses, the city is indeed a prosperous and bustling place and a home for the rich and famous.

Storyteller! Why all this boring stuff about the sights and sounds along the banks of the Qinhuai River?

Well, gentle reader, I was about to tell you a story about a Scholar Chen Heng, who lived at the mouth of the Qinhuai River at a time not too far removed from ours. He was a rich man, and yet his wife, Ma-shi, a woman with many wifely virtues, managed the household with industry and frugality. Scholar Chen had two homes, one large and one small, located on opposite sides of the river's mouth. Scholar Chen loved entertaining and had a weakness for women. Day in and day out, he went with his friends to visit the courtesans' quarters or indulge in drinking on pleasure boats. His

hangers-on never took so much as a step from his side, and his banquet tables were never short of courtesans. Singers often came up with new tunes, healers of itches tried all manner of remedies, florists delivered the freshest flowers, and chefs presented their fanciest dishes. As the saying goes, "Profit is what moves the world." Because Scholar Chen was the number one spendthrift, everyone played up to him with designs on his money. The poor and the stingy were the losers in this game. And so, in Nanjing in those days, Scholar Chen was a household name. With his poetic talent, his attentiveness, and his way with women, every courtesan in the city liked him. What a life of joy and delight! Indeed, Scholar Chen spent every day as if it were a festival.

Time sped by. After seven or eight years of such a dissipated way of life, Scholar Chen's family fortune was almost all gone. However desperately his wife, Ma-shi, tried to talk sense into him, he remained his old self, spending left and right. But he parted with his money less freely than before, and he still had enough to meet his expenses. When things got desperate another six months later, Ma-shi, to her credit, adopted a philosophical approach and said to herself, "Let me wait until he has squandered the last penny. He'll have to stop then." And so she gave up her attempts to admonish him. (MC: *Very wise. If she hadn't known the right thing to do and put up a fight, she would have caused terrible scenes without accomplishing anything.*)

Having spoiled himself all these years, Scholar Chen was certainly not ready to mend his ways, but he was penniless. At his friends' urging, he drew up a loan contract with Squire Wei from Huizhou, owner of a pawnshop on Sanshan Street, and borrowed three hundred taels of silver from him. A rapaciously greedy man, Squire Wei readily lent Scholar Chen money, at 30 percent interest, only because the scholar was a celebrity and therefore would surely not be able to get away with defaulting on the loan. Richer by three hundred taels of silver, Scholar Chen resumed his dissipated way of life, but enough of him for the moment.

Now, Squire Wei was an insatiably greedy man. When he first started out in Nanjing, his pawnshop was very small, but he employed an infinite number of tricks to maximize his profits. For example, he regularly passed off inferior-quality silver to his customers as silver of the highest grade. Using a tiny scale, he gave short weight and short measure. When customers came to redeem their pawned items, he changed to large scales and demanded full weight and silver of the highest grade, or he would refuse to return the items to them. In the case of pawned articles of jewelry, if they

were of high-quality gold, he had duplicates made surreptitiously and replaced fine pearls with inferior ones and high-grade gems with lowly stones. In short, he had more tricks up his sleeve than I can enumerate here.

As for Scholar Chen's three-hundred-tael loan, Squire Wei never sent anyone to remind him about payment because he planned on taking possession of Chen's other house. When the three-year loan period finally expired and the principal plus the interest came to twice the original sum, Squire Wei sent a man to the Chen residence to press for payment. (MC: *This is how calculating creditors can be.*) By this time, Scholar Chen had been reduced to dire poverty and could not do otherwise than put his desires on hold and apply himself to his studies at home. Not knowing what to do when Wei's man came, he instructed his servant to say that he was not at home and would pay the squire back upon his return. This happened quite a few times. As they say, "Just as sure as you don't want trouble, you can't hide from your creditor." It was no surprise that Squire Wei stopped believing these repeated promises and sent messengers every day to demand payment. As Scholar Chen still dared not show his face, Squire Wei's men, acting on their master's orders, kept watch at his gate and even bawled out strings of vile invectives at him. Scholar Chen swallowed the insults.

*Even the gods fear the wealthy;
Even ghosts bully the poor.
Had he known he was to take such insults,
He would not have wallowed in all those pleasures.*

Eventually, Scholar Chen gave up his losing battle against Squire Wei. He went to the middlemen who had witnessed the signing of the contract and said, "I owe six hundred taels of silver in total—principal plus interest—but I honestly have no way of scraping together that much money on such short notice. The other house of mine, the one across the river, is worth about a thousand taels of silver. I'd like to offer it to Squire Wei. He needs to pay me only four hundred taels. Please help me make this deal. I'll be ever so grateful."

Believing that Scholar Chen was indeed strapped for cash, the middlemen agreed and went to report to Squire Wei.

Squire Wei said, "I've looked at that house of his. How can it be worth a thousand taels? Shame on him for asking so much! Even six hundred taels is too much. How could you gentlemen be speaking on his behalf?"

One of the men said, "Sir, that house should be worth more than six hundred taels of silver. You can take advantage of his plight—just throw him a hundred taels and be done with it. That will be quite a good bargain for you. If someone else buys it, you'll no longer be able to land such a good deal."

On hearing these words, Squire Wei said, his face aflame, "It was you gentlemen who palmed this nice client off on me in the first place. I'm the creditor, am I not? But where's my principal? And the interest? And, to make it worse, I've become the one who's supposed to pay up. I'm not waiting for a house to move into. Why should I buy that rundown house? (MC: *This is how devious creditors can be in their arguments.*) If it sells for only six hundred taels, I'll take the loss. If not, he must cough up three hundred taels to pay back the loan." Having said that, he told his servants to go with the middlemen and relay his message.

After the men went to see Scholar Chen and gave him the message, the latter was stunned into silence. His eyes widening, his jaws agape, he wanted to say something, but he knew he was in the wrong and had no money. Being in no position to argue with the men, he saw nothing for it but to say with an ingratiating smile, "If the house is worth less than 1,000 taels, how about 800 taels? I did spend 1,200 or 1,300 taels when I had it built, but I won't go into that. Please do me another favor and pass my message along to him."

One of the men said, "That will be a tough job! When we proposed that he pay you a hundred taels, his face fell, and he said, 'I'm not waiting for a house to move into. If he wants me to pay him something out of my pocket, forget it! Let him cough up the three hundred taels for the loan!' That was the tone he took. Your idea of eight hundred taels for the house will be quite impossible, even if you wait for an eternity!"

Scholar Chen spoke up again. "Surely, such important money matters can't be settled on the first attempt. Squire Wei is just trying to make things difficult because the price I quoted the first time around was too high. Now that I've knocked off two hundred, maybe he'll relent."

Yielding to his insistence, the middlemen again went to see Squire Wei. Without a word, Squire Wei pulled a long face and went inside. (MC: *This is how disrespectful creditors can afford to be.*) Soon, four or five servants came out and addressed the middlemen in these words: "Master ordered us to go to Mr. Chen and demand payment of the debt. He can forget about paying off the debt with his house!"

Very much out of countenance, the middlemen joined the servants and went to see Scholar Chen again. While the middlemen remained silent, the

servants said in chorus, "Our master ordered us to sit here until payment is made."

A shamefaced Scholar Chen kept his resentment to himself and said to the middlemen, "Please talk nicely to the Wei family's servants and make them go back. I'll think about what to do next."

After a great deal of coaxing, the middlemen succeeded in making the servants return to their master's house, and they themselves also went their separate ways.

Choking with all his pent-up fury, Scholar Chen went to the interior part of the house and vented his spleen by banging the tables and chairs while heaving sigh after sigh. Taking in the situation at a glance, Ma-shi said purposely, "Why aren't you drinking, singing, and making merry in the pleasure quarters? Isn't the night still young? Why are you looking so miserable, heaving one sigh after another? There does seem to be less romance in the air here." (MC: *Now is the time for admonitions. A wise woman.*)

"How can you make fun of your husband like this? I'm suffering such indignity exactly because I ignored your advice and spent recklessly. I wanted to sell him the house across the river and asked for two hundred taels of silver, which is what's left after my debt is paid. But he adamantly refused and is still pressing me to repay the debt in cash. Then he sent several servants here to sit until payment is made. Luckily, the middlemen talked them into leaving, but they'll surely come back tomorrow morning. Am I to understand that house of mine is worth only six hundred taels of silver? I'm at my wit's end."

Ma-shi said, "When you were spending money like water, you thought there was no limit to the family savings. Thousands of taels at a time were thrown away. Little did you know that one day, a paltry two hundred taels would be so hard to come by! Since he refused to pay cash, just give the house to him. Why feel so dejected? If it had been three years ago, you would have given away multiple houses. What's the big deal when it's just one?"

Having thus got the rough side of his wife's tongue, Scholar Chen sank into silence. Later that night, he gloomily ate a perfunctory supper, washed his feet and hands, and went to sleep.

As a couplet puts it,

For those in joy, the night slips by all too quickly;

For those in loneliness, the hours drag on, and dawn never comes.

With so much weighing on his mind, Scholar Chen tossed and turned in his bed, waiting for a dawn that just would not come. It was not until the fifth watch when roosters began to crow that he felt sleep coming upon him, but a servant came in quite a few times and announced, "Squire Wei's men have been here for quite a while."

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Scholar Chen scrambled out of bed and went to ask the middlemen to come in. In their presence, he drew up a document specifying that his other house was to be sold to Squire Wei for six hundred taels of silver. When he handed the document to the middlemen, they gladly took it, unlike the day before, and went to report to Squire Wei. However furious he was, Scholar Chen had at least freed himself from harassment and felt obliged to come to terms with the arrangement. As for Squire Wei, he had not really given up on the house as he claimed, nor had he actually meant to take nothing but cash. He had just been taking advantage of the scholar's plight to press for repayment, all the while confident that the house would eventually be his. And sure enough, Scholar Chen had indeed buckled under pressure and signed the house over to him. Now that his wish had been fulfilled, Squire Wei had no more to say.

Let us come back to Scholar Chen. He deeply regretted having ceded the house to Squire Wei. He wore a scowl all day long, neglected his meals, and spent his nights sleepless, often saying between clenched teeth, "Should I ever come up in the world, I'll most certainly take revenge!"

Seeing him carrying on like this, Ma-shi said, "So you put the blame on others rather than yourself! Any other person with money would naturally put it to good use by every conceivable means. Who would squander borrowed money the way you did? What serious occupation were you engaged in that justifies selling such a nice house for a song? You don't mean to say that someone begged you to do it?"

"Now that things have come to this, do you suppose I have no regrets? But regrets are too late for what has already happened."

"You do have a way with words! But I'm afraid you might not mean what you say. 'Regret' is a weighty word. As the proverb goes, 'A prodigal son who reforms is like a ghost returning to life.' Maybe you're sulking at home with your head sunk between your shoulders only because you're short of money for the moment, and as soon as you lay your hands on a couple hundred taels, you'll be a philandering spendthrift again."

With a sigh, Scholar Chen said, "Wife! You don't understand me. I'm no block of wood. How can I not know anything? I did indeed neglect the management of the household. I followed bad advice, and I wallowed in pleasure and squandered the family fortune. But now, after experiencing all these troubles and insults, I'd be a heartless man if I remained a philanderer!"

His wife said, "From what you say, I suppose you still have some pride in you. I thought that you weren't going to stop what you were doing until everything was lost. And now that everything is indeed lost, it's no surprise that you should have no more illusions. Now let me ask you this: If you come into some money, what are you going to do with it?"

"If so, I'll first and foremost buy back that house and put that dog from Huizhou to shame, so that I can feel avenged. And then I'll open a shop or buy some land, and take things as they come, until I make a name for myself as a scholar. That would be my wish, and a thousand taels of silver should do it. But where is that kind of money to come from? As the idiom goes, I'll have to conjure up a cluster of plums to quench my thirst and draw a cake to allay my hunger." With that, he slapped the table and heaved a sigh.

Ma-shi said with the hint of a smile, "If what you just said is to be believed, what's so difficult about coming up with a thousand taels?"

Detecting something odd about that remark, Scholar Chen promptly asked, "Where am I supposed to find the money? Am I to get a loan or join a mutual-aid group with friends? Otherwise, where's the money supposed to come from?"

With another smile, Ma-shi said, "If you try to get a loan through an official channel, you'll only run into another Squire Wei. (MC: *She knows the ways of the world.*) As for those mutual-aid groups, well, relationships change with shifts in status, as they say. The way things are with you, which friend of yours would be willing to cough up money and form a mutual-aid group with you? You'd be better off looking homeward. You may have a chance here, for all you know."

"Looking homeward? Who can it be? Maybe you can do something for me? If you could help me out and point me in the right direction, I'll be ever so grateful!"

"Haven't you got all those friends who enjoyed life with you and shared your interests? Why don't any of them come to see you? And now you're

reduced to asking your wife for help. I'm but a lowly woman with nothing to offer. I just want to have one word with you."

"Please go ahead. I'm all yours."

"Are you truly determined to turn over a new leaf?"

"Need you even ask? If I, Chen Heng, set foot in the pleasure quarters again, may bad luck hound me for the rest of my life! And may I die a violent death!"

"In that case, I'll buy back the house for you." Having said that, Ma-shi took a key, led her husband to a dark corner in an inner room, and, pointing to a leather box, said to him, "Take the contents of that box to redeem the house and return whatever's left over to me."

Imagine Scholar Chen's joy at this blessing from heaven! Still incredulous, he opened the box and saw about a thousand taels of snow-white silver. As tears ran down his cheeks (MC: *These tears bespeak his remorse.*), Ma-shi asked, "What makes you so sad, pray?"

"I'm so worthless! I frittered away the family fortune while you, my good wife, denied yourself everything and saved enough for me to make a comeback! What kind of man am I? I'm so ashamed of myself!"

Ma-shi said, "If you can turn your life around, it will be a blessing for this family. Go and buy back the house tomorrow. There's no time to lose."

That day, Scholar Chen's joy knew no bounds.

The next day, he sent a messenger to ask the middlemen to approach Squire Wei. When they relayed the message, saying that Scholar Chen would like to buy back the house for six hundred taels of silver, Squire Wei, who had landed such a good deal, flatly rejected the offer, saying, "When the house was transferred to me, it was quite rundown. I added new rooms, had the house all fixed up in lavish style, and planted neat rows of bushes and flowers around it. And now he wants to have it back for six hundred taels. He's getting the best of the deal! Well, if I have to sell it, give me one thousand taels of silver, not a penny less!"

When the message was duly passed on to Scholar Chen, he said, "In that case, I'll have to take a look first. If he has indeed renovated the place, I'll have an estimate done and pay more." So he went to the house with the middlemen and asked, "Is the squire at home?"

A maidservant replied, "Master has just left for the pawnshop. The ladies of the house are inside, so please don't enter if there's nothing important."

The men said, "We'll just look around outside. There's no harm."

Thereupon, the maidservant let the men in. They took a walk on the grounds and saw that the house remained in a state of disrepair except for a few places where the floor had been patched, a couple of leaks plugged, and three or four broken bars in a railing replaced. Those were the only recognizable renovations. No additions had been made.

Having inspected the grounds, Scholar Chen said to the middlemen, "How can he raise the price when no additions have been made to the house? When I offered him the house and asked for only two hundred taels of silver in return, he took advantage of my dire situation and tried every means he could think of to seize my property. And now, he's again turning the tables on me. There's no justice! I was too vulnerable last time, but this time, I'm not going to let him walk all over me. Here's my six hundred taels of silver. Please deliver the money to him for me and tell him to vacate the premises. Even at this price, he still comes out ahead with the three hundred taels of interest."

The middlemen would not have been bold enough to approach Squire Wei with this message, but, awed by the sight of the silver that Scholar Chen had just produced, they picked up the flattering tone that had served them so well in the past and said, "You're absolutely right, sir! We'll surely tell him that!"

When the middlemen presented Squire Wei with the silver, the squire refused to take it, saying that it was not enough. However, the middlemen won the argument, so he resignedly took the money but did not specify when he was going to vacate the premises. Since he had taken the money, the middlemen thought that the case had basically been settled. They took a receipt, gave it to Scholar Chen, and went their separate ways.

After a few days, Scholar Chen sent a message urging Squire Wei to vacate the premises, but Squire Wei said, "I'll move out only after I recover the full amount of money I spent on renovations. Otherwise, it's out of the question."

After getting the same answer several times in a row, Scholar Chen seethed with rage and thought, "What a stubborn brute I'm up against! If I take him to the authorities, he'll surely lose the case, but the ruling on the disposal of the property may not be entirely to my satisfaction. Let me take my time and think of a way to deal with him. He'll have to leave. I haven't yet avenged myself over the humiliation I suffered from him, and there he goes again browbeating me. He'll be sorry for this!"

It was a bright moonlit night in the middle of the tenth lunar month. By the merest chance, Scholar Chen decided to take a stroll along the Qinhuai River. He walked leisurely for quite a while, and then, something happened. As the proverb puts it, "No coincidence, no story." Lo and behold, a dark object floated down from upstream. Scholar Chen looked closely and was shocked to see that it was a dead human body. It must have been washed there from the middle reaches of the Yangzi River, and it was nearing his house. His mind preoccupied with Squire Wei, he said to himself, "I know what to do now!" He summoned a servant named Chen Lu, who was his right-hand man and a man with a strong sense of loyalty. Scholar Chen often consulted him.

"I suffered such indignities from that Wei dog," said Scholar Chen to Chen Lu. "I haven't been able to vent my spleen, and yet, here he goes again, refusing to vacate the premises. I've been thinking of a way to fix him."

Chen Lu said, "You're right, master. You've enjoyed wealth and distinction. You're not a little man. Why take such abuse from him? We can stomach no more of this and often want to fight him to the death to avenge you, sir."

"I've got a plan. You must do thus and so as I say. I'll have a handsome reward for you."

Beside himself with joy, Chen Lu said, "Good plan! Good plan!" He acknowledged the order and left to put it into action.

The next day, Chen Lu put on a loose-fitting robe and, with Third Master Lu, a good friend of Scholar Chen's serving as a go-between, went across the lake to offer his services to Squire Wei. Impressed by his good looks and articulateness, the squire accepted him and assigned him a room. Chen Lu was given access to all the rooms, and a diligent and capable servant he proved himself to be.

One day, more than a month later, Squire Wei rose bright and early and went to look for Chen Lu to tell him to buy firewood. He found Chen Lu's door open. He went in, but Chen Lu was not there. After looking for him everywhere without success, he assigned several servants to the search, but they all returned after a while, saying he was nowhere in sight. Not having spent much money on him, Squire Wei did not think much of the matter.

When Squire Wei was about to approach the go-between and ask him about Chen Lu's whereabouts, several servants from the Chen household came and said to him, "A servant named Chen Lu escaped from our household a month ago. We heard that Third Master Lu took him here to enter

your service. Tell him to come out this instant and follow us back. Don't hide him! Our master has filed a complaint against you at the yamen!"

Squire Wei said, "There was indeed a man who came a month ago to enter my service. I didn't know he was from your household. He suddenly ran away the other night, for whatever reason. So you won't find him here."

"How could he have escaped again? You must have hidden him and made up that story to fool us. We won't believe it until we've searched the place."

With exaggerated nonchalance, Squire Wu said, "Go ahead! If you don't find him, don't be surprised if I box your ears!"

The servants trooped into the house and searched everywhere except the rat holes. Squire Wei was about to explode when the servants shouted, "Look here!"

Not knowing what was happening, Squire Wei drew near for a look. It turned out that they had dug in a spot where the soil was loose and found a dead man's leg. Squire Wei stood transfixed in shock. The servants clamored, "Squire Wei must have murdered the man and buried one of his legs here. Let's get our master here and talk with him about reporting this to the yamen."

One of the servants quickly went and brought Scholar Chen onto the scene. In a thunderous rage, Scholar Chen yelled, "Heaven forbids the taking of human lives! How could you have murdered a servant of mine? Let's report this to the yamen. What are we waiting for?" Having said that, he told his servants to carry the leg to the yamen.

As they were about to exit the house, Squire Wei blocked their way and said, trembling with fear, "Oh my lord and master! I truly and honestly did not kill him!"

Scholar Chen said, "Nonsense! Where did this human leg come from? You can do your explaining at the yamen!"

As a matter of fact, rich people dread the government, and this was a case of homicide, too. Squire Wei said imploringly, "Can't we talk about this? You can do whatever you want with me, sir, but please don't take me to the authorities. I don't want any trouble with the law!" (MC: *At such moments, they can no longer afford to be calculating, devious in their arguments, and disrespectful.*)

Scholar Chen said, "You seized my property without paying anything, and while you occupied it, you demanded payment from me. What a brute you are! And then you took in a servant of mine and murdered him. This is a chance for me to avenge myself through the yamen! I'm not going to let you off."

Squire Wei pleaded, "My lord and master! It's all been my fault. You can have the house back."

"Why did you lie and claim to have made additions to the grounds? Give me back the three hundred taels of interest you took from me for repairs to the house. Then write me a confession. Then we'll keep our mouths shut about the whole thing and cremate the leg so that no evidence will ever be found. Otherwise, with so many people witnessing the excavation of the leg in your house in these times of peace and order, you won't be let off easy once word gets out."

In spite of the injustice done to him, Squire Wei only wanted to be free of legal trouble. In resignation, he wrote the confession and handed it to Scholar Chen. Then the scholar forced him to return the three hundred taels of interest and insisted that he vacate the premises. Left with no alternative, Squire Wei moved into his pawnshop on Sanshan Street before the night was out, and the leg was hidden away. Only then did Scholar Chen feel vindicated.

You may well ask, where did that leg come from? Well, when Scholar Chen happened to see a dead body floating toward him as he was taking a walk that moonlit night on the fifteenth day of the tenth lunar month, he told Chen Lu the servant to cut one leg off the corpse. The next day, Chen Lu surreptitiously took the leg with him when he went to offer his services to Squire Wei and, when unobserved, buried it in a quiet spot. After he returned to Scholar Chen's house, a group of Chen's servants, ostensibly looking for Chen Lu, dug up the leg, and threatened to press charges against Squire Wei at the yamen. Squire Wei panicked and, at a loss as to what to do, vacated the premises and returned the three hundred taels of interest. It was Scholar Chen's wonderful plan that made all this possible.

Scholar Chen recovered the house and, by managing what remained of his family fortune wisely, surprisingly became a rich man again. Later, he passed the provincial examinations but never attained an official post. Chen Lu went away but returned to the Chen household after a long absence. (MC: *A long absence is necessary.*) Squire Wei occasionally encountered Scholar Chen and guessed, correctly, that he had been tricked. But he had already returned the deed to the house, and, not having kept any evidence in his haste on that day, he could not press charges and demand that justice be done. What's more, knowing nothing about where the leg had come from, he would have had too much explaining to do, and he did have something on his conscience, after all. So he was obliged to let the matter drop. This is the

story of Scholar Chen's clever plan to win back his house, as witnessed by the following poem:

*Spendthrifts bring ruin to their families,
Neither are loan sharks worthy of praise.
Disasters that seem to come out of the blue
Are in fact borne out of one's own evil doings.*

Zhang Liu'er Lays One of His Many Traps

Lu Huiniang Severs a Bond of Marriage

As the poem says,

*Even the cleverest plots may not work;
Evil schemers are in fact a sorry lot.
They try to lift the moon out of the water
But in the end ruin themselves and their families.*

Our story is about the most detestable of all criminals—swindlers. People do put themselves on guard against robbers and thieves when warned, but generally speaking, they do not suspect fellow travelers of harboring evil intentions. The swindlers play tricks so clever and elaborate that even the gods fail to see through them, and the victims throw themselves trustingly into their embrace. By the time the deed has been done and the victims see the truth, it is too late to hunt down the criminals. Aren't those confidence men the worst thieves and undercover robbers?

The story goes that in the sixteenth year of the Wanli reign period [1573–1620] of this dynasty [Ming], there lived a Mr. Hu outside the north gate of Hangzhou Prefecture, Zhejiang. His wife having recently died, he, now in his late fifties, lived with his two sons and their wives. Both daughters-in-law had some claim to attractiveness (MC: *The source of trouble.*), and they treated their father-in-law with reverence.

One day, all three men went out, leaving the women at home. They closed the front door and began doing their household chores inside. With a heavy

rain pouring down, the streets were bare of pedestrians. Around noon-time, they heard the feeble but heartbroken sobs of a woman from outside, and the sobs went on nonstop until, at sundown, the two daughters-in-law could not restrain themselves any longer and went out the door to investigate. Truly,

*As they sat peacefully at home behind closed doors,
Disaster struck right down from heaven.*

If this storyteller had been born at the same time they were and had grown up with them, shoulder to shoulder, I would have seized them, blocked their way, and told them that whatever was happening, however important, was no concern of theirs. If the truth be told, women, in most circumstances, should not involve themselves in what does not concern them, and they must exercise caution in everything they do. (MC: *Good advice for women*.) It is better if the husbands are at home. If not, they should remain in the depths of their boudoirs, and nothing untoward would happen to them. But if they unthinkingly get involved in some dispute, they will surely land themselves in trouble. The two daughters-in-law should not have opened the door and gone out that day, but they did.

On seeing a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman, they asked, feeling safe, "Where are you from, madam? What makes you so sad? You can tell us about it!"

Shielding her teary eyes, the woman said, "Young ladies, I live in a village just outside the city. I'm a widow. I live with my son and daughter-in-law. My daughter-in-law suffers from ill health, and my son is quite unfilial. He yells at me and doesn't take good care of me. My meals are few and far between. With resentment, my brother and I agreed to go to the county yamen today and accuse him of the crime of filial impiety. My brother told me to go first, saying he'd catch up with me soon, but I've been waiting for him a whole day, and he still hasn't shown up. If I go home in such a heavy rain, I'll only be ridiculed by my son and daughter-in-law. I'm really in a fix, which is why I've been crying over my bitter fate. I had no idea that I'd caught your attention. Since you were so good as to ask me solicitous questions, I thought I shouldn't hide my family scandals from you."

Touched by her tale of woe and the circumspect way she chose her words, the two daughters-in-law said, "In that case, please come in and sit down while you wait for him." (MC: *They fall into her trap after all*.) As they led the

woman in, they continued, “Just sit back and relax, madam. You can go home after the rain stops. Your son is your flesh and blood after all. Even if he acted inappropriately in the rush of the moment, it’s better to talk to him nicely. To take him to court would only sour the peace at home and make you lose face.”

The woman said, “Thank you so much for your advice. All right, I’ll bear with them longer.”

While they were thus engaged in conversation, evening had long ago set in. The woman remarked, “It’s so dark now, but he still hasn’t shown up. I can’t very well go home by myself. What’s to be done?”

Her hostesses replied, “Why don’t you stay here for the night? We have nothing fancy in the way of food and tea, and a couple of extra portions don’t cost us much!”

“But I shouldn’t be inconveniencing you like this.” So saying, the woman rolled up her sleeves and went straight to the kitchen to start a fire. Then she had her hostesses measure out some rice, cooked it, wiped the table and chairs clean, and fetched water, taking on almost all the chores that needed to be done around the house.

The two young women protested, “We should be waiting on you! How can we allow you to tire yourself out like this!”

“I’m used to doing these things at my own home. I feel good when I keep myself busy, and I get drowsy when there’s nothing to do. If you have jobs to do, just give them to me!”

That night, after they had all washed their hands and feet, the woman helped her hostesses to bed before she herself retired for the night. The next morning, she was the first to rise. She boiled water, made porridge with the leftovers from yesterday’s supper, and wiped the chairs and table again—all this she did effortlessly with practiced hands. After the two young women rose, they found that everything they were prepared to do had already been done for them. (MC: *The woman takes every precaution.*) Without having to exert the slightest effort, they grew so complacent that they took each other’s counsel and said, “That lady is so friendly and so hardworking. Since she’s unhappy at home and we need help around the house, why don’t we talk Father into marrying her? He does often say that he’s ready to remarry. Wouldn’t that be nice on both counts? (MC: *Getting meddling.*) But we can’t very well bring the matter up with her. Let’s keep her here and wait until Father comes home before deciding what to do next.”

A few days later, the three men returned home. When they asked the two women of the house to explain the presence of a stranger, the women told them everything they knew about the visitor and her problems at home, adding, "She's very amiable and hardworking. Having lost her husband and with her son so nasty to her, she has nowhere to go. How sad!" Then they told their respective husbands about the agreement the two of them had reached and asked them to inform their father about it.

When the two sons did approach their father with the proposal, the latter said, "We know nothing about her background. How can we rush into such things? But she can stay longer. We'll see." Even though he thought it improper to agree then and there, he was in fact quite pleased with her looks. After a couple of days, the old man, who lacked good sense, began to surreptitiously make passes at the woman. (MC: *Maybe it's the other way around.*)

Observing this development, the daughters-in-law said to their husbands, "Father does often say that he intends to remarry. Why doesn't he take this lady as his wife? That way, we'll be spared the trouble and expense of looking elsewhere for a bride."

Their husbands said, "You do have a point." Thereupon, they went to speak to their father. The daughters-in-law had already talked the woman into the idea. Both parties readily agreed. A family feast was laid out, and after a few cups of wine had been downed with good cheer, Mr. Hu and the woman became man and wife.

A couple of days later, two men came to the door to make inquiries, one claiming to be the woman's brother, the other her son. Both said that they had been looking for her for quite a few days until they learned she was in this place. Having heard them, the woman went out. The son prostrated himself on the ground and asked for forgiveness, and the brother also apologized for him, but the woman was not mollified. As she railed against them nonstop, old Mr. Hu acted the peacemaker, offering many kindly words. As the brother and the son asked her to return home, the woman said harshly to her son, "Even every mouthful of plain water I take here is a joy to me. Why would I want to go back and put myself into your murderous hands again? Look at my daughters-in-law! They're so dutiful to me!"

On hearing this, the son knew that his mother had married the old man. Mr. Hu Senior set out wine in honor of the brother and the son. With a bow to Mr. Hu, the son said, "You're my stepfather now. I'm so glad that my mother will be taken good care of for the rest of her life. This is indeed a stroke of

great fortune for her!" After their departure, they returned for several visits within two or three months' time.

One day, the son came again and said, "Tomorrow is my son's betrothal day. I'm here to invite Father, Mother, and my brothers and sisters-in-law to the betrothal feast."

The woman replied, "How can two young ladies go to our home when the occasion isn't grand enough? I'll just go with Father and your two brothers."

The next day, the woman and Mr. Hu and his two sons went and spent the whole day at the betrothal feast, after which they returned home happy and roaring drunk.

More than a month after that, the grandson came and said, "Tomorrow is my wedding day. I'm here to invite your entire family to go and join the ceremony." Then he emphasized, "My two aunts must go, to add to the splendor of the occasion."

Both daughters-in-law were only too eager to visit their stepmother-in-law's home (MC: *Being nosy*.) and regretted that they had not been able to go to the last feast. Radiant with smiles, they accepted the invitation.

The next day, they went to the party arrayed in their best, together with their father-in-law, mother-in-law, and their husbands. The groom's mother-in-law, a sallow and sickly-looking woman, came out to greet them. In the early afternoon, the son—the groom's father—asked his mother and his wife to go to the bride's home to bring the bride over. He also asked Mr. Hu's two daughters-in-law to join them, saying, "According to our local custom, all female relatives are supposed to go. Otherwise, we'll be accused of not treating the bride with enough respect."

Mr. Hu's wife said to her son, "I know your wife is ill, but now that she's a mother-in-law, she needs only to go by herself. Why drag your two sisters-in-law along?" (MC: *Being deliberately earnest so as not to arouse suspicions*.)

The son replied, "My wife's sickly appearance may not be a credit to us in terms of proper etiquette. I'm afraid our newly acquired in-laws may look down on us. Since my two sisters-in-law are already here, why begrudge the little time that will be spent on the road? If they go, they'll make us look much better."

"You do have a point," said his mother.

In their eagerness to join the fun, old Mr. Hu's two daughters-in-law left with their mother-in-law and the groom's mother. The four of them boarded a boat and were gone.

More than two hours elapsed but the women did not return. The groom's father said, "How very strange! Let me go and see what's happening."

Some time after he had gone, his son, in bridegroom's attire, said to Mr. Hu and his two sons, "Please stay here and relax. Let me go, too, and find out what's happening." With that, he sauntered out of the house. (MC: *Doing a "golden cicada shedding its skin" trick and leaving no trace. Real masters.*)

Mr. Hu and his two sons were the only ones left sitting by the lamp in the hall. They waited and waited, but no one returned. Hungry and apprehensive, the two sons went into the kitchen and saw that it was bare, with no fire going, no meal being prepared, and nothing to suggest that it was a household ready for a wedding ceremony. They went back into the hall, told their father about it, and picked up a lantern to take a look at the inner rooms. By the light of the lantern, they saw that all the rooms were empty, with no trunks, clothes, or bedding but only a few chairs and tables. Appalled, they said, "How can this be?" They wanted to ask the neighbors, but the night was far advanced by now and all the doors were bolted.

The three men shot in and out of the house with the frenzy of ants on hot ground. (MC: *Now they are worried.*) It was not until daybreak that they found a neighbor. When they asked him where those people had gone, the neighbor professed to know nothing. They asked again, "Does that house belong to that family?"

The neighbor replied, "The house belongs to Mr. Yang, who lives in the city. That family rented the house about five or six months ago, but no one knows what they do for a living. Aren't you relatives of theirs? You've visited with them many times. Why is it you don't know anything but have to turn to us for information?"

Mr. Hu and his sons asked several more neighbors and got the same answer. A couple of them who knew more about the ways of the world said, "They must be a gang of big swindlers. You fell into their trap and lost your women to them."

The father and sons rushed back helter-skelter, like stray dogs without a home. Then they set out separately to search for the women, but to no avail. Left with no alternative, they filed a complaint at the yamen, which then put up "wanted" posters all over the region, but there was little hope that the case could ever be solved. Old Mr. Hu had thought that he was gaining a wife on the cheap, little knowing that he was to lose two daughters-in-law as a

consequence. This is a case of a petty gain leading to a major loss. The moral of the story is that one must never covet small advantages and do things that are less than honorable. Truly,

*Believe not in what appears to be straightforward;
Be on guard against those who seem to be kind.
To covet the moon in the sky
Is to lose your treasure on earth.*

So much for the above story. Let us now turn to another story, one about a confidence man who spent his whole life in this line of work but was outsmarted in the end. In Tongxiang County, Jiaxing Prefecture, Zhejiang, there lived a scholar named Shen Canruo who, at twenty years of age, was known throughout Jiaxing for his literary talent. Of tall stature and vigorous build, he was also broad-minded and had an expansive nature. His wife, Wang-shi, was a ravishing beauty, forming a perfect match with him. Their family fortunes were quite ample, and Wang-shi, to her credit, kept good watch over their assets. Well aware of their distinguished status as a beauty married to a talented scholar, they were as happy in their union as fish in water and as inseparable as lacquer and glue. However, Wang-shi was of delicate health and was never free of ailments. As for Canruo, he had been enrolled in a government school at age twelve and had become a stipend student at age fifteen. With his sharp intelligence, he brimmed with youthful arrogance, believing that first honors on the civil service examinations would be his for the taking. He spent much of his time with close friends, enjoying poetry and wine or feasting their eyes on mountains and waters, quite unrestrained by conventional codes of behavior. As the ancients put it, "The intelligent and the talented are drawn to one another." Among his circle of friends, the four closest to him were scholars Huang Pingzhi from Jiashan County, He Cheng from Xiushui County, Yue Erjia from Haiyan County, and Fang Chang from the same county as he was. All five of them found great delight in one another's company. They were all from the same prefecture, and Mr. Shen also associated with numerous talented scholars from other prefectures and regions.

Mr. Ji Qing, magistrate of the local county and a native of Jiangyin County, Changzhou, had great respect and affection for scholars. Confident

that Shen Canruo would win honors at the imperial civil-service examinations, he formed a teacher-student relationship with the young man and enjoyed his company.

When the provincial-level examinations drew near in the year of which we speak, Canruo returned home from his school to pack for his journey to Hangzhou to sit for the examinations. As he said good-bye to Wang-shi, who was ill, she said tearfully while putting things together for him, "You have a bright future ahead of you. Please come back as soon as you can. I wonder if I have the good fortune to share your wealth and honor."

"What kind of talk is this, wife? You're ill. You need to take good care of yourself while I'm away." So saying, he also involuntarily shed tears. Hand in hand, they bade each other farewell. Wang-shi saw him out through the gate and waited until he had disappeared from view before she went back into the house, wiping away her tears.

Canruo was in low spirits as he went along. A few days later, he arrived in Hangzhou and found lodging at an inn. All three sessions of the exams went by quickly, and he felt triumphant.

One evening, after a daylong excursion to a lake with his many friends, he went to bed quite drunk. At midnight, he suddenly heard knocks on his door. He threw some clothes on and got out of bed. Seeing a Daoist-looking man wearing a tall hat and a robe with wide sleeves, he asked, "Sir, what instructions do you have for me, coming here so late at night?"

The man replied, "This humble priest is quite able to tell a man's fortune from his energy field. It just so happens that I came from the southeast and find myself without a place to stay at this time of night. I'm sorry to have disturbed you with my knocks at your door."

"Since you're looking for a place to stay for the night, sir, you're welcome to share my bed. The results of the exams will be announced soon. With your fortune-telling skills, could you use my natal chart and tell me about my chances on the exams?"

"I need no natal charts. A look at your energy field will suffice. With your imposing looks, you'll have no lack of fame and fortune, but only after your wife passes away. I offer you two lines that sum up your fortune. Remember them:

*Success on the exams coincides with a death;
The phoenix gives way to a pair of mandarin ducks.*

Canruo was about to ask for further clarification of the Daoist's meaning when a cat outside pounced on a mouse with a loud noise. He gave a start and realized that it had been a dream. He said to himself, "What a strange dream that was! All too clearly, that priest was saying that only after my wife dies will I gain fame and fortune. But I'd rather remain a student holding no official position the rest of my life. I don't want to gain fame and fortune only to lose my beloved wife." The two lines stood out so clearly in his memory that he kept tossing and turning and slept only in fits and starts. He said to himself again, "Why should I believe what I heard in a dream? Tomorrow, if I don't see my name on the list of successful candidates, I'll go home immediately."

In the midst of these thoughts, he heard a commotion outside, with loud cries and the beating of gongs. It was a procession to announce that Canruo had won third place on the examinations. In response to solicitations for tips, Canruo made out notes of redemption for silver. After the procession dispersed, he hastily combed his hair and washed, and went to call on the chief examiner and fellow candidates in a sedan-chair. The chief examiner was none other than Ji Qing, the magistrate of his home county. And the one who had placed first on the examinations was He Cheng, a close friend of Canruo's. A few of his other friends—Huang Pingzhi, Yue Erjia, and Fang Chang—had also passed the examinations with flying colors. Everyone rejoiced.

Dusk had deepened into evening by the time Canruo finished what he was duty bound to do. As he drew near his inn, the innkeeper rushed up to his sedan-chair and said in alarm, "Mr. Shen! Someone from your family is here to deliver an emergency letter. He's been waiting for you for quite some time now."

On hearing that there was an emergency letter from his family, Canruo felt his heart take a sudden leap. As the lines he had heard in his dream came flashing back to him, his heart began to pound violently, as if there were fifteen clanging buckets going up and down in the same well. Verily,

*A green dragon and a white tiger
Bring either joy or woe when together.¹*

Upon arrival at the inn, he got off the sedan-chair and saw Shen Wen, a family servant, clad all in white. He asked, "How is Mistress? (IC: *Important*.) Who sent you here?"

Shen Wen replied, "It's not for me to answer your first question. It was Butler Li who told me to deliver this letter. Please read it, and you'll know everything."

Canruo took the letter and found that the envelope was sealed with the flap inside, in the manner of envelopes containing obituaries. Feeling as if he were being stabbed through the heart, he tore the envelope open and learned that his wife had passed away on the twenty-sixth of that month. Canruo was petrified. It was as if

*The eight pieces of his skull opened up
And half a bucket of wet snow poured in.*

For a good long while he made no sound, and all of a sudden he collapsed onto the ground. Those around him revived him and raised him to his feet. A lump rising in his throat, he broke down in wails of grief, calling his wife's name over and over again. There was not a dry eye throughout the inn.

"Had I known this would happen," lamented Canruo, "I wouldn't have come to sit for the exams. Little did I know that I'd never see her again!" (MC: *How sad!*) Turning to Shen Wen, he asked, "Why didn't you come earlier to let me know about her condition?"

Shen Wen replied, "After your departure, sir, Mistress's condition remained the same as before. It wasn't very serious. But on the twenty-sixth day of the month, she suddenly fell into a coma and never woke up again. I came as soon and as fast as I could."

After another burst of sobs, Canruo told Shen Wen to hire a boat so that they could return home posthaste. He had no time to be concerned with anything else. Inwardly, he was awed by the accuracy of what he had heard in his dream. The results of the examinations were announced on the twenty-seventh of the month, and Wang-shi died on the twenty-sixth, bearing out the line "Success on the exams coincides with a death."

Having gathered his luggage, he left the inn. Before he had gone very far, he ran into a schoolmate, Huang Pingzhi, seated in a sedan-chair. After they exchanged greetings, Huang Pingzhi said, "My brother, you look very sad. Is anything the matter?" Holding back his tears, Canruo told him everything, from his dream to the announcement of the results of the examinations and the obituary letter, adding that he was now on his way home.

Pingzhi sighed heavily and said, "My brother, please restrain your grief and don't be too distraught. I'll tell our teacher and friends about this on

your behalf. You just go ahead and don't worry on that score." With that, they bade each other farewell.

Canruo made all the speed he could on his way home. Upon arrival, he went inside and fell onto his wife's dead body in a flood of tears. Several times, he cried until he fainted. After the corpse was encoffined at a chosen hour, the coffin was placed temporarily in the main hall. Canruo spent his nights keeping vigil over it.

About twenty days later, halfway into the forty-nine-day mourning period, some of the friends who came to offer their condolences brought up the subject of the next level of the examinations, which were to be held in the capital. Canruo commented indifferently, "My pursuit of vainglory the size of a snail's horn snatched my beloved wife away from me. Even if the first-place winner's certificate were lying right here at my feet, I wouldn't even bother to pick it up." (MC: *A loyal husband*.) Well, this was said shortly after Wang-shi's death.

In the twinkling of an eye, the forty-nine-day mourning period came to an end. His friends and relatives again offered him advice, saying, "Since it's impossible for your honorable wife to come back to life, what useful purpose does it serve to mope like this? There being nothing to do at home, you'd naturally feel lonely. Now, if you go to the capital with your fellow candidates, you'll be able to see the sights, feel refreshed, and, what's more, chatting with friends will dispel your sorrow. Your grief serves no purpose. How can you let it get in the way of the career of a lifetime?"

Yielding to their pressure, Canruo said, "Since you all mean so well, I have no choice but to join you on the journey."

Then and there, he took leave of Wang-shi's spiritual tablet, instructed Butler Li to take care of offering food and incense to the shrine, and set out on his journey with his friends Huang, He, Fang, and Yue.

It was the middle of the eleventh lunar month. The five men traveled by day and rested by night and arrived in the capital in a matter of days. They spent their time reveling in poetry recitation and visiting the pleasure quarters. Canruo was the only one with no interest in any of the girls.

Time sped by. Before one knew it, another year had elapsed. The Lantern Festival [the fifteenth day of the first lunar month] came and went, and gradually the peach blossoms bloomed, water turned warm, and the time for the examinations rolled around. All five of them sat through all three sessions of the examinations. The other four did well and were full of confidence,

but Canruo, in low spirits, just rushed through the examinations perfunctorily. Before long, the list of successful candidates was posted. All four of Canruo's friends made the list, but he did not, and yet he could not have cared less. (MC: *Had he known this earlier, he would have spent the time keeping vigil by his wife's coffin.*) Huang, He, Fang, and Yue went to the ceremony in honor of the successful candidates, a ceremony that was presided over by the emperor. He Cheng, having made it into the second class on the list, was appointed a division director in the Ministry of Defense, and his family joined him in the capital. Huang Pingzhi was assigned a position in the Imperial Hanlin Academy. Yue Erjia became an officer of imperial ceremonies, and Fang Chang was assigned a post in the messengers office of the Ministry of Rites. Ji Qing, the county magistrate, was promoted to supervising secretary in the Ministry of Justice. They all went to assume their respective offices, but so much for his friends for now.

Canruo spent more time sightseeing before he returned to Tongxiang County. After entering his house, he bowed twice to Wang-shi's shrine, burst into abundant tears, prepared sacrificial offerings, and poured a libation. Two months later, he engaged a feng shui master and had Wang-shi buried in a chosen spot. After all this had been done, matchmakers gradually began to knock at his door. He thought that if he, a man of the highest caliber, lacked a predestined bond with even a beauty like Wang-shi, he had no hope of finding a perfect match. He told the matchmakers that he must see the candidates with his own eyes and that only when they were to his liking could he start talking about any possibilities. He was in no rush.

Time flew like an arrow, and the sun and moon shuttled back and forth. Only when there is a lot to tell will a story be a long one, but there being little to tell at this point, let me skip three years and come to the time when Canruo was about to go to the capital again to take the examinations. His one regret was that there was no one to take care of his house. As the saying goes, "An untended house turns upside down." After his wife's death, the furniture and utensils in the house began to wear out. Lamenting the rundown look of his home, he said to himself, "I need a wife to take care of the house. Too bad there's no one suitable." Feeling low, he entrusted household management to Butler Li, as before, and packed for his journey.

It was the eighth lunar month of the year, with cool and refreshing autumn breezes, the perfect season for traveling. Under a bright moon casting its light on the waves that merged with the sky into one color, Canruo

drank alone, and feeling listless and saddened by scenery that reminded him of his loneliness, he improvised a poem:

*Dewdrops gather around the autumn pond;
I let down the bed curtains from the hooks;
The moon shines through my window, but to what purpose?
I left my nuptial quilts at home far away,
To take this long journey all alone,
But this raft can hardly take me to "The Terrace."²
I gaze at the moon in vain,
For I see no sign of her.
(To the tune of "The Oriole")*

Then he drank until he was tipsy and went to bed by himself on the boat.

Let us skip irrelevant details and come to the time when he arrived in the capital about twenty days later. He rented a place to stay to the east of the examination grounds and settled in. One day, he went for a drink with several friends outside Qihua Gate. There, they saw a woman in mourning white riding a lame donkey, followed by a man who looked like a servant carrying food boxes. The woman looked as if she was on her way back from a visit to a graveyard. Canruo eyed her and saw that

*Her complexion needed no white powder;
Her cheeks needed no rouge.
One inch taller and she would be too tall;
One inch shorter and she would be too short.
She was perfect in every way,
And her grace and charm matched her sweetness.
She is gentleness itself
Without carrying it to excess.
Her bewitching smile sends one into raptures;
Her enticing eyes hold one in thrall.
Even a woman given to jealousy
Would feel kindly disposed toward her.*

As Canruo eyed the woman, his three souls took flight through the top of his head and his seven spirits gave him the slip through the soles of his feet.

Abandoning his friends, he hired a donkey and went after the woman, gawking at her from behind, as if spellbound. She, on donkeyback, turned her head from time to time, throwing glances at him with eyes that were as limpid as autumn water. (MC: *Are these glances at this time meaningful or not?*) About a *li* farther on, she entered a house in a quiet and secluded place. Canruo also dismounted but, unable to tear himself away from her, stood transfixed at the gate and stared with glazed eyes. He stood there for the longest time, but the woman did not reappear. While he was wondering what to do, a man emerged and said, "May I ask why you're peering inside, sir?"

"I came the same way as the young lady in white did. She entered this house. I've been wondering what kind of family this is and who the young lady is, but there's no one around to ask."

The man said, "She's my cousin Lu Huiniang. She's recently been widowed and is now staying here. She's just come back from a visit to her deceased husband's grave. She's looking for a new match, and I came over to offer her my services as a matchmaker."

"What is your honorable name?"

"My surname is Zhang. Because I'm good at getting things done, people gave me the nickname Zhang Liu'er [Getting Things Done Easily]."

Canruo asked, "What kind of man is your cousin looking for? Would she be willing to leave her home and live in another town?"

Liu'er said, "Any young scholar will do. The location doesn't matter."

"Let me be frank with you," said Canruo. "I have a *juren* degree from the last round of the examinations. I'm here to sit for the national-level exam. I truly admire your cousin for her peerless beauty. If you could play the matchmaker for me, I'll give you a handsome reward."

"That's easily done!" said Liu'er. "I believe my cousin won't turn down a handsome man like you. Just leave it to me! I'll surely be able to pull this off!"

Overjoyed, Canruo said, "If so, please convey my sentiments to her." So saying, he extracted an ingot of silver from his sleeve and handed it to Liu'er, saying, "This is a little gift for you, just to show my gratitude in a small way. After the job is done, I'll have many more rewards for you."

After making a polite pretense of declining, Liu'er accepted the silver. Taking Canruo to be a rich man from the way he so readily parted with his money, Liu'er said, "Please come back tomorrow for an answer."

Canruo returned to his lodging on cloud nine.

The next day, he went again to that house on the outskirts of the town to get his answer. At the gate, he saw Liu'er walking up to him, all smiles.

"Sir!" said Liu'er. "A happy event is in store for you! And you're quite early! I relayed your message to my cousin. She's already taken a fancy to you (MC: *Who knows if this is true or not!*). So, that made my job easy. She agreed on my first try! You need only get the betrothal gifts ready and prepare for the wedding. My cousin has means of her own, so she doesn't care about the betrothal gifts. Just use your own judgment." (MC: *Goodwill does not necessarily translate into the monetary value of gifts.*)

So Canruo sent over thirty taels of silver, the amount he would have spent on clothes and jewelry for the bride. There was no haggling over the amount, and a wedding date was set. Such readiness on the bride's part made Canruo somewhat apprehensive. But then he remembered that northerners called women who remarried "ghost wives," which he thought was the reason she was so accommodating.

On the chosen day, a procession complete with a drum-and-reed ensemble, lanterns, and a bridal sedan-chair went to that house to take Lu Huiniang to Canruo's lodging for the wedding ceremony. When Lu Huiniang arrived in the sedan-chair, Canruo was beside himself with joy when he recognized her, by lamplight, as the very woman he had seen the other day. (MC: *So he wasn't sure.*) Only then did he put his mind at ease. They made nuptial bows to heaven and earth, and after the wedding banquet was over, the guests dispersed and went their separate ways.

The newlyweds went into the bedroom, but Huiniang unexpectedly sat down in a chair and did not budge. At about the first watch of the night, when night had fallen and all was quiet, Canruo spoke up. Having abstained for so long, he was burning with desire. "Wife," said he, "let's go to bed."

In her coquettish way, she said, "You go ahead first."

Believing she was shy, Canruo thought it better not to force her. So he went to bed first, but how could he fall asleep? After another hour went by with Huiniang still glued to her seat, Canruo again pleaded, "Aren't you tired from the day's activities? Why don't you take a rest? What do you mean by sitting there?"

Again, Huiniang said, "You go ahead and sleep." In the meantime, she kept her eyes fixed on Canruo. (MC: *Not the way she looked at him last time.*)

Afraid that he might displease his bride, Canruo obliged and slept by himself for a while. Then he rose and asked gently, "Why aren't you in bed yet?"

Again, Huiniang looked him over closely and asked, "Do you have any influential acquaintances in the capital?" (IC: *What a strange question!*)

"I have a wide circle of friends, including schoolmates and fellow exam candidates, many of whom are in the capital now. And then there are other, ordinary acquaintances."

"If so, let me be your real wife!" (IC: *Even stranger.*)

"What a funny thing to say! I met you a thousand *li* from home, sought the services of a matchmaker, offered betrothal gifts, and held a wedding ceremony with you. What makes you think you aren't my real wife?"

Huiniang replied, "You wouldn't have imagined it, but Zhang Liu'er is a notorious con man. I'm no cousin of his. I'm his wife. Because of my looks, he makes me entice men to our house. Then he makes out that I'm a widowed cousin planning to remarry and that he's the matchmaker. Plenty of men who like a pretty face have offered to marry me. But he doesn't demand lavish gifts. Each time he tricks one such man into the deal, he sends me to the wedding ceremony. He tells me to act shy and unwilling to go to bed with the man, so as not to be sullied. The next day, he comes with a gang of thugs, accuses the man of ensnaring a woman from a decent family, and takes me back, along with all of the man's possessions. The victims are afraid of being caught in brushes with the law while they're on the road. So they swallow the humiliation and keep their mouths shut about the scam. This has happened many times.

"The other day, I was on my way home from a visit to my mother's grave. I'm definitely not newly widowed. That devil of a man happened to see you, and he played his old trick again. I've often wondered if I was condemned to do this the rest of my life. Should the scams be found out, I'd be finished for life. Even though I've never been sullied, it's wrong for me to be stealthily involved with so many men. I've tried several times to talk my husband around, but he turns a deaf ear. Then I came up with an idea of my own: Why don't I play along and then turn the tables on him? If I meet someone I really like, I'll elope with him. (MC: *For her laudable determination, she deserves the good fortune that is in store for her.*) Now, you, sir, are quite different from the common run, and I also admire your sincerity and kindness. But I fear that if I elope with you and then he finds us, we'll only suffer with no one to protect us. Since you have friends all over the capital, I'd like to commit myself to you, sir. But you'll have to seek shelter in a good friend's home in a secure place and do it this very night. Only by so doing will you be able to marry me without trouble. Now I'm acting as my own matchmaker in order

to commit myself to you. (MC: *A woman with vision.*) In the future, please don't forget this gesture of mine."

Canruo was dumbstruck. Only after a considerable while did he find his tongue again. "I'm ever so grateful to you for enlightening me. Otherwise I would have become a victim."

Losing no time, he went out of the bedroom, woke his servant, and packed. He put Huiniang on the lame donkey that he had been feeding himself and had the servant carry the trunks, while he himself went on foot. But before going through the gate, he called out to the owner of the house, "We're leaving! We have an urgent matter to attend to!"

Knowing that He Cheng was staying in the capital with his family, he went to He Cheng's lodgings before the night was out, knocked on the gate, and, on being admitted, told him what had happened, sparing no details. Huiniang was also accommodated, and the luggage was duly deposited. He Chang's house was large, with enough space for Canruo, and there we shall leave them.

Now back to Zhang Liu'er. The next day, sure enough, he assembled a gang of riffraff and went into action. But they found the door open, the room empty, and no one in sight. He asked the owner of the house, "Where's the scholar who got married yesterday?"

"He went home last night."

The men were astounded. After they came to their senses, they clamored, "Let's give chase!" Frantically they ran in the direction of Zhangjiawan. But where were they going to search in such a large city? The fact is that landlords in Beijing do not track the comings and goings of their renters. Therefore, there is no way to find those who have changed lodgings.

Canruo stayed for two months with He Cheng, who spent much of his time reading. After the spring exams began, he did well on all three sessions and eagerly awaited glad tidings. As expected, he passed and made the list of third-rank successful candidates. He was appointed magistrate of Jiangyin and therefore a "parent-official" with jurisdiction over Qi Qing's native county. Soon thereafter, he set out on his journey to his duty station, along with Huiniang. It so happened that Fang Chang was on an official mission to Suzhou, so Canruo got a ride on his government-provided boat. Out of the blue, Lu Huiniang became a magistrate's wife, bearing out the line "The phoenix gives way to a pair of mandarin ducks." Canruo later rose through the ranks of officialdom to be a governor. Huiniang gave birth to a son, who

later also passed the civil service examinations. The Shen clan prospers to this day. The following quatrain bears testimony:

*Huiniang was a true heroine,
For she found her soul mate in a stranger.
She turned the tables on the villain
And proved herself the smarter one.*



A Coffin Is Prepared in the Kaifeng Yamen for a Living Criminal

Prayer Services Are Held at West Hill Temple for a Departed Soul

A Coffin Is Prepared in the Kaifeng Yamen for a Living Criminal

As the poem says,

*The three religions—each has its approach;
Each holds its own place in the universe.
But similarities in the trappings
Obscure their features and mix them with the worldly.*

As for Daoism, it originated when Laozi crossed Hangu Pass on the back of a water buffalo, and the border official, later to be known as Sage Wenshi, asked him to leave behind the five-thousand-character *Classic of the Way and Virtue* [Daode jing] that is still in circulation even to this day.

In Daoist practices, the most accomplished reach the state of the Void and live in quiescence and nonaction. Able to move freely between the mortal and spirit realms, they rise above the defilements of the world and deliver themselves from mortality. Those who are less accomplished cultivate their spirit, engage in breathing exercises, mix elixirs for prolonging life, and perform alchemic transmutations for the benefit of the populace. The least accomplished use charms and magic figures to summon ghosts and spirits, hold prayer services to communicate with the Upper Realms, and make magic signs to get through to the netherworld. Now, Zhang Jiao of the Eastern Han

dynasty [25–220] belonged to the last category.¹ He was able to conjure up a fog that stretched for five *li*. Those who wanted to be his disciples were told to pay five piculs of rice by way of an induction fee, hence the name, the Five Piculs of Rice Sect. Later on, this school gained popularity. Those who used their skills to subdue demons and rid the people of scourges were orthodox, whereas those who used their skills to do evil were nothing more than sorcerers. Even though the orthodox practitioners and the sorcerers were of quite different orders, they were very effective in their own ways and very hard to come by. With the passage of time, we in our day cannot find Daoists of the first two categories anywhere on earth anymore, but the third kind remains popular, with legions of disciples learning the arts, and some among them are quite impressive. However, there is one peculiarity about the arts: Those who have acquired such skills are no longer at liberty to behave as they please. There is no lack of practitioners who bring calamity on themselves as a consequence of their indiscretions. (MC: *Beware!*)

In the Qiandao reign period [1165–73] of the Song dynasty, there lived in Fuzhou, Fujian, a young man named Ren Daoyuan. He was the oldest son of Ren Wenjian, vice minister of imperial ceremonials. A Daoist devotee from an early age, he learned the orthodox method of the Five Heavenly Thunderbolts from his teacher, Ouyang Wenbin. He built an altar at home, and his services for people were quite efficacious. His wife's nephew, Liang Kun, shared his enthusiasm for Daoist magic arts.

One day, a patient with a heart ailment went to him seeking a divination. He was from the Ke clan of Yongfu County [present-day Yongtai County, Fujian]. Before the patient arrived, Ren Daoyuan and Liang Kun, who had retired for the night at the altar, saw a celestial general approaching them. The divine being announced, "When the next divination seeker arrives, write the character 香 and give it to him, and tell him to go home quickly."

On hearing this, Ren Daoyuan immediately rose, lit a candle, wrote the character on a piece of paper, sealed it, and went back to sleep. The next morning, when the patient arrived, Daoyuan gave him the sealed envelope and told him to return home quickly. After returning home, the patient died on the eighteenth day of the lunar month because the upper part of the character contained the radical 木, which consists of 十 (ten) plus 八 (eight) and 日 (day). This event brought him fame far and wide, and he came to be called "the Master" by all and sundry.

Later, after his father's death, Daoyuan inherited his father's title and left his hometown to take up his post. His official duties kept him so busy

that his devotion to the Daoist arts began to cool. Every morning when passing the altar, he just saluted it briefly and told a young acolyte to make offerings of incense. That was all there was to it. He never even stepped inside the hall. His servants commented, “Master is not as devoted to the Dao as before. The gods may get angry.”

Complacent in his exalted position, Daoyuan did not take these comments to heart. Ignoring their gossip, he maintained this routine day after day.

On the fifteenth night of the first month of the thirteenth year of the Chunxi reign period [1174–89], residents of the northern section of the city gathered by previous agreement in front of the temple of Daoist Zhang and invited Ren Daoyuan to preside over the ceremony at the massive altar bearing Daoist charms. Amid the heaving mass of humanity attending the ceremony were two beautiful young women with tall coiffures. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they looked like twin lotus flowers on the same stalk. As Ren Daoyuan raised his head, his eyes happened to rest on them. The sight threw him into such raptures that all thoughts of the prayer service and the Daoist commandments took flight from his mind. (IC: *Mara hindrances are upon him [in the form of earthly temptations].*) “Young ladies,” he addressed them, “come and take a look inside, if you please.”

“Thank you, Master,” said the two women.

As they stepped over the threshold gracefully with their dainty feet, Daoyuan kept looking them up and down. Then he said, “Young ladies, lift your halters.” By adopting a line that local men used when making advances to women, he meant that he wanted to touch their breasts.

One of the women shot back sternly, “How can a Daoist master holding a prayer service say such a thing?” She grabbed her companion and turned around to leave the hall.

With another grin, Daoyuan said, “Since you’re here for a prayer service, why don’t you try to fulfill your bond with a great master?”

Blushing to the roots of their ears, the two women departed, cursing him under their breath.

After the ceremony was over, Daoyuan began to feel an itch and a sting in a spot behind his left ear. He asked a servant to check what it was, and the servant saw a tiny red lump the size of a grain of millet. When it was pressed with a finger, the pain was intolerable. The next day, Daoyuan returned home in dejection. After several days, he said to Liang Kun, his wife’s nephew, “Last night, I had a nightmare in which a celestial general reproached me.

My number is up. The date of my death is written secretly on a piece of paper. It's to be revealed by Master Shang Rixuan."

Master Shang Rixuan, when he arrived, looked at the red lump and said, "This is beyond me. Only a child can reveal the secret."

Soon a village boy came in. He leaped onto the rafter and announced in the tone of a deity, "Ren Daoyuan! The gods have been protecting you for a long time now, but instead of faithfully tending to the altar, you fell prey to avarice, lust, and moral turpitude. Your trespasses are unforgivable."

In deep repentance, Daoyuan kowtowed and begged for forgiveness.

The celestial being continued, "And a fine thing you said on the fifteenth night of the month!"

Over and over again, Daoyuan begged for his life to be spared, and stated his readiness to turn over a new leaf.

"What's the use of saying all this when things have come to this pass?" said the celestial being. "I don't mind losing one disciple. You should serve as a warning to all Daoist disciples. (MC: *Fierce*.) However, considering your past merit, I give you twenty days." With that, the child fell to the floor and woke up, but he knew nothing about what had just transpired. Liang Kun opened the envelope that Daoyuan had sealed and showed it to Shang Rixuan. It contained the same words: "twenty days."

That very night, Daoyuan saw in his dream a celestial general running after him with an iron whip. Panic-stricken, Daoyuan ran around the foot of Nine-Fairies Mountain, where he resided, but the celestial general caught up with him and hit the back of his head with the whip. Daoyuan woke with a start. The lump behind his ear grew larger, and his head swelled until it was as big as a bamboo basket. When the drum sounded the second watch each night, he would cry out in pain as if he were being whipped.

When the twenty-day grace period was about to expire, Liang Kun was sleeping in his own house when he had a dream in which a celestial general said to him, "Go to the Ren residence as soon as the fifth watch strikes, to watch me finish off Daoyuan."

Kun rose in alarm and rushed to the Ren residence. On seeing him, Daoyuan said tearfully, "This is the last time we meet!" He threw some clothes over his shoulders and was about to get out of bed when he suddenly fell onto the floor. Seven or eight servants tried to raise him, but he was picked up and thrown onto the floor again as if by an invisible huge hand. Upon close inspection, the servants realized that he had stopped breathing. Liang

Kun saw to his burial. Awed by divine power, Liang Kun dared not practice his arts anymore.

Gentle reader, consider how Ren Daoyuan practiced orthodox Daoist arts half his lifetime. His only offense was saying those vile words in an unguarded moment, and yet he was punished so severely even though he was not guilty of any actions that brought disgrace to the religion. Imagine how much more unforgiving Heaven will be toward those Daoists of our day who engage in nothing but debauchery and felony! Indeed, in the netherworld, there is divine censure; in the mortal world, there are the laws of the land. There is just no getting away with crime. Yet it just so happens that it is easier for Daoists to engage in evil doings because Buddhist monks, with their distinctive shaved heads and robes, are easily recognized and therefore hardly at liberty to do evil. (IC: *Not necessarily so.*) But Daoist priests, once their Daoist hats and robes are replaced by everyday hats and clothes, look no different from laypeople, so they may not be easily seen through. And those Daoist priests with wives and children are all the more undistinguishable from ordinary men in the street. As a consequence, they find themselves less hampered than Buddhist monks when it comes to debauchery.

This leads me to my next story, one about a Daoist priest who used prayer services to seduce a woman and ended up dying a violent death. This story is a warning to all Daoist devotees. There is a poem in testimony:

*A fetus is formed by the forces of nature;
It finds in its mother's womb the best of nurture.
But the womb may turn out to be your tomb;
Stay free of offenses against womanhood!*

The story goes that in the Song dynasty, there lived in Kaifeng Prefecture, Henan, a woman, Wu-shi, who married into a Liu family of this prefecture when she was fifteen years old and gave birth to a son, Li Dasheng. When Dasheng was twelve years old, Mr. Liu died of illness, leaving the beautiful Wu-shi a young widow, not yet thirty years old. With no parents-in-law or other clan members, she became head of the household (MC: *This is unseemly.*) and looked after her son. Recalling her deceased husband's kindness, she planned to hold a prayer service for the salvation of his soul. (IC: *She will not be so inclined in the future.*)

There was a West Hill Temple nearby, where Daoists cultivated their spirits. One of the priests, Huang Miaoixiu, had been chosen abbot of the temple thanks to his skill at drawing charms and his elegant and graceful bearing. One day, he was in the temple drawing up a document for a patron when he suddenly saw a young woman in mourning white walking into the temple with an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy. As the saying puts it so well, "A woman in mourning white is a pleasure for the eye." That woman, already quite a beauty, was doubly charming in her white clothes and white head scarf. If she had been not in a Daoist temple but in a Buddhist monastery, she would have been taken as the white-robed fertility goddess Bodhisattva Guanyin. (MC: *Idle but good comments*.) She approached Abbot Huang and bowed twice as if offering votive candles. The abbot looked her over and felt as if his soul had taken leave of his body. Eagerly, he bowed in response and asked, "Which family are you from? What brought you here?"

"I'm Wu-shi of the Liu family. My husband passed away recently, and I'm here, with my son, Liu Dasheng (IC: *Her little nemesis*), to request a prayer service for the departed. We, mother and son, plead in all sincerity that Your Reverence apply your divine power to ensure his well-being in the netherworld."

Feeling the stirrings of less than honorable desires, Abbot Huang said, "Since your worthy husband died only recently and you want the salvation of his soul, you need to set up a mourning hall for him at home. I say this because a prayer service must be held in a mourning hall in order to be efficacious. A perfunctory service in this temple with other activities going on at the same time may not do much good. Would this idea be agreeable to you, madam?"

Wu-shi replied, "Your Reverence's visit to my humble home will be my greatest honor. My son and I will be ever so grateful. After returning home, I'll get the mourning hall ready for the prayer service in anticipation of your coming."

"When may I come to your house?"

"The one-hundredth-day commemoration of my husband's passing is coming up in eight days. I'd like to have a seven-day service. If it starts tomorrow, the last day of the service will coincide with the commemoration. So it will be best if Your Reverence could grace my humble home with your presence early tomorrow morning."

"You have my word. I won't be late. Tomorrow, then!"

Wu-shi retrieved a tael of silver from her sleeve and offered it as advance payment for paper and other materials required for the service. Then she

took leave of the abbot and returned home to make preparations for the service.

The truth of the matter is that Wu-shi's wish to hold a prayer service for her husband was sincere and unmixed with improper motives. As it turned out, however, Abbot Huang was a rapaciously lecherous man. Impressed by Wu-shi's beauty at first sight, he burned with amorous desires even as he talked with her. Wu-shi did not entertain lascivious thoughts, but inwardly she marveled at the abbot's prepossessing exterior and his straightforwardness. "What a handsome man!" she said to herself. "Why did he take up a religious vocation? I'm glad he didn't put on airs but was so good as to offer to come to my home for the service. He's one of those men who go out of their way to help others." And she felt quite well disposed toward the man. (IC: *Herein lies her karma.*)

Early the next morning, Abbot Huang went straight to Wu-shi's house, followed by two young acolytes and a custodian carrying scrolls of Daoist scriptures. As her son, Dasheng, was still too young, Wu-shi managed the household herself, so she greeted the visitors and led them into the mourning hall. The abbot, the two acolytes, and the custodian hung up portraits of multiple Daoist deities and laid out an altar. Then the abbot began to put the ritual implements to use. He announced the purpose of the service, invoked the deities, conjured up spirits, proclaimed amnesty, and summoned the soul of the deceased. As this was noisily going on, Wu-shi entered the room to offer incense. Eyeing the woman, the abbot put on an even greater show of enthusiasm. After he finished intoning the scriptures in unison with the two acolytes, he rose and, holding the celestial instructions, knelt down on the carpet in front of the portraits of the deities to read them out loud. He also bade Wu-shi to get down on her knees to offer her prayers. Kneeling, as she was told, at a spot only a few inches from him, Wu-shi smelled the incense that he had scented his clothes with and instinctively stole glances at him. Sensing her interest, the abbot returned her glances while intoning the sutra. As they shot looks back and forth, both were overcome with the desire for an embrace. After the prayers were duly said, they rose to their feet, and Wu-shi began to offer incense and kowtow to the portraits of the deities, all the while stealing glances at the altar. When her eyes fell on the two young acolytes, each with shoulder-length black hair topped by a small hat, she marveled at their ruby lips, white teeth, delicate complexions, and fresh looks and said to herself, "Those Daoists do know how to enjoy life! What heartthrobs those two boys will grow up to be!" She was seized with

uncontrollable desire as she continued to throw surreptitious glances from behind the mourning-white curtain.

The frightening truth is that lovers' eyes see what they want to see. Once you have fallen in love, everything about the object of your affection fascinates you. Indeed, no matter whether he or she is tall, short, well built, or thin, you find each attribute adorable. (MC: *How true!*) What's more, women tend to be more constant in love. Once a woman is enamored of a man, she won't be able to dismiss him from her mind. The more Wu-shi looked at the abbot, the more she found him dashing and delightful. Being a young widow, she was at the height of passion. With her desire stirring, she blushed and grew pale by turns, and she kept pacing to and fro behind the curtain, sometimes showing half her face, sometimes stepping out from behind the curtain, as if to make her wish known to the abbot. But since Abbot Huang had already taken a fancy to her, how could he not be aware of it? However, lest he make the wrong move on the very first day of his stay, he limited himself to darting amorous glances at her without attempting to have his way. As for her son, Liu Dasheng, he was too young to understand the ways of the world. Thrilled at the chance to look at the images of deities and play with the bells and drums, he knew nothing about his mother's inner thoughts.

Soon, lamps were lit, and they had supper. Then Wu-shi assigned a clean side room to the abbot and his acolytes. The abbot told the custodian to return to their temple, whereas he and the two boys spent the night in the same bed. The next morning, they rose and made preparations for the continuation of the service. So much for the abbot for now.

Let us retrace our steps and come back to the moment when Wu-shi and her son, Dasheng, retired for the night. Once in her bed, she thought, "That priest must be doing that thing with the two pretty boys at this very moment while I have to sleep all alone." Aroused by these thoughts, she found herself overwhelmed by her desires. With a shudder, she gnashed her teeth and broke into a sweat. She had just drifted off to sleep when she heard footsteps nearing her bed. She raised her head and saw a man lift her bed curtain and jump into bed. Then she heard the voice of the abbot saying softly, "Thank you for sending me signals with your tender glances. They were by no means lost on my watchful eyes. Now that the night is deep and all is quiet, let's enjoy the moment!" With that, he inserted his cucumber-like member into her. Without demur, Wu-shi joyfully accepted his advances.

At the height of her enjoyment, she saw one of the two boys lift the curtain to look for his master. (MC: *The dream will be borne out.*) At the sight

of the abbot quite carried away with what he was doing, the boy cried out, "Lady! A fine thing you're doing, seducing a priest! I'll keep my mouth shut only if you let me join you." So saying, he shot out a hand to grope Wu-shi's waist.

Sharply, the abbot said, "I forbid you to misbehave in my presence!"

Wu-shi was about to go into raptures when that harsh demand wakened her, and she realized that it had been but a dream. Finding her thighs and even the mat wet, she quickly wiped them dry with a handkerchief and said to herself with a sigh, "What a nice dream! Will such happiness be mine for real?" Peaceful sleep continued to elude her the rest of the night.

On rising at daybreak and hearing the bells and drums in the hall, Wu-shi told her maids to carry water to the abbot and tend to his needs. The two young acolytes, secure in the knowledge that they could get away with misbehavior on account of their age, entered the mourning hall to ask for what they needed, and a familiarity sprang up between them and members of the household.

As Wu-shi was sitting in the mourning hall, one of the acolytes came in to ask for tea. Wu-shi detained him and asked, "What's your name?"

"Taiqing."

"And the name of the older one?"

"Taisu."

"Which one of you slept head to head with His Reverence last night?"

"What's wrong with sleeping head to head?"

"I'm only afraid that His Reverence may be a little wanting in discretion."

With a grin, the boy said, "Madam, you're a funny one." With that, he left the room and quietly reported the conversation to the abbot.

His heart flutter, the abbot thought, "Only a flirt is capable of such comments. But even though that mourning hall is only a couple of feet away, the interior section of the house is off limits to outsiders. What am I going to do to lead her on?" He gave himself up to thought, putting himself in her position. Suddenly he said, "I've got an idea!" A moment later, when Wu-shi emerged from the interior of the house to offer incense, the abbot immediately went to stand shoulder to shoulder with her. Holding a bell in one hand and a tablet in the other, he began to chant a lyric poem to the tune of "Ripples Sifting Sand":

*I kowtow to the Top Layer of Heaven,
Sharing a bond with a fellow worshipper.*

*In the flower of her youth,
She suffers in her lonely bed.*

*She holds a prayer service
In pious memory of the deceased.
To Lovers' Lane we come to quench our thirst
And to enjoy celestial bliss.*

This poem was all too clearly meant to lead her on. Well aware of its meaning, Wu-shi commented with a slight smile, "That was a lot of mumbo jumbo, Your Reverence."

The abbot rejoined, "No. Nothing I said was against Daoist teachings. Those lovely words were passed on to us by our forefathers, who enjoyed celestial bliss, so that we can follow their examples."

By now, there was no doubt left in Wu-shi's mind about the abbot's intentions. She went inside, filled half a bowl with shelled nuts, brewed a pot of high-grade green tea, and told a maidservant to take them to the abbot, saying, "Tell him that these are from Madam, to quench his thirst." This covert echo of the abbot's poem was just as good as saying "Yes." The abbot was beside himself with joy. Gesticulating wildly with both hands and feet, he cast all thoughts of the *Treasured Canons* and the *Purple Cloud Secret Talismans* to the winds. The pleasures of the pillow had taken full possession of his mind. Surreptitiously, he had one of the boys find out about Wu-shi's sleeping arrangements. On learning that she shared a room with her son and a maid, he thought better of recklessly barging in.

That evening, he went to bed with the two boys as before. His mind was filled with images of Wu-shi as she had appeared to him during the day, and he found release in Taiqing. As the bed creaked under them, he caressed Taiqing's back and said to both acolytes, "My dear boys, I have something to talk over with you. The mistress of the house seems to have taken a fancy to me. If I have my way with her, you two may also have something to gain. But the private section of the house is strictly off limits to outsiders, and she shares her bedchamber with her son and her maid. And, here, your presence also makes things awkward. What's to be done?"

Taiqing said, "But don't mind us!"

The abbot said, "At the beginning, she may not like being watched."

Taisu suggested, "There's a bed meant for the soul of the deceased in the mourning hall, and it's furnished with a bed curtain and nice bedding. And

that hall is between the private section and the outer section of the house, a perfect spot for a secret affair.” (MC: *This is why Taisu will also suffer retribution from the netherworld.*)

“Good idea, my dear boy!” exclaimed the abbot. “Now I know what to do tomorrow!”

Whispering into their ears, he told them of his plan. Both boys said, clapping their hands, “Wonderful!” Aroused by all this talk, the abbot finished what he had been doing with Taiqing. The two boys found release in self-amusement. Nothing further happened that night.

The next morning, the abbot greeted Wu-shi and said to her, “Today is the third day of the prayer service. I know the magic formula for summoning the spirits of the dead. Shall I go ahead and summon the spirit of your deceased husband, so that he can meet you? What do you say, madam?”

“That would be wonderful!” said Wu-shi. “But how are you going to do it?”

“I’ll first build a bridge with white silk in the mourning hall. Then I’ll make his spirit cross the bridge for a meeting with you, but only one family member can stay here, because with another person in the room, the yang element will be too strong for the spirit. And the door of the mourning hall must be kept closed so as to prevent any prying eyes from detecting the cosmic secret.”

“There are only two family members: my son and I. My son is too young to know anything. Seeing his father won’t mean much to him. But I do want to see my husband. Let me stay in the mourning hall and watch you apply your magic formula.”

“That would be best,” said the abbot.

Wu-shi went back to the interior of the house and brought out two bolts of white silk. The abbot took one bolt, held one end of it and, with Wu-shi holding the other end, began to measure its length. Each time they folded the fabric, they exchanged meaningful glances. When their hands met, he gently touched her wrist, and she kept silent. The abbot then had the tables stacked up to make his “bridge,” which, placed squarely at the entrance to the mourning hall, blocked the view from outside.

The abbot then emerged from the mourning hall to give these instructions to the two young acolytes: “I’ll close the door of the mourning hall and summon the spirit of the deceased. You two must keep watch at the door and prevent anyone from looking inside, so as not to ruin my magic.”

With their tacit understanding of the situation, the two acolytes said, “Yes, Master.”

Wu-shi, on her part, told her son and the maid, "The abbot is going to summon the spirit of the deceased for a meeting with me. It's to be done in absolute silence. You stay inside. Don't come out and make noise."

On hearing that his father's spirit was to be invoked, Dasheng cried out, "I want to see Daddy, too!" (MC: *Plea of an innocent child.*)

"My son, the abbot says that the more people there are in the room, the stronger the yang element will be, and the spirit will refuse to show up. So only I can be there to keep vigil. If you want to join, the whole attempt may fail. If the abbot makes a success of it this time, you can join the session next time." In fact, Wu-shi knew that the abbot must have been using this as an excuse to hide something he had up his sleeve. So she talked her son out of the idea with nice words, bribed him with a liberal supply of goodies, and locked him and the maid in her bedchamber. That done, she went into the mourning hall and sat down.

With a click, the abbot bolted the double-leaf door. Then, feigning gravity, he hit the table twice with a tablet. After mumbling goodness only knows what words of incantation, he said smilingly to Wu-shi, "Please sit on the bed for the spirit. But there's one thing I need to warn you about: when the spirit comes, it will be nothing more than an indistinct image, as in a dream, and it can't do anything for you."

"I just want to meet his soul and pour out my sorrows to him. I don't mind if he can't do anything for me."

"I say that because you'll only be seeing him face-to-face but won't be able to resume your pleasures of the bed."

"There you go again, Your Reverence! I'll be quite content with just seeing his soul. Why did you have to bring that up?"

"But I'll be able to bring about your union of delight with him."

Startled, Wu-shi exclaimed, "That can't be true!"

The abbot explained, "A soul is devoid of body. Once I summon his soul and attach it to my body, he can be united with you."

"But a soul is a soul, and a priest is a priest. How can you substitute a soul?"

"We've always had this magic formula through which numerous souls have been able to attach themselves to live bodies in order to meet their loved ones."

"How can this possibly be done?"

"If you find me different from your worthy husband in any way, just don't believe me in the future." (IC: *Very clever.*)

Wu-shi said reproachfully, "What a clever tongue you have, wicked priest! You do know how to fool people!"

At this point, the abbot walked up to her, gathered her in his arms, and put her on the bed meant for the soul of her husband. With a grin, he said, "Let me be your husband for now." Wu-shi was aroused by this time, and the two of them began to cavort with each other.

*He, a shrewd and handsome Daoist,
Had seldom tasted respectable women.
She, a beauty newly widowed,
Had forgone the nuptial pleasures.
With wind and thunder roaring,
They conjured up a storm in bed.
Her spotless chastity is ruined,
Like flowers trampled underfoot.
The images of deities that filled the hall
Never had any substance to them.
The soul of the departed
Remained in the netherworld.
One drew in the spermatic essence;
The other plowed the fertile field.
When honoring the gods,
A lone bird slipped on the path;
When servicing the Dao,
A priest plunged into the depths of the flowers.
The taste was wonderful and mysterious;
The bodies were exhausted and spent.*

Their joy complete after their amorous sport was over, the abbot asked Wu-shi, "How do I compare to your husband?"

With a snort, Wu-shi replied, "You filthy rascal! This is so embarrassing! Don't bring this up!" (IC: *What does she know about "embarrassing"?*)

The abbot said gratefully, "I'm much obliged to you, madam, for not finding me inadequate. I can never repay you enough, not even if I die."

"Now that you've tricked me into this, you'd better make this a long-lasting relationship."

The abbot said, "We'd better call each other cousins, so that we can continue to see each other without arousing suspicions."

"Good idea," acknowledged Wu-shi.

"How old are you, madam?"

"I'm twenty-six."

"I'm one year older than you are. So let me be your older cousin. I know what to do." So saying, he got out of bed, struck the altar table twice with a tablet, opened the door, and said to the two acolytes, "The dead man's soul that I just summoned revealed that his widow is in fact a cousin of mine. I never knew this. The soul volunteered the information. I questioned him in detail and found what he said to be true. So she and I are in fact very close relatives."

The acolytes said, grinning, "Yes, very close indeed!" (MC: *A double entendre.*)

Wu-shi called her son to her and repeated the abbot's barefaced lies to him, adding, "It was your father who said this. Now come and greet your uncle."

What did a little boy know? Henceforth, he called the abbot "Uncle," as he was told.

From then on, the abbot and Wu-shi met daily for their unions of delight, ostensibly to call back the spirit of the deceased. Every evening, Wu-shi emerged from the interior section of the house, the abbot entered the mourning hall, and they cavorted in bed with growing intimacy. The son asked to see his father every time he heard about a session to call up his father's spirit, but each time he was told, "You're a mortal being. You can't see him."

The son had to give up on the idea, but inevitably a suspicion began to creep into his mind. "Why am I always told no?"

On the seventh day, the prayer service came to an end, and the one-hundred-day mourning period expired. Wu-shi thanked the abbot, and the two acolytes cleared away the altar. Furtively, she and the abbot agreed on their next assignation. In order not to attract prying eyes, the abbot returned to the temple. Wu-shi sent her son back to his tuition-free school, so that he left home early in the morning and returned after dark. During daytime, the two acolytes often came to bring messages to Wu-shi, and sometimes the abbot came himself. At night, after the son went to bed, the abbot was let in for their games of fornication. The maidservant knew what was afoot, but her mistress had bought her silence. Three years went by with nothing standing in their way, but we shall say no more of this for the moment.

In the meantime, Liu Dasheng the son grew up and reached puberty. He began to gain some idea of what was going on. He had a quick mind and was well read and sensible. The thought that his mother was involved in something dishonorable bothered him, but he dared not confront her. One day, a schoolmate in the classroom jestingly called him “the little priest.” His face aflame, he returned home and said to his mother, “I have something to say to you, Mother. Could you tell that uncle to stop coming here? Someone called me ‘the little priest.’ I’ve become a laughingstock.”

On hearing this, Wu-shi reddened from the roots of her ears to her cheeks. Giving him a couple of sharp raps on the head with her knuckles, she said, “What does a child like you know? Your uncle is your mother’s cousin. Who’s to stop us from seeing each other? Who told you this? Once I find that goddamned swine, I’ll give him hell!”

But Dasheng continued, “I’d never heard of such an uncle before the prayer service started. (MC: *Meticulous*.) If he’s really my uncle, it’s only right for cousins to visit each other, so why do I hear gossip about this?”

That charge hit home. Seized with rage, Wu-shi cried, “A fine son you are! Think of all the hardships I’ve gone through in raising you! And now you believe some outsiders and come to humiliate your mother. Oh, why did I bring up such an ungrateful son?” And she began to slap the table and chairs while wailing at the top of her voice.

In consternation, Dasheng dropped to his knees in front of her and pleaded, “Please forgive me! It’s all my fault!”

Mollified by his plea for forgiveness, Wu-shi stopped crying and said, “Do not ever listen to baseless gossip again!”

Dasheng stifled his anger and did not venture another word, but he said to himself, “She was so brazen in her denial. I must catch them in the act in order to put a stop to it. Let me keep a watchful eye on them first.”

One evening, after all became quiet, Dasheng went to sleep in his mother’s room. On waking at midnight, he heard the door creak, as if someone had just gone out. On the alert, he threw some clothes on and got out of bed to look. When he found the door open, he knew that his mother must have gone to her illicit rendezvous again. So he turned back and felt around his mother’s bed in the dark. Sure enough, she was not there. Instead of leaving the room to track her down, he hit on a plan and bolted the door. Then he put a bench against the door before going back to his own bed to sleep.

What had happened was that Wu-shi and the abbot had agreed to meet after dusk. The spiritual tablet in the mourning hall had already been taken down, but the bed was still there, neatly made, for their convenience during their filthy trysts. There were more screens than before standing tightly around the bed. The abbot lay down in bed before Wu-shi entered the mourning hall to join him. After spending the whole night indulging in sexual pleasures, they rose a little before daybreak so that the abbot could leave the hall, after which she returned to her bedroom. They had been following this routine for so long without having to be on their guard that they thought nothing of it. But that night, on reaching her bedroom door, Wu-shi found it closed, and it did not yield to her hand. Realizing that her son must be in the know, she felt very much put out and sat down to wait for daybreak. Her teeth clenched, she remained immobile, silently suppressing her angry words.

Dasheng did not open the door until it was broad daylight. On seeing his mother, he feigned surprise and said, "Why are you sitting outside, Mother?"

Wu-shi had to resort to lying. "Last night, I heard footsteps outside. I was afraid there might have been a burglar around, so I opened the door to take a look. Why did you bolt the door?"

"When I saw the door open, I was also afraid that there might have been a burglar around, so I closed the door and put a bench against it. I thought you were asleep in bed. Why were you outside? And why didn't you call me so that I could let you in? What's the meaning of sitting here all night?" (MC: *The questions touch her to the quick.*)

Listening to her son, Wu-shi racked her brains for an answer but failed to come up with any. She gave up the attempt and said to herself, "I can't keep this wayward son of mine in my room any longer."

One day, out of the blue, she said to him, "Now that you've grown up, it's unseemly for you to share a bedroom with your mother. That bed in the mourning hall is quite nicely made. Why don't you sleep there tonight?"

Wu-shi meant to turn him out of her room so that she could entertain the abbot in her own room with greater ease and enjoyment in the future. Little did she know that her son, with his sharp mind, had caught on to her intentions. He nodded in agreement. That day, he went to school as usual and returned home in the evening to sleep in the hall, but he kept an even sharper lookout.

When one of the acolytes came later that day, Wu-shi told him to go back and tell the abbot that her son had locked her out the night before, adding,

“So I told my son to sleep in another room. Tonight, your master can use the back gate and come straight to my bedroom.”

That night, when the abbot came, Dasheng, in the hall, had not gone to sleep. Instead, he was walking about, on the lookout for signs of anything astir. On hearing a sound from the back gate, he ducked into a shadowed spot and clearly saw the abbot enter. As the maid closed the gate, the abbot went straight to Wu-shi's room, closed the door, and went to bed.

Dasheng thought, “A son can't very well catch his mother in the very act of adultery. Instead, I'll just go and spoil their fun.” After a while, hearing no more sounds from his mother's room, he quickly found a thick rope and used it to fasten the door knockers together, one on each leaf of the door. He thought, “That scoundrel won't be able to open the door and slip out. He'll have to jump out the window. Let me do something to make him feel sorry for himself!” He went to the outhouse and brought back a urine bucket and a broken night-soil bucket. He then put them in the spot under the window where the abbot would land when he jumped out. Having done that, Dasheng went back to the hall to sleep.

After spending the whole night wallowing in debauchery, the abbot heard roosters crow twice. Afraid that daybreak was near, he put on his clothes and headed for the door. He pushed and pushed but could not get it open. He had to call Wu-shi's attention to it. Wu-shi came to offer him help, but she could not get the door open either. The door creaked, as if it was being blocked from the other side.

“How very strange!” said Wu-shi. “Could it be that the little brat is up to some trick? Since the door won't open, you'll have to take the window. (IC: *Just as he expected.*) I'll take care of the door tomorrow morning, but the sky will be turning light soon. There's no time to lose!”

Peering through sleep-deprived eyes, the abbot opened the window and leaped. With a splash, his right foot landed in the urine bucket. Thus thrown off balance, he lurched, and his left foot ended up in the night-soil bucket. In haste, he pulled his right foot out of the urine bucket, but the bucket was deep, and he was in a panic. He fell, knocking the bucket over. (MC: *Marvelous!*) He was covered to the waist with urine and feces, and his lips were bleeding (IC: *Did he get a taste of the filth?*), but he dared not let out a peep. In spite of the pain, he scurried away through the back gate, covering his nose with a hand.

Wu-shi was already quite upset because the door would not open, and now, hearing the racket that followed the abbot's departure through the

window, she began to worry. She went to the window. In the darkness, she could make out nothing, but she was hit with a wave of foul stench. Wondering what could have happened, she went broodingly back to bed.

When Dasheng rose in the morning and went to his mother's door to take down the rope, he saw the buckets toppled over and the ground beneath the window covered with urine and feces. His anger mingled with amusement, he cleared away the buckets in spite of the foul smell, taking care not to wake his mother.

After a while, Wu-shi rose and was surprised that the door yielded easily to her. Wondering if she had been too hasty last night, she walked to the window and saw urine and feces covering the ground and wet footprints stretching all the way to the back gate. She called her son to her and asked, "Where did all that filth come from?"

"I have no idea," replied Dasheng. "But judging by the footprints, I think a man was here, someone who couldn't hold it any longer and made the mess." (MC: *Very funny.*)

Reduced to silence, Wu-shi blushed and turned pale by turns and seethed with rage, but she could not come up with a retort. Henceforth, hatred for her son began to burn in her, and she came to regard him as a thorn in her flesh, to be removed at the first opportunity.

As for the abbot, his scented clothes were wet through with filth the night he suffered the humiliation. Gloomily, he washed himself clean in the temple. His lips badly bruised, he stayed away from the Liu residence for several days in a row. With her bellyful of grievances, Wu-shi was looking forward to pouring out her woes to him and taking his counsel. His prolonged absence made her long for him and added to her anger.

One day, the abbot dispatched the acolyte Taisu to call on Wu-shi.

"Your master's absence means he must be angry," said Wu-shi.

"He's terrified of your son and is trying to stay out of his way for a few days."

"My son is in school during the daytime. You can ask your master to come over during the day. I have something to say to him."

Well aware of Wu-shi's exploits, the eighteen- or nineteen-year-old Taisu threw a significant glance at her and said flirtatiously, "While my master is otherwise occupied, can his disciple take his place, just once?"

"You little rascal!" snapped Wu-shi. "How dare you take liberties with me? I'll tell your master about it and have you beaten in your lower part!"

Taisu rejoined, grinning, "My lower part is just as good as yours. My master has a use for it. He won't have the heart to beat it." (MC: *Lovely! No wonder Taisu stirs her desires.*)

"You shameless little rascal! The way you put it!"

Wu-shi had always been attracted to that pretty boy but had found him still too young. Now that he had grown up and was trying to lead her on, her desires stirred. She pulled him close with one arm and planted a kiss on his mouth. Reaching out a hand, she found that member of his hard and erect. She was about to haul him to bed when, all too unexpectedly, Taiqing came to the hall and called out for Taisu. Abbot Huang had sent Taiqing because he had been waiting in vain for Taisu to return. On hearing Taiqing's voice, Taisu immediately stopped what he had been doing, afraid that his master would reproach him. And so, their high expectations of fun were thus abruptly brought to an end. (MC: *Fun will have to wait.*) The two acolytes returned to the temple to report to their master.

The next day, the abbot went, as expected, to the Liu residence. Wu-shi closed the front gate and ushered him into the hall. She asked, "I didn't hear from you after that night until yesterday when you sent one of the boys. Why?"

The abbot replied, "Your son is extremely crafty. He's a grownup now and is quite a holy terror. It will be difficult for us to meet. I'm afraid we'll have to call it quits."

Wu-shi had been hoping to include the two boys in her continued liaisons with the abbot, and these words displeased her. She said, "There's no one above me to tell me how to behave. That little scoundrel is the only obstacle. I'm going to go all the way and finish him off, so that I can enjoy some freedom. (IC: *Heartless!*) He went too far these last few times!"

The abbot said, "He's your birth son, your flesh and blood. How can you have the heart to kill him?"

"A good son should care about his mother's happiness. That's what flesh and blood is about. (IC: *Exactly.*) But he's made life so hard for me. I'd rather do without him!"

"This is entirely up to you," admonished the abbot. "Others can have no say in the matter, but I'm afraid you may regret it later."

"I'll put up with him for another couple of days. In the meantime, you can relax and come tonight for some fun. Even if he suspects something, let's just ignore him and let him be. There's precious little he can do."

The conversation went on for a considerable while before the abbot departed, to come back after nightfall.

That day, Dasheng's teacher was eager to return home and dismissed the class earlier than usual. On his way home, Dasheng ran into the abbot. Feeling sure that the abbot had just left his mother, Dasheng grew vigilant, but now that he was face-to-face with the abbot, he forced himself to call out "Uncle" and bowed with joined hands. Startled, the abbot returned the greeting and walked on without saying a word. Dasheng thought, "It's been quiet these past few days since that night, but he obviously went to my home again just now, which means he'll be back tonight. I can't very well catch him again this time. I'll just do something to keep him away."

When he got home, his mother asked, "Why are you home so early today?" "The teacher went home. I get to stay at home for a few days."

Wu-shi kept her displeasure to herself and asked grudgingly, "Do you want a snack?"

"Yes, I'd like to eat something before I go to bed. These past few days, the teacher accelerated our lessons because he had to be away for some days. I'm so tired. I need to go to sleep early."

Her spirits lifting a little at this remark, Wu-shi gave him a snack, and after he ate, he went to the hall to sleep, as he had said. Much relieved, Wu-shi ate supper by herself, tidied up the room, and took a rest. Then she told the maid to leave the back gate ajar in anticipation of the abbot's arrival.

Little did she know that Dasheng had been feigning sleepiness. When all was quiet, he noiselessly got up and went to check the gates. The front gate was locked, and the inner gate was closed from the other side. He pried it open and went to check the back gate. Finding it ajar, he quietly bolted it, put a stool next to it, and sat down. At the first watch of the night, he heard the gate being pushed from the other side, but only gently. Then, on hearing tapping at the gate, Dasheng remained silent, meaning to watch for the man's next move. Suddenly, a voice came through the chink in the gate, saying, "It's me! Why is the gate closed? Open it!"

Dasheng said, disguising his voice, "It's not going to work out tonight! Go back! Don't cause trouble!"

All became quiet again. (MC: *Wonderful!*) In the meantime, in her room, Wu-shi was aflame with desire for the rendezvous. With still no sign of the abbot after the first watch was struck, she saw no option but to tell her maid to go to the back gate to see if anything was wrong. The maid went there in the darkness and gave a start when her groping hand touched Dasheng.

Dasheng said, his voice loud and harsh, "You slut! What are you up to, sneaking to the gate at this time of night?"

A scream escaped the maid's lips as she took flight. Back in her mistress's bedroom, she reported to Wu-shi, "I didn't see the abbot, but Young Master was sitting there. I was almost frightened to death!"

Wu-shi said, "That little rascal is getting more and more hateful, going to such lengths to get in my way." Rubbing her hands in irritation, she was about to let herself go and throw a fit when she checked herself, for she was in the wrong after all. Also, worried that the abbot might go back and fail to keep the appointment, she could not sleep in her agitated state.

After he had heard no sound for quite a while, Dasheng surmised that the abbot must have gone quite a distance. Only then did he turn in for the night. (MC: *Meticulous*.) Wu-shi again told the maid to check things out, saying that the young master must have left his position by the gate. The maid quietly opened the gate and stepped into the street, but she saw no sign of a human figure anywhere. Her report put an even greater damper on Wu-shi's spirits. Seething with rage, she stayed awake without getting a wink of sleep until daybreak. On seeing Dasheng, she snapped, "What were you doing—a child like you—sitting by the back gate instead of sleeping in bed?"

"I didn't do anything bad. What was the harm in sitting there?"

Her cheeks blazing red, Wu-shi cursed, "You little scoundrel! Are you implying that I did something bad?"

"Who said so? It's just that I had nothing to do after nightfall, so I closed the gate and sat there to look out. There's nothing wrong with that."

Unable to argue him down, Wu-shi swallowed her anger and said in brazen defense of herself, "Your mother isn't going to escape. No need for you to stand guard!" With tears in her eyes, she went back to her room, to wait for one of the acolytes so that she could ask about what had happened the night before.

As it turned out, instead of going to school that day, Dasheng spent his time reading in the hall and taking a stroll around the house now and then. At the sight of Taiqing, he blocked the acolyte's way and said, "What's up?"

Taiqing said, "I'd like to see the mistress of the house."

"I can relay your message to her," said Dasheng.

Hearing the acolyte's voice from her room, Wu-shi immediately told her maid to usher him in. To her annoyance, Dasheng followed on his heels and

never took so much as a step from his side. Unable to steal a private moment with Wu-shi, the acolyte could do no more than give a hollow greeting: "His Reverence sends Madam and Young Master his regards."

Without missing a beat, Dasheng said, "We're both fine. He has nothing to worry about. You may go now."

Taiqing's eyes locked with Wu-shi's, but not knowing what to do, he departed sullenly. Wu-shi smoldered with mounting rage. For about ten days in a row thereafter, no communication took place between the abbot and Wu-shi.

One day, a classmate sent Dasheng word that the teacher was back at school. Dasheng took leave of his mother and returned to school. Wu-shi was as delighted as if she had received amnesty by the grace of the Lord on High. As a matter of fact, the two acolytes Taiqing and Taisu not only served as messengers for their master but were also eager to get something out of the liaison for themselves. So they had been running to and from Wu-shi's house like shuttles on a loom. But after Taiqing suffered such an indignity at Dasheng's hands the other day, the two acolytes would not enter the house if they learned that Dasheng was home.

On the day Dasheng resumed school attendance, Taiqing put in an appearance just when Wu-shi was about to send a message. After what her son had done to her the past few times, she should have learned her lesson and exercised caution. But she knew no caution in her pursuit of carnal pleasures. (MC: *She is too carried away to see the picture clearly.*) Believing that her son was too young to be taken seriously, she asked the abbot to come that very evening, and to the front gate, too, saying that her son would not be on his guard but that the abbot should still wait until the night was deep. And so the appointment was made.

It was late when Dasheng returned home. After eating supper with him, Wu-shi and the maid locked the front and back gates, torches in hand—all for Dasheng's benefit—and told Dasheng to go to sleep, whereas Wu-shi retired to her own room.

Dasheng said apprehensively to himself, "Since I wasn't at home during the day, they'll surely be up to some monkey business tonight, but why did she lock the gates? So that I won't get suspicious? I must stay awake. I'm sure something will happen."

He sat around until the night was deep before he quietly went to check the gates. He found the inner gate closed but not bolted and the back gate

properly locked. "So he'll be using the front gate tonight," Dasheng thought. He slipped back into the hall and hunkered down in the darkness.

There, by the dim light of the stars, he saw his mother emerge from her room with the maid. Then his mother positioned herself by the door, apparently to be on the alert for Dasheng, while the maid went to check the front gate. Soon there came a tapping at the gate. Gently, the maid opened the lock and drew one leaf of the gate ajar. In a trice, a man slipped in. The maid closed the gate, and all three of them headed noiselessly for the inner section of the house. Without a moment's delay, Dasheng threw open the front gate, took down the burglar-alarm gong hanging by the gate, beat it with all the force he could muster, and yelled, "Stop, thief!" (MC: *Dasheng has not only an agile mind but also agile limbs.*)

Allow me to digress: Kaifeng, being the capital city with a large metropolitan area, had no shortage of thieves and burglars. Therefore, by government order, every family hung a burglar-alarm gong inside the front gate. When a gong was beaten, neighbors in the ten-household administrative unit would come to offer help, and the neighbors were to compensate for any loss suffered by that family. It was a stringent law indeed.

Back to the story: The abbot was about to enter Wu-shi's bedchamber when the sound of the gong burst on his ears. Realizing he had been seen, he was shocked out of his senses. Without sparing a moment to say one word, he spun around and headed for the back gate. (IC: *Through force of habit.*) Finding it under lock and key, he made a dash for the front gate. Thrilled on seeing it open, he regretted that he didn't have an extra pair of legs to carry him. In fact, Dasheng meant only to drive him away because catching him would put his mother in a bad light. On seeing the abbot running helter-skelter, he picked up a stone and hurled it with all his strength at the fleeing figure. (IC: *Comical.*) As the stone struck him in one leg, the abbot drew up the leg and his shoe fell off. He certainly had no time to stop and pick it up. So he got away, with nothing but a stocking on one foot. (MC: *Beating gongs and throwing stones are but child's play, but they are more than enough for Dasheng to deal with the adulterers.*) When neighbors came and asked what had happened, Dasheng said only that the burglar had gotten away. He picked up the shoe, closed the gate, and went inside.

Wu-shi, who had been looking forward to a union of delight with the abbot, was badly shaken. She and the maid were trembling with fear when they noticed that the beating of the gong had stopped and the front gate

had been closed. Guessing that the abbot had gotten away, Wu-shi breathed a little easier.

Dasheng came in and asked deliberately, "Did I frighten you, Mother, when I drove away a burglar?"

Wu-shi replied, "Where was the burglar? You made such a big fuss over it!"

Showing her the shoe, Dasheng continued, "I didn't catch the burglar, but I did pick up one of his shoes. I should be able to track him down with the shoe tomorrow."

Knowing all too well by now that she had been tricked by her son, Wu-shi became even more spiteful, but she was in no position to lash out at him. From then on, the abbot stopped coming. While feeling sorry for the abbot because he had sustained such a shock, Wu-shi burned with hatred against her son and wanted to consult the abbot about a plan to get at him, but she dared not ask the abbot over for fear that her son would find out.

The anniversary of Mr. Liu's death rolled around a few days later. Wu-shi hit on an idea. She said to Dasheng, "Take some fake paper coins to your father's grave, burn the money as an offering, and sweep the grave clean. You go first. I'll prepare some food offerings and go there by sedan-chair."

Dasheng said to himself, "Why is it necessary to visit the grave on an anniversary? What's more, why make me go first? She must be planning to get rid of me so that she can sneak off to the temple. I'll say yes for now instead of confronting her." So he said to his mother, "All right, I'll go first and wait for you there."

Having assured her with those words, he went instead to West Hill Temple and walked straight in. On seeing him, Abbot Huang gave a violent start. You may ask why. Well, the memory of the events of that night still haunted him. He collected himself before saying, "What brought you here, my good nephew?"

"My mother will be arriving any moment now."

The abbot, with his guilty conscience, said to himself, "When did he and his mother reconcile? And if she's indeed coming, why would she tell her son to precede her? Something isn't right." While he was thus debating with himself, he saw a sedan-chair approaching. (IC: *As expected.*) When the sedan-chair was set down right in front of him, who should emerge from it but Wu-shi of the Liu family! She had just stepped out of the sedan-chair when she raised her eyes and saw none other than her son.

"Mother, so you've come," said he.

Appalled, Wu-shi thought, "How on earth did this nemesis of mine get here first?" Aloud, she could do nothing else but lie. "It being your father's anniversary today, I can hardly do without a prayer service. That's why I came to the temple, to see your uncle."

"I've been thinking along the same lines, Mother. Since it's not necessary to visit the grave on an anniversary, I thought it would be a better idea to ask Uncle to do something. That's why I came first."

Wu-shi seethed with rage, but there was nothing she could do about him. (MC: *Dasheng in his brilliance is scoring one victory after another, but he is also inviting trouble.*) The abbot, as was only to be expected, served tea. False-heartedly, he drew two Daoist charms, said a prayer to the gods, and burned the charms. (IC: *This is all hocus-pocus.*) He had no chance to make any mischief.

After the commotion was over, Wu-shi told her son to leave first, but he refused. "I'll follow your sedan-chair on foot," said he.

Wu-shi saw nothing for it but to get into her sedan-chair. Having gone to all this trouble in vain without even managing to say a meaningful word to the abbot, Wu-shi felt her anger mount with each step of the sedan-chair carriers. She made up her mind to put her son out of the way.

The sedan-chair carriers went fast. Dasheng was still too young, after all, and found it hard to keep up, and he felt the need to relieve himself. He thought, "Nothing should happen on the way home. I don't have to keep up." And so he lagged behind.

As if something was destined to happen, Wu-shi saw Taisu coming toward her. She asked the sedan-chair carriers, "Is my son following behind?"

"No, he couldn't keep up and is now out of sight."

Immensely delighted, Wu-shi called Taisu to her and whispered to him, "I'll send that little scoundrel away tonight by one means or another. Your master must come. I need to talk to him about an important matter."

Taisu said, "My master has suffered so many shocks that he dares not enter your house again."

"If so, he doesn't have to enter my house tonight. He can just stay outside the gate and toss a brick over the wall as a signal. Then I'll go to the gate to talk with him. He can come in when it's safe. Nothing can go wrong." So saying, she shot Taisu a significant glance. Taisu was so seized with desire that he would have his way with the woman right there on the grass if the sedan-chair carriers had not been there. Wu-shi whispered again into his ear, "Tonight, you come, too. I may also do something for you." Having heard that, Taisu went off, wagging his head in delight.

On arriving at home, Wu-shi dismissed the sedan-chair carriers. After Dasheng also arrived and it began to grow dark, Wu-shi prepared wine and some fancy tidbits to go with supper and told Dasheng to eat supper with her in her room. Affably, she said, "My child, after your father's passing, you're the only one I have. Why do you make things so difficult for me?"

"It's precisely because Father is no longer with us that you need to work out a way to ensure the well-being of the family. I, as your son, would surely do as you say, but all that gossip floating around unsettles me."

Her anger turning to joy, Wu-shi said, "I can tell you quite truthfully that I was indeed guilty of some youthful indiscretions, which gave rise to the gossip. But now, I'm a thirty-year-old woman. I'm deeply remorseful. I've decided to live a quiet life by your side."

At this show of contrition, Dasheng put on a smile and said, "That would be enough luck to last me a lifetime!"

Wu-shi filled a cup with wine and said, handing it to Dasheng, "If you don't think ill of me, drink it up."

Startled, Dasheng thought, "Could she be up to some mischief? Could there be poison in the wine?" He took the cup but dared not drink from it.

Judging from his hesitation that he was suspicious, Wu-shi said, "How can I, your mother, bear you any malice?" So saying, she took the cup from him and drained it in one gulp.

Feeling deeply apologetic for having misjudged her, Dasheng grabbed the flask and filled his cup, saying, "I'll gladly drink this as a penalty."

After he drank three cups in succession, Wu-shi said, "I'm repentant. That's why I confessed to you. If you have sympathy for me and forgive my past indiscretions, you must drink with me until we've thoroughly enjoyed ourselves."

These words from his mother gladdened Dasheng's heart, and he finished every cup that his mother offered him without declining even once. Now the truth is that Wu-shi had a large capacity for wine, but Dasheng, at his young age, could get drunk on very little, which was why Wu-shi was so assiduously plying him with wine. With one yawn after another, Dasheng was seized by a longing for sleep. After a few more cups that his mother shoved his way, he felt that the ceiling and floor had changed places on him, and the effort to stay awake was too much. After ordering the maid to help him to Wu-shi's own bed, Wu-shi went out with the maid and locked the door from the outside. As she did so, she muttered, "Good gracious! Imagine you falling into my trap!"

She was waiting for news from outside when she heard the thud of a brick landing on the roof. At this awaited signal, she promptly told the maid to open the back gate. In came Taisu, saying, "My master is outside the front gate, but he dares not come in. You'll have to go let him in."

Wu-shi told the maid to keep watch over her bedchamber door and went toward the front gate with Taisu in the darkness. As Taisu got his arms around her, she turned, held him, and said, "Little villain! I've long had my eye on you. We weren't able to finish what we were doing the other day, so let's pay the debt now!" So saying, she led him to her son's unoccupied bed in the hall and made merry with him.

He was an untested virgin;

She was an old hand at illicit affairs.

The first-timer was hungry for more;

The one with experience was filled with lust.

The disciple tasted the first course;

The master was to enjoy later offerings. (MC: Old hands at this business.)

After they were done, they straightened their clothes, walked out together, and opened the front gate. Sure enough, the abbot was still standing there, waiting like an idiot. Wu-shi stepped out and asked him in, but he hesitated. Wu-shi said, "That little scoundrel is in my room, stinking drunk. I need to work out a plan with you to bump him off here and now. Follow me in. We need to talk!"

As he followed her, the abbot admonished, "You mustn't do that! He's your son, your own flesh and blood. How can you find it in your heart to do that?"

"Isn't it all for your sake? And I can't take it from him anymore."

"But if you do go ahead with it and word gets out, you'll be in for a lot of trouble."

"I gave birth to him. So my taking his life away shouldn't be a major crime."

The abbot said, "What's between you and me isn't that much of a secret. If what you do to your son is found out, you'll be accused only of killing your own son, but if some enemy of mine pursues this case and accuses me of complicity with you, I'll be guilty of a capital crime!"

"If you're so afraid of the consequences, how can we enjoy ourselves with him around?"

“Why don’t you find him a wife? Let’s teach him a thing or two and muddy the waters. (IC: *He is greedy for more.*) Once he loses his moral high ground, he’ll be in no position to maintain his hold on you.”

“No, that will only make things worse! Who knows what kind of woman my future daughter-in-law will be? If she’s not to my liking, I’ll only be bringing a spy into the house and further inconvenience myself. The only option is to make short work of him. With him out of the way, even though I won’t be able to marry a priest, who’s to stop us from seeing each other as cousins? Now, that’s what I call a long-term plan.”

The abbot said, “If so, I have an idea: Go to the government yamen for help.” (IC: *This is Heaven’s will. If Wu-shi was to have her way, it would be all over with Dasheng.*)

“What do you mean?”

“Our prefect of Kaifeng hates unfilial sons most. Those charged with the crime of filial impiety have been either beaten to death or given long prison sentences. (MC: *A wise judge wouldn’t be so opinionated as to convict an innocent man. But based on his wrong assumption, the stupid man charges Dasheng with filial impiety, only to bring ruin on himself, by the will of Heaven.*) So you need only charge him with filial impiety. He’ll find it difficult to defend himself. You’re his birth mother, not a stepmother, so naturally the yamen will go by what you say. No one will question you. Even if he’s not beaten to death, his prison term will be long enough to spare us from his prying eyes. But if you want him dead, the yamen will surely comply with the mother’s wishes.”

“What if that little scoundrel grows desperate and tells tales about us?”

“How can a son accuse his mother of adultery? If he does blab about it, you can charge him with willful slander. The prefect will be even more convinced that he’s an unfilial son. Who will believe him? (MC: *He believes he has covered all the angles.*) What’s more, to prove adultery, you must catch both parties in the act. And there’s no proof against you and me. Whatever he says, the prefect will take it as a lie that’s meant to cover his ass. No one will help a son investigate his mother’s adultery. You need not worry on that score.”

“Earlier today, I told him to go to his father’s grave, but he went to your temple instead. His refusal to pay respects to his father’s grave—that fact alone is enough to convict him of filial impiety. But we need to prepare the case against him in secret, behind his back.”

The abbot said, “You can’t do anything because he’s always by your side. I’m on good terms with some yamen employees. I’ll submit the accusation paper in secret and work out some way to have the yamen accept the case

and dispatch lictors to arrest him. You can come out then to bear witness. That way, not a soul will know a thing about it.”

“Yes, that’s the right way to do it. There’s one thing, though: After my son dies, you must be good to me and humor me in everything. If you don’t, won’t I have finished off my son for nothing?”

“What can I do to please you?”

“I want you to sleep with me every night. I refuse to sleep alone.”

“But I have business to attend to in the temple. How can I manage to come every night?”

“If you don’t have time, just send one of your disciples to keep me company (IC: *Her lewdness has reached the extreme! Her fall is inevitable.*), or I won’t be able to stand the loneliness.”

“I can humor you in that. Both young men are my trusted disciples. They’re very eager to please. Even when I’m with you, all three or four of us can have fun together if you like them. Won’t that be wonderful?”

Aroused by these words, Wu-shi went to the bed in the hall with the abbot and enjoyed herself to the full. In a seductive tone, she said, “I’m giving up my son for your sake, my love. Don’t you ever forget me!”

The abbot took a solemn vow: “If I ever betray you, let me die without a coffin to lie in!” (MC: *He will not be denied a coffin. He’s not that bad a traitor after all.*)

The abbot was quite exhausted after his passion was over, but Wu-shi wanted more.

“Why don’t you summon Taisu right now to try it out?” she suggested.

“Wonderful idea!” exclaimed the abbot. He rose, went to Taisu, gently took his hand, and said, “Madam Wu wants you.”

When Taisu approached the bed, the abbot said, “Get in bed quickly and keep Madam company!”

Although Taisu had already done it once that night, a young man like him would have no trouble doing it a second time. He jumped into bed and started again. Sitting on the edge of the bed, the abbot said, “You should be grateful that I made this possible for you.” He could not have known that this was Taisu’s second time around that evening.

Wu-shi felt satiated only after she had contended with two men. She said to the abbot, “With the little scoundrel out of the way, we’ll be free to do this often in the future!” (IC: *Don’t be so sure!*)

After it was over, she told both men to leave before her son woke up from his wine-induced sleep. As she walked them to the gate, she repeatedly

reminded the abbot, "I'll be waiting for news from you tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Don't fail me!"

Behind the abbot's back as he preceded Taisu, Wu-shi again pawed Taisu, furtively gathered him in her arms, and kissed him on his lips before letting him go. (MC: *The root of his future demise.*) She then closed the gate and went inside. The maid was still by the door of the bedroom, dozing off. Wu-shi then entered her bedroom but, seeing her son still in bed, went to sleep in the hall.

The next morning, on realizing that he was in his mother's bed, Dasheng said to himself, "I must have been dead drunk last night!" As he recalled what his mother had said to him the previous evening, he wondered whether she was being sincere or not. "Could she have done that again while I was drunk?"

Meaning to pick a quarrel with Dasheng, Wu-shi said as soon as she laid eyes on him, "You were so drunk that you lost your head and collapsed on my bed. I had nowhere to sleep the whole night!" (MC: *Liar!*)

Feeling deeply apologetic, Dasheng dared not make a peep.

Another day went by. Early the following morning, on hearing shouts and loud pounding at the gate, Dasheng grew apprehensive and went to open it. Two yamen lictors charged in and threw a noose around Dasheng's neck. Dasheng asked, aghast, "What's this about, gentlemen?"

"You goddamned villain! Your mother is accusing you of filial impiety. Once you're in court, you'll be beaten to death! And here you are, asking what it's all about!"

In a panic, Dasheng burst out crying and said, "Please let me see my mother before I go with you."

"Your mother will see you in court!" While saying this, the lictors marched him inside.

Having heard the pounding at the gate, the ensuing commotion, and her son's cries, Wu-shi knew what was going on. As she rushed to the gate, Dasheng held her and said tearfully, "Mother, however bad I am, you gave birth to me. How can you do me such harm?"

"This is what you get for disobeying me in everything! Now get a taste of what I'm capable of!"

"When did I ever disobey you?"

"The other day when I told you to visit your father's grave, why did you refuse to go?"

"You didn't go either. How can you blame me?"

Knowing nothing of what had actually happened, one of the lictors butted in, "Of course you should pay respects to your father's grave. How can you shift the blame onto your mother? We thought she was your stepmother or adoptive mother. But now that we know she is your birth mother, you're unquestionably guilty! What do you have to say for yourself? Now go with us this instant to the yamen!"

And so they took Dasheng, along with Wu-shi, to the Kaifeng prefectural yamen.

It just so happened that Prefect Li Jie had just opened his court session. Prefect Li was an incorrupt and honest official with a sharp intelligence. All his life, he looked on unfilial sons with the greatest aversion. Having read the complaint about an unfilial son, he glowered on hearing the announcement that the defendant had been brought in. But seeing that the defendant was just a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boy, he began to have doubts. He thought, "What could this boy have done to make his mother accuse him of filial impiety?"

He struck the silencer against the table and said, "Your mother accuses you of filial impiety. What do you have to say to that?"²

Dasheng replied, "I may be young, but I'm not uneducated. I'd never dream of failing in my filial duties to my parents. But as bad luck would have it, my father passed away, and I've displeased my mother to such a degree that I now stand accused of a crime. This fact alone is enough to prove the atrocity of my crime. Your Honor, please have me beaten to death to please my mother. I have nothing else to say." With that, he burst into a flood of tears. (MC: *These words are enough to move any casual passerby to tears.*)

The prefect felt saddened on hearing those words. He thought, "How can a son who says such things be unfilial? There must be more to this case than meets the eye. But then again," he thought, "maybe he's just a good talker, for all I know." He called forth Wu-shi.

Wu-shi approached with her seductive way of walking and took the scarf off her head. The prefect ordered her to raise her head, and when he saw that she was a pretty young woman, a certain suspicion entered his mind. He asked, "What did your son do in his filial impiety?"

"After my husband passed away, he broke free from my control and did everything his own way. (IC: *He needs no control.*) Every time I offered him admonishment, he hurled curses at me. I thought I should take his young age into consideration, but he got worse by the day. Unable to discipline him, I had no alternative but to seek justice in a court of law."

Turning to Dasheng, the prefect asked, "What's your response to your mother's accusation?"

"How could I dream of arguing with my mother? My mother speaks the truth."

The prefect asked further, "Does your mother play favorites?"

"My mother is most loving, and I'm her only child. She doesn't play favorites."

The prefect told him to approach the bench and said to him in a subdued voice, "This case is not what it seems. You can tell me the truth. I'll do right by you."

Dasheng kowtowed and said, "Nothing is hidden from Your Honor. I'm totally at fault."

"In that case, I'll subject you to corporal punishment, since parents can't be wrong, as they say."

"I do deserve punishment."

The prefect grew even more skeptical at this reaction, but in order not to contradict himself and lessen his dignity as the prefect, he ordered sharply, "Beat him!"

Dasheng was immediately thrown to the floor and given ten strokes with bamboo rods. (IC: *Injustice!*) The prefect observed Wu-shi with a watchful eye and was struck by the total lack of compassion in her face. Instead, she advanced toward the prefect on her knees and pleaded, "Your Honor, please make sure he's beaten to death!"

The prefect lost his temper. "You evil woman!" he lashed out. "This young man must be the son of your husband's former wife or concubine. You have no heart. How can you be so ruthless!"

Wu-shi said, "Your Honor, he's my birth son. You can ask him."

The prefect asked Dasheng, "Is she your birth mother?"

Sobbing violently, Dasheng replied, "Yes, she is indeed."

"But why does she hate you so much?"

"I have no idea. Please grant my mother her wish and beat me to death!"

The prefect grew even more apprehensive. Feeling certain that this case was not what it appeared to be, he said to Dasheng with deliberate harshness, "You are indeed an unfilial son. Death is what you deserve!"

Encouraged by the prefect's severity, Wu-shi kowtowed over and over again, saying, "Your Honor, please finish him off as soon as possible, so that I can enjoy some peace and quiet."

"Do you have other sons or adopted sons?"

“No.”

“He’s your only son, so I’ll give him a lecture and spare his life so that he can support you the rest of your life. Won’t that be good?”

“I prefer living alone instead of having him around.”

The prefect warned, “The dead cannot return to life. Regrets will be too late.”

“I’ll have no regrets,” said Wu-shi through clenched teeth.

The prefect announced, “In that case, I order you to buy a coffin tomorrow and come to claim his corpse. The accused is to be sent to jail today.” So he sent Dasheng to jail and released Wu-shi.

Her face beaming with joy (IC: *How can she have the heart to smile?*), Wu-shi made straight for the gate. Following her with his eyes until she was out of the gate, the prefect thought, “This woman is no decent sort. They must be hiding something. The way that boy is keeping his lips sealed shows that he is in fact a filial son. I must get to the bottom of this case.” (MC: *A benevolent man with divine wisdom.*) He summoned a detective who was keen of eye and swift of movement and gave him these words of instruction: “That woman will surely talk to someone after she leaves the yamen. No matter how far she goes, follow her and report to me whatever you see—what kind of people she talks to, what she says, and so on. I’ll have a handsome reward for you if you do a thorough job, but if you give me false information or if you hide anything from me, you’ll be a dead man!” (IC: *These instructions are indispensable.*)

Prefect Li had always maintained such strict discipline that no yamen employee would dare to disobey him. So the detective cautiously tailed Wu-shi and saw a Daoist priest meet her only a few steps from the yamen gate. (IC: *He’s too hasty and impatient. It’s all because of his wrong assumption about the prefect’s propensity to sentence unfilial sons to death.*)

“How did it go?” asked the priest.

Grinning from ear to ear, Wu-shi replied, “It’s over. You need only buy me a coffin so that I can claim his dead body tomorrow.”

Clapping his hands, the priest exclaimed, “Wonderful! Buying a coffin is no problem. I’ll have the coffin carried to the yamen tomorrow.” After that exchange, the priest and Wu-shi went away, talking and laughing. (IC: *Predictably, they are in for some enjoyment that night, but it will be their last night together.*)

The detective recognized the man as a priest of West Hill Temple and reported to the prefect. “Just as I thought!” said Prefect Li. “That’s why she

asked to have her son killed and has no qualms about it. How abominable!" Then and there, he wrote something on a piece of paper and said to the detective, "After that woman shows up at the yamen tomorrow, I'll order that the coffin be carried in. You can open the envelope at that point and act according to my instructions."

The next day, Wu-shi was the first one to enter the court. She said, "Upon Your Honor's instructions, I've prepared the coffin, and I'm here to claim my wayward son's corpse."

The prefect said, "Your son was beaten to death last night." (IC: *Wonderful!*)

Without the least hint of grief, Wu-shi kowtowed and said, "Your Honor, I'm deeply grateful to you for having done right by me."

"Carry the coffin in, and be quick about it!" ordered the prefect.

The detective promptly opened the seal and saw that it was an arrest order written in vermilion [a mark of the urgency and the severity of the case]. On it was written: "Immediately arrest Wu-shi's adulterer, the Daoist priest who is overseeing the coffin carriers. Make sure he does not escape."

Having seen the abbot only the day before, the detective would surely be able to easily identify him. Plus, the abbot was, at that very moment, giving orders to the coffin carriers. The detective seized him with one hand and showed him the arrest order. Unable to resist, the abbot resignedly let himself be taken into the prefect's presence.

Prefect Li asked, "Why did a priest like you buy someone a coffin and hire the carriers?"

Unable to deny the facts on the spur of the moment, the abbot said, for lack of a better excuse, "That woman is a cousin of mine. She asked me to do this as a favor, which I granted."

"A fine uncle you are, helping to kill your nephew!"

"That was a family matter. It has nothing to do with this poor priest."

The prefect continued, "As a relative of hers, you didn't stop her from taking her son to court, but you were certainly very helpful in providing the coffin. You're having an adulterous relationship with the woman, and you two are in this together! Even death won't expiate your crime! Scoundrel!"

Thereupon, he ordered that the ankle-squeezer be applied to the abbot so as to make him confess under torture. The pain being too much for him, the abbot confessed. The prefect obtained his signature and wrote this conclusion on the confession: "Huang Miaoixiu, abbot of West Hill Temple, has been found guilty of adultery and instigation of murder."

Wu-shi, on her knees at the foot of the dais, moaned in anguish as she watched the proceedings.

The prefect then ordered that the detainee, Liu Dasheng, be brought from the jailhouse to the courtroom. On first entering the jailhouse the day before, Dasheng had said to himself, "The prefect sounds like a good man. I don't think he'll sentence me to death." But now, on his way to the courtroom, he took fright at the sight of a brand-new coffin and thought, "Can he really mean to beat me to death today?"

As he knelt down in trepidation, the prefect asked, "Do you know Huang Miaoxiu, priest of West Hill Temple?"

Dasheng was impressed that the prefect had hit home, but he still feigned ignorance and said, "No, I do not."

The prefect insisted, "How can you not know your enemy?"

Dasheng turned his head and saw Abbot Huang on the floor, moaning in pain from the torture. Dasheng gave a start. Wondering what could have happened, he kowtowed and said, "I bow to Your Honor's divine wisdom, but I still dare not say anything."

The prefect said, "I've been questioning you repeatedly since yesterday without getting anything out of you. I know you consider it your filial duty to do this. Little do you know that I've already gotten to the bottom of this case." Having said that, he told Wu-shi to rise, adding, "I'm going to return the coffin to you, with a dead body in it."

Wu-shi assumed that the prefect was going to have her son beaten, but she heard him roar, "Put Huang Miaoxiu on the floor and apply the rods on him with extra force!" The abbot was beaten until his skin split and his flesh ripped. When he appeared to be breathing his last, several lictors were ordered to put him in the coffin, and nails were then driven into the coffin lid. (MC: *Bravo! Better than Ren Daoyuan's experience with the whip.*)³ All color drained from Wu-shi's face, and her teeth clattered uncontrollably.

After the coffin lid had been nailed into place, Prefect Li turned to Wu-shi and thundered, "You whore! For your illicit lover's sake, you demanded your son's death. What good does it do to keep a person like you in this world? You also deserve to be beaten to death. Lictors! Take her down and beat her hard!"

Like eagles swooping down on a little bird, the lictors forced Wu-shi to the floor. They were about to start applying the bamboo rods on her when Liu Dasheng threw himself across his mother's back, crying, "Beat me instead! Beat me instead!" As the lictors stood there, unable to execute the prefect's

order, more lictors came over to pull Dasheng away, but the boy held on to his mother and refused to let go, all the while wailing with grief.

Moved by Dasheng's sincerity, the prefect ordered the lictors to stop and told Dasheng to approach the bench. "Your mother wants to kill you," said the prefect. "I was going to have her beaten just a few times to give you some satisfaction. Why are you so protective of her?"

Dasheng replied, "How can I bear grudges against my own mother? What's more, Your Honor did not call me an unfilial son but censured my mother. This will trouble me until the day I die. Please consider my request, Your Honor!"

As Dasheng kowtowed repeatedly, the prefect told Wu-shi to rise to her feet, adding, "You should have been beaten to death, but I'm going to spare your life out of regard for your son. (MC: *He's letting her off too lightly.*) You must mend your ways from now on. If you fall back into your old ways, I won't let you off, not on any account!"

With the abbot's death, Wu-shi thought that her number was also up. Her son's offer to take the beating for her and his pleas on her behalf saddened her. While wondering what was going to happen next, she was relieved to hear the prefect's pronouncement. Moved by her son's kindness, she broke down in tears (MC: *It's now clear that his tricks to block the adulterers were motivated by his commitment to filial piety.*) and said to the prefect, "I deserve death for having betrayed my own son. (IC: *Her conscience awakens.*) In the future, I'll be content to spend my days with my son as he grows up and will never do wrong again."

"Your son will surely go far. I'm going to praise him publicly for his filial piety."

Dasheng kowtowed and said, "If so, Your Honor will only be praising me at the expense of my mother. I wouldn't dream of letting such a thing happen in my lifetime."

After Wu-shi heard her son out, mother and son fell into each other's arms and burst out sobbing right there in the courtroom. (MC: *Evidence of the natural bond between mother and son. This proves that all human beings are capable of kindness.*) The prefect then released them.

Thereafter, Prefect Li issued a summons for Abbot Huang Miaoxiu's disciples at West Hill Temple to go to the yamen and claim the corpse and the coffin. The news having already spread to the temple, Taisu and Taiqing were chosen to carry out the mission. On seeing the two handsome young men being led into the courtroom, the prefect thought, "So, those who have

supposedly renounced the material world lure young men from decent families in order to satisfy their own lust. These two handsome ones, when their turn comes, will involve more women in scandals.” Whereupon he ordered lictors to escort the two acolytes out, let them bury the coffin, and then return them to their parents so that they could resume their secular lives. They were also forbidden to enter the temple ever again. (MC: *Good rulings. In this day and age, he would be forced to serve as a janitor.*) After all this had been done and duly reported back to the yamen, accompanied by the receipts from the two families, the prefect also gave words of admonition to other priests at the temple, but that is no part of our story.

Now, back to Wu-shi: She returned home with her son, overwhelmed by gratitude to him. Henceforth, she treated him well, and he, on his part, complied with her every wish. No tension ever arose between them again. Moreover, with the abbot dead and the two acolytes dismissed, Wu-shi resigned herself to the situation and turned over a new leaf. However, memories of the past depressed her, and the shock she had suffered took a toll on her health. She died soon thereafter.

Liu Dasheng buried her remains with his father’s, in the same grave. After the mourning period was over, he took a wife. They lived in harmony, with full respect for each other, and maintained strict discipline in their home. Later, he went out to seek literary honors. With strong recommendations from Prefect Li Jie, he was assigned a government position and held the office to the end of his life.

Let us retrace our steps and come back to the day when Taisu and Taiqing were taken under guard out of the yamen. In their conversation about the event along the way, Taiqing said, “Last night, the great Laozi appeared to me in my dream, saying, ‘Your master was such an unusual man of the cloth that I’m going to give him a raise. You two can claim it for him.’ I said to myself, my master was unusual all right—unusually wicked! Why would he deserve a raise? And we’re supposed to claim it for him, too! As it turned out, the yamen summoned us today to claim his coffin—which is a case rather than a raise!”

Taisu said, “Master enjoyed so many pleasures that his life was not lived in vain, but now that he’s dead and gone, it’s too bad that he took our chance with him to the grave!”

“But even if he were still around, you and I could only drool in vain.”

Taisu said, “Oh, I did get one little taste of the sweetness.” (MC: *Even at this point, he still doesn’t heed the example of his master but instead crows about his*

accomplishment. He deserves to die.) Whereupon he told Taiqing everything about his dalliance with Wu-shi.

“Weren’t both of us disciples of His Reverence? And yet you got the better end of the deal! Well, now that we’re returning to secular life, I suppose we can each get a wife and satisfy our thirst.” (IC: *One who knows when to be content will be spared humiliation.*)

They buried their master in the ancestral graveyard of the temple and went their separate ways home to resume their secular lives.

Sometime thereafter, Taisu recalled Wu-shi’s affection for him and could not banish her from his thoughts. He went to the Liu residence to find out how things stood but was deeply saddened to learn that she had died. From that day onward, he seemed to have lost his mind. The moment he closed his eyes, he would see Wu-shi approaching for a sexual encounter with him. Sometimes he dreamed of his master, here to snatch her away from him. His nocturnal emissions weakened his constitution, and he succumbed to consumption.

Taiqing had married by this time. On hearing of Taisu’s death, he said with a sigh, “Now I know that Daoists should not break the commandments. Master did, and he died as an inevitable consequence. Taisu did, in a small way, and he died of illness. Luckily, I wasn’t involved at all. Otherwise, I would have joined them in the netherworld.” Henceforth, he behaved properly and abided by the law to the end of his life.

Clearly, divine justice never misses the mark. All Daoists must wake up to this truth. A later poet wrote these lines about Huang Miaoxiu:

*The magic charms at West Hill worked wonders;
He lured the living rather than raised the ghost.
He stopped only when death came to him;
The demon had in fact been in his pants. (MC: Facetious but true.)*

There is also a quatrain about Wu-shi:

*She carried at her waist a sword, no less;
Driven by lust, she meant to kill her son.
The evil priest died for the same reason,
As if she had a sharp knife in her hand. (MC: And as if he had died by his
own hand.)*

A quatrain about Liu Dasheng:

*He was charged with filial impiety,
Yet he hated to see his mother suffer.
At court, he withheld the truth, proving to the judge
That the orphan was a most filial son. (MC: His sincerity moves
one to tears.)*

The following lines are about the two acolytes Taisu and Taiqing:

*One served his master in his bed
But enjoyed female charms as well.
The innocent one was spared,
But the guilty one was not.*

Last, a quatrain about Prefect Li's sharp perception:

*The prefect in his divine wisdom
Never let off the unfilial.
But he turned this case on its head—
Proof that his strictness had been justified. (MC: If he used filial impiety as
a general criterion in giving death sentences, injustices would
abound.)*

富翁千金一



A Rich Man Squanders Thousands of Taels of Silver to Win a Beauty's Smile

An Alchemist Turns Half a Grain of Millet into a Nine-Cycle Pill

A Rich Man Squanders Thousands of Tael of Silver to Win a Beauty's Smile

As the poem says,

*Covered in tattered rags,
They brag to all of their alchemical skill.
Why don't they produce silver for themselves
And sell it like water by the river?*

The above lines were written earlier in this dynasty [Ming] by Tang Bohu, who won first place in the civil service examinations at the provincial level.¹ There are in this world people who engage in the transmutation of base metals, and they do little but set traps and perform sleights of hand to cheat the greedy and the benighted. They claim to be able to turn medicinal herbs into elixirs, iron and lead into gold, and sulfuric mercury into silver and call the trick “the art of the Yellow and the White” and “the magic of the furnace fire.” They ask for pieces of silver to use as the base, and then, when the coast is clear, they take the silver and run, calling the act “lifting the jar.” One such man, a Daoist priest, once tried to recruit Tang Bohu, saying, “Scholar, with your refined and otherworldly appearance, you’re a good candidate for this art.”

The scholar said in rebuttal, “You’re wearing nothing but tatters. If you’re a master of this divine art, why don’t you conjure up some wealth for yourself? Why go out of your way to enrich other people?”

The priest replied, “This poor priest has magic skills that are the envy of Mother Nature. They work only on those who are richly blessed by Heaven. I myself have no such luck, and therefore they don’t work on me. I see that you, sir, are one such richly blessed man, which is why I’m here to recruit an ‘outside protector,’ as we say in our professional parlance.”

“Let me tell you this: I care nothing about what you do with your magic. I’ll focus on transferring my rich blessings to you. When the gold is ready, you split the gold with me, fifty-fifty, and that will be that!” (MC: *Words that never fail to debunk falsehoods.*)

The priest caught on to Tang Bohu’s sarcastic tone. Realizing that the scholar was not one to take the bait, the priest went airily off. This is the encounter that resulted in the above-cited quatrain meant to admonish the world.

Now, some of those in that line of work have such a way with words that they could have easily argued Scholar Tang down. Why? Because, as they put it, “The immortals have the duty to deliver people from suffering. They’re not supposed to use their magic for selfish purposes. But only those who have the qualities of an immortal and a predestined bond with immortals can join us in practicing the art and succeed in inner perfection as well as in alchemy.” A fine speech that was! But there is indeed much truth in it, and alchemy is indeed a divine art. The methods for turning cinnabar into gold were passed on by immortals in olden times in order to deliver all mortal beings from poverty. Daoist patriarch Lü Chunyang, afraid that the gold thus derived would revert to its original state in five hundred years and bring losses to later generations, never meant to have the gold used for purchasing land, marrying, having children, or running a household.² An immortal who was about to succeed in making pills of immortality recruited Du Zichun as an “outside protector.”³ However, because Du Zichun had not been completely purged of the human emotion of love, the elixir in the furnace of Yuntai Temple was ruined.

As for those greedy people of our times, they acquire land and houses, along with their spoiled wives and beautiful concubines, harm others to enrich themselves, and haggle over every penny. What small and petty minds they have! When they seek out some lousy Daoists and expect them to churn out enough gold and silver for themselves and their offspring, wouldn’t you

agree that they have gone quite out of their minds? They would do well to reflect on the admonition about succeeding "in inner perfection as well as in alchemy." It would not do to concentrate on making elixir but neglect cultivating inner perfection. As long as they entertain this wrong idea, their attempts at alchemy will be doomed to failure.

Gentle reader, you would think that by now even the most benighted would have learned not to engage in such fruitless endeavors. And yet, for reasons quite beyond me, even the brightest of men fall into this trap. (MC: *Only the brightest indulge in fanciful ideas and imagine themselves impervious to trickery.*)

Let me tell you about a Mr. Pan of Songjiang [now part of Shanghai]. He was a rich man and a student at the Imperial Academy. With his erudition and eloquence, he was quite an interesting man, but he had one eccentricity: he had blind faith in alchemy. As the saying goes, "Like attracts like." Indeed, alchemists flocked to his door in a steady stream and, little by little, relieved him of much of his silver. In spite of having fallen victim to scams multiple times, he had no regrets, insisting that he was just not lucky enough to meet a true alchemist. He said, "This art has been around since the oldest times. Of course it works. (MC: *He is too well informed.*) When it does for me one of these days, the small losses I've suffered so far will be nothing!" And so he threw himself into the practice with greater enthusiasm. His name spread far and wide by word of mouth until every alchemist, worthy or not, planned to cheat him out of his money.

One autumn day, Mr. Pan went on an excursion to West Lake in Hangzhou. After settling down in a rented place, he saw his neighbors resting in their pavilion. They had come from afar, also to tour the lake. They had a lot of luggage and an impressive retinue of servants, and the woman who appeared to be the lady of the family was a delight to the eye. He learned, upon inquiry, that she was the master's favorite concubine. Day after day, they set out wine on an enormous rented pleasure boat complete with a band of musicians and singers. That concubine joined the company on the boat, where they drank, in moderation, and sang in subdued voices. As they toasted one another with raised cups, Mr. Pan saw that all the wine utensils were made of gold or silver and in various exquisite designs. After they returned to their lodgings in the evening, their rooms were ablaze with lights, and liberal rewards were given out.

The rich Mr. Pan in the next house was awestruck. He thought, "My family qualifies as wealthy (MC: *If he is wealthy, what complaints can he have?*)

He is just too greedy.), but we can't afford such extravagance. He must be like Tao Zhugong and Yi Dun, among the richest of the rich!"⁴

Out of admiration for his neighbor, Mr. Pan began to send messages to the man, indicating his wish for them to get acquainted. When they did meet, each introduced himself and voiced his admiration for the other. Seeing his chance to sound the man out, Mr. Pan said, "Sir, your wealth is nothing short of fabulous!"

Modestly, the neighbor said, "Oh, it's nothing even worth mentioning!"

Mr. Pan pressed further, "The way you spend your money every day, your vast fortune will eventually dwindle away unless your stockpiles of gold and silver reach the Big Dipper in the sky."

"Well, even if my stockpiles of gold and silver reach the Big Dipper, they'll easily be exhausted if nothing is added to them. There has to be a way to keep the supplies coming."

Quickly catching the drift of the conversation, Mr. Pan asked, "What would that way be?"

"I can't very well talk about it on the spur of the moment."

"But I do so wish to hear it!"

"You may not understand it, or even believe it."

Sensing something mysterious in that remark, Mr. Pan grew all the more eager to be enlightened. The neighbor dismissed all the attendants and whispered into Mr. Pan's ear, "I have Nine-Cycle pills. They change lead and mercury into gold. If you can turn out such pills, rubble won't be any less precious than gold!"

That remark about alchemy struck the right chord in Mr. Pan's mind. All the more intrigued, he said joyfully, "So you're a master of the art, sir! I'm an eager student trying but failing to get the hang of it. Since you're well versed in the art, please teach it to me, even if I have to use up all my savings for it!"

"This art is not to be passed on lightly. But we can give it a little try for now, just for your amusement." So saying, the man instructed a page boy to start a furnace fire and melt several taels of lead and mercury. He then retrieved a paper packet from his waistband and opened the packet to reveal some powder. With his little finger, he picked up a little of the powder and flicked it into the jar in the furnace. By the time the jar was taken out and emptied, all that met the eye was snow-white high-grade silver. The pieces of lead and mercury had disappeared.

Gentle reader, you may argue that since such a powder could change copper or lead into silver, then there is nothing fake about the practice of

alchemy. The truth is that this was a trick called the “pre-shrinking” method. Before the demonstration, he extracted the essence of the silver in the furnace with powder, so that each tael shrank to less than one-tenth its original weight. And then, when lead and mercury were added into the flames, the lead and mercury evaporated, leaving dregs that assumed a silvery color on encountering the essence of the silver. The actual weight of the silver remained the same as before the transmutation. This was how alchemists tricked people into believing them with unwavering conviction.

Mr. Pan was beside himself with joy. He thought, “No wonder he’s so rich and extravagant. I never thought producing silver could be so easy. I’ve been at it for a long time now, but I always lose money. I’m lucky that I ran into a real master. I must ask him to turn out some silver for me.” Whereupon he asked the man, “How was the powder made?”

“This is a process called ‘The Mother Silver Giving Birth to Children.’ First, get some silver to serve as the mother, or the base. The amount doesn’t matter. Smelt it with some of the powder and keep it warm in the furnace. When the fire reaches the right temperature after nine cycles, yellow sprouts will come up, followed by snow-white granules. When they’re ready and the lid of the furnace is taken off, scrape off the granules. Each little granule the size of a millet grain changes metals into gold or silver. The silver base will remain there, undiminished in the slightest.”

Mr. Pan asked, “How much silver is needed to serve as the base?”

“The more mother silver you put in, the better the quality of the granules yielded. (MC: *Standard language of con men.*) If you can harvest half a boxful of them, your wealth will rival that of the empire.”

“I’m no rich man, but a few thousand taels of silver should be within my means. If you’d deign to grace my humble home with your presence and give me a few pointers, I won’t ask for more from life.”

The alchemist replied, “I don’t impart my art to just anybody, nor do I tend the furnace for just anybody. But I’m impressed by your sincerity, and you do have some of the aura of a Daoist immortal about you. It’s written in our karma that we should meet in this place as neighbors. So I guess there’s no harm in doing this for you. Where’s your honorable residence? I can come someday for a visit.”

“I live in Songjiang. It’s only a two or three days’ journey from here. If you’re so inclined, why don’t you pack right now and go with me? If we say good-bye here, there may not be another chance for us to meet, and I’ll miss out on this opportunity.”

"I live in Zhongzhou [a general term for regions of the Yellow River Valley in present-day Henan] with my aged mother. When I left home with my concubine to see the famous scenery of Hangzhou, I didn't take any money. Whatever expenses we ran into have been paid with what comes out of my furnace. We've been having such a good time that we've forgotten about returning home. (MC: *If so, he should be a real immortal. Why would he need a young concubine?*) Now that I've met a soul mate in you, I wouldn't presume to selfishly keep my secret under tight wraps. But let me take my concubine back home first. I'll also get to see my mother before I pay you a visit at your home. There's no rush."

Mr. Pan objected, saying, "I can accommodate the lady in one of my spare houses. It has a garden and a pavilion of its own. She can stay there while you attend to business. Won't that work out nicely for all of us? I may not be the perfect host, but I certainly won't be remiss in courtesy to my honored guests and make the lady feel uncomfortable. My only wish is for you to honor me with your presence, for which I'll be deeply grateful."

Only then did the alchemist nod and say, "Out of appreciation for your sincerity, I'll talk to my concubine and prepare for a trip to your home."

Overwhelmed with joy, Mr. Pan wrote an invitation card right away and invited him to a feast on the lake the next day. When the appointed time came, Mr. Pan lavished attention on his guest, brought him to the boat, and engaged him in an animated conversation in which both tirelessly flaunted their knowledge. (MC: *In the end, he is ruined by his learning.*) Their only regret was not having met each other earlier. Host and guest did not part until they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Mr. Pan then sent a spread of exquisite dishes to the neighboring house for the young concubine. The following day, the alchemist reciprocated the hospitality with an elaborate feast. All the utensils and wine vessels were made of gold or silver, but I need not go into more of such details.

The two men got along so well that, having already enjoyed the lake to the full, they agreed to go together to Songjiang. They hired two large boats at the wharf and had all their luggage carried on board. All along the way, the two of them sat shoulder to shoulder. The young woman sat in the other boat and, from time to time, showed part of her face through the curtain of the window facing the men. Stealing glances at the beauty, Mr. Pan regretted that

*With a strip of water between them,
He could not offer words of tender love.*

Pei Hang sent the following poem to Madam Fan, who was traveling in the same boat with him:⁵

*We tour Wu and Yue in the same boat,
But a silk screen stands between me and the fairy.
Would that we could meet in fairyland!
Let's follow divine birds up to the sky!*

The same thoughts went through Mr. Pan's mind as he ogled the beauty in the neighboring boat, feeling frustrated that there was no messenger to carry words to her.

To dispense with idle chatter, let me come to the moment when the two boats arrived in Songjiang a couple of days later and moored in front of Mr. Pan's house. He invited the alchemist ashore and led him to the main hall of his residence. After tea was served, Mr. Pan said, "This is my main residence. With too many people coming and going, it's hardly the right place for you. My villa nearby is better for you and the lady. I myself will take the study in the outer wing of the villa. For one thing, it's quiet in the villa, so we won't be disturbed by unrelated matters. For another, the privacy of the villa makes it the ideal place for alchemical experiments. What do you think?"

The alchemist said, "The first taboos in alchemy are noises of the mundane world and distractions from unauthorized persons. What's more, with my concubine by my side, there's all the more reason for me to stay far away from outsiders. It would indeed be most convenient if we could be put up in your villa."

Thereupon, Mr. Pan gave instructions for the boats to be moved along the river to his villa, while he and the alchemist walked hand in hand to the villa. On top of the gate was a horizontal board that bore the characters "Garden of Delight." Once inside, they saw

*Ancient trees piercing the sky,
New bamboos lining the borders.
Long rafters sat atop the Moon and Breeze Pavilions;
Grand halls flanked winding paths to quiet dens.
The tall rockeries could store the Grand Historian's books;
The deep grottos could hold immortals' talismans.
Music played here could summon phoenixes;
A chess game here could last an eternity.⁶*

Admiring the scenery in the garden, the alchemist cheered, "What a tranquil and tastefully built place! The right place for practicing alchemy! With my concubine nicely installed, I can devote myself to the job you assigned to me. It looks like you're indeed richly blessed by fate."

Thereupon, Mr. Pan sent for the young woman. Having dolled herself up, she took along her two maids, Spring Cloud and Autumn Moon, and went to the villa on foot, swaying her hips as she went.

As Mr. Pan half rose from his seat to remove himself from the female presence, the alchemist said, "Now that we're good friends, it's all right for you to meet my concubine." With that, he introduced his concubine and Mr. Pan to each other.

Now that he was face-to-face with the young woman, Mr. Pan saw that, indeed, her beauty could make fish sink and wild geese fall from the sky and put the moon and flowers to shame. All rich men, without exception, are hungry for money and sex. (MC: *This observation hits home.*) At this point, Mr. Pan began to feel weak in the legs, like a snow lion melting away by the fire. The business of alchemy was relegated to the backseat. He said to the alchemist, "The bedchambers in the villa are all quite spacious. Please feel free to pick a suite to the young lady's liking. If she needs more maids, I'll give her a few."

While the alchemist and his concubine were checking out the bedchambers, Mr. Pan hurried back to his own quarters and took out a pair of gold hairpins and a pair of good bracelets. Then he went to the villa and offered them to the alchemist, saying, "This is my paltry First Meeting gift for the lady. (MC: *The temerity!*) Please don't take offense at its humbleness."

The alchemist could tell at first glance that the items were made of gold. With studied unconcern he said in demurral, "This is too much. I can easily produce gold. It troubles me to think that you spent so heavily on them. I won't take them."

Feeling all the more apologetic at his guest's refusal to take his gift, Mr. Pan said, "I know that you don't care for such trifles, but this is just a small token of my respect for the lady. Please accept it out of regard for my sincerity."

"I'd be putting too much distance between us if I insisted on rejecting your kindness. I'll have to oblige and accept it. Please allow me to do my best to make a success of my alchemy assignment and repay you for your lavish hospitality."

All smiles, the alchemist went to the chosen bedchamber and had a maid carry the gift inside. Then he brought his concubine out to express her thanks

to the host. To Mr. Pan, it was worth the expense to have this one chance to see her again. Without saying anything out loud, he thought, "This man is in possession of the art of alchemy and this beauty. What more blessings can one ask from life? I'm glad that he's willing to practice his art for me. It should be just a matter of days before the job is completed. (IC: *Don't be so sure.*) But with this beauty in my own villa, I wonder if I have a predestined bond with her. I won't be content until I can have my way with her. Now let me give her some thoughtful attentions, and if I don't succeed at first, I'll keep trying. Let me take my time." As he began to make arrangements for the alchemical experiment, he asked the alchemist, "Since you deigned to accept this job, when are we going to start?"

"Any time, as long as we have some mother silver."

"How much do you need to begin with?"

"The more, the better. The more base silver there is, the greater the production, and we'll be spared the trouble of repeating the process over and over again."

"In that case, I'll put two thousand taels of silver in the furnace. I need to take care of some business at my main residence today, so please excuse my absence, but I'll move here tomorrow and join you in the operation." That evening, a feast was laid out in the villa, and they did not part company until they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Mr. Pan also had wine and food sent to the young lady's suite. I will spare the reader details of his assiduous attention to his female guest.

The next day, Mr. Pan weighed out exactly two thousand taels of silver and had the silver carried to the villa along with the furnace and relevant utensils that had long been in his possession. No stranger to the art, Mr. Pan knew what to do and gathered together all the necessary ingredients, including lead and mercury. (MC: *This suffices to show that he is quite an aficionado.*) As he presented them to the alchemist, the latter said, "You're indeed meticulous in your preparations, but I have a secret formula that's quite unusual. You'll see after I start the fire."

Mr. Pan said, "It's precisely your secret formula that I wish you could pass on to me."

"My elixir is called 'Elixir of Nine Cycles.' Every nine days of firing make up one cycle. After nine cycles, a total of eighty-one days, the lid of the furnace can be removed for the harvesting of the pills. That will be your moment of great bliss."

"That will all be thanks to you!"

The alchemist summoned one of the servants he had brought with him and began to apply his method. They built a fire and slowly put in silver as the base. Then he showed Mr. Pan his prescriptions and added several rare ingredients. When multicolored wisps of smoke arose, he and Mr. Pan sealed the furnace together. The alchemist then called forth the servants who had followed him to the villa and told them, "I'll stay here for about three months. You go home and tell my mother about this and then come back." He kept only one or two servants who were practiced hands at smelting metals, and all the others dispersed as he had instructed.

From that day onward, the servants watched the furnace day and night, whereas the alchemist went to the furnace from time to time to check the color of the flames, but he did not give orders to remove the lid of the furnace. He spent his leisure time chatting, drinking, and playing chess with Mr. Pan. That host and guest enjoyed their time together goes without saying. Mr. Pan also kept sending things to the young lady so as to win her favor, and the young lady, on her part, sometimes reciprocated with a few articles that she thought he might like.

Suddenly, after more than twenty days had passed in like manner, a man wearing white hempen mourning clothes and sweating all over barged into the villa. He was soon recognized as one of the alchemist's servants who had been sent back to his home. On seeing the alchemist, the servant kowtowed and burst into wails of grief. "The old mistress passed," he said. "Please go home immediately to take care of the funeral."

The news so shocked the alchemist that all color drained from his face, and he collapsed to the ground in a flood of tears. (MC: *How does he manage to call up a flood of tears on the spur of the moment?*) Mr. Pan was also appalled, but he could do no more than offer some words of comfort. "Your mother lived out her allowed life span," said he. "Excessive grief doesn't do any good. Please restrain your grief."

The servant pressed further, "No one is in charge in the household now. Please go quickly!"

The alchemist stopped crying and said to Mr. Pan, "I planned to complete this job for you so as to repay you for your kindness. I never imagined I'd be hit by this tragedy at this time. I'll regret this to the end of my life. As things stand now, I can't stay here, but the job hasn't been completed, and it's not something you can stop and resume later. I'm really in a dilemma. My concubine may be just a woman, but she's been with me for a long time now and knows quite a thing or two about alchemy. It would be good if she

could stay on to keep watch over the furnace, and yet she's young, and there will be no one to discipline her. I'd hate to inconvenience you."

Mr. Pan said, "That's not a problem for close friends like us! Just leave the lady with me. The furnace is in a quiet spot with no unauthorized people around. I'll have a few older, more discreet women keep her company. At night, I'll take her to my wife and have her sleep in my wife's room. (MC: *Taking her to his own room would be much more convenient.*) I'll keep watch over the villa while waiting for your return. What inconvenience are you talking about? As for tea and meals, I won't be remiss in my duty."

After hesitating for a good while, the alchemist said, "With my mother's death, my mind is a shambles. As far as I recall from history, there was no lack of ancients who left their wives and children in other people's care. Given our friendship, I respectfully defer to you. Yes, she can stay here to watch the fire. After I'm done with the funeral, I'll come back to complete the transmutation and remove the lid. That's the only way for me to fulfill both obligations."

On hearing the man agree to leave his concubine behind, Mr. Pan wished he could offer half the sky to him as repayment. Smiling from ear to ear, he said obsequiously, "This shows that you follow through on what you start." (MC: *He may not follow through all the way to the end.*)

The alchemist went to the bedchamber in the interior of the house and told the woman about everything, after which he led her out to greet the host again and put her under Mr. Pan's charge. He then cautioned Mr. Pan with these words: "Keep good watch over the furnace. Be sure not to open the lid on your own. If you make a mistake, regrets will be too late."

Mr. Pan asked, "But what if you're detained and fail to return after the ninth cycle is completed?"

"The longer the product stays in the furnace after the ninth cycle is over, the higher the yield will be. So it's all right to open the lid a little later."

After exchanging some confidential words with the young woman (MC: *Instructions about his ingenious plan.*), the alchemist went off in a hurry.

Now, Mr. Pan did not worry about the alchemical operation because the concubine was still there and the alchemist himself would certainly return in good time. What occupied his mind was how to take advantage of the alchemist's absence and seduce the woman while she was in his villa. Such an opportunity was not to be missed, and he spent every waking moment searching his mind for a way to make his move. It so happened that while he was indulging in these wild thoughts, the young woman's maid Spring

Cloud, acting on her instructions, came to him and said, "My mistress would like to invite you, sir, to the furnace room to check the furnace."

On hearing this invitation, Mr. Pan hurriedly straightened his clothes and his cap and rushed to the young woman's bedchamber. He said, "Young lady, your maid relayed your order to me, and here I am, to wait for you and go with you to the furnace room."

In her coquettish voice, the young woman said, "Please go ahead first, sir. I'll follow you." Having said that, she emerged from her room with her charming way of walking and greeted Mr. Pan with a curtsy.

Mr. Pan said, "You're the guest, madam. How would I dare precede you?" "I'm but a woman. How could I give myself airs?"

As they deferred to each other, they refrained from physical contact, but the verbal exchanges, face-to-face, were significant enough. In the end, Mr. Pan let her precede him, followed by the two maids. Watching the young woman from behind, Mr. Pan felt as if a lotus flower appeared with every step she took. It was hardly surprising that he was seized with desire.

On reaching the furnace room, the young woman turned to the two maids and said, "This room is off limits to people who aren't supposed to be there. You two stay outside. Only the host can go in."

As soon as he heard these instructions, Mr. Pan half trotted to the door (MC: *Obligingly*.) and went into the room with her. As they checked the sealed furnace, front and back, Mr. Pan wished he could find a swig of water with which to swallow her whole. (MC: *Can such a lustful man expect to succeed as an alchemist?*) What did he care if the fire in the furnace was green, red, black, or white! Too bad there was a furnace attendant in the room, which meant that he could only limit himself to some amorous glances. Even a flippant word was not possible. Only when they were back at the door did Mr. Pan say cheekily, "Thank you, madam, for making this trip. In your husband's absence, you must feel lonely in your room."

The young woman smiled slightly without saying a word. (MC: *Bewitching*.) This time, she did not defer to Mr. Pan but went ahead of him with unhurried steps.

Mr. Pan was sent into greater raptures. He thought, "If there had been no one else in the furnace room today, I would have been able to have some fun with her. That furnace attendant was a killjoy. I'll have to think of a way to get rid of him tomorrow. I'll then ask her to go with me to check the furnace. That will be a good time to make my move."

That evening he told his servants, "Tomorrow morning, prepare a fine feast in honor of that furnace attendant and tell him that it's to show my gratitude to him for his hard work. Be sure to get him drunk." Having given these instructions, he drank by himself but felt bored. The thought that the beauty was in the vicinity and the memory of what had happened during the day set his heart aflutter. Feeling listless, he intoned a poem:

*A prized flower from a famous garden
Is transplanted to a spot in the hills,
Little knowing that outside the railings,
The spring breeze is offering its service.*

Then he went into the hall and intoned the poem several more times at the top of his voice for the benefit of the one in the adjoining bedchamber. Soon, the maid Autumn Moon emerged from the room, carrying a cup of tea in her hands. "My mistress heard you intone a poem, sir," said she. "She's afraid that you might be thirsty and offers you green tea."

A huge grin split Mr. Pan's face as he said his thanks over and over again. After Autumn Moon went in again, he heard the young woman chant:

*Who is the master of the prized flower?
It floats wherever the spring breeze takes it.
So long as Spring God shows it affection,
Its tender heart is similarly inclined.*

Mr. Pan caught on to the inviting tone, but he dared not barge in rashly. On hearing her bedroom door being bolted, he gave up and returned to his own room to sleep and wait for daybreak. (MC: *How is he going to make it through the night?*)

The next morning, as instructed, the servants invited the furnace attendant to a feast. The man had been bored to death, watching the furnace day in and day out. Now that he was offered a wine cup, nothing could stop him from doing justice to the wine. He drank himself into a stupor and dropped off to sleep outside. Knowing that the man was not in the furnace room, Mr. Pan went to the young woman's door to invite her to check the furnace. On hearing him, she came out and walked ahead of him, as she had done the day before. When she went through the door of the furnace room, Mr. Pan

followed closely on her heels and entered the room, but the maid stayed outside. On reaching the furnace and realizing that the attendant was nowhere in sight, the young woman said in feigned alarm, "Why is the attendant not here? And why did he put out the fire?"

All smiles, Mr. Pan replied, "I told him to put out the fire for now because I myself have a fire to build."

Pretending not to understand him, she exclaimed, "But that fire should not be put out!"

"Why don't the two of us unite and build up a real fire?"

Putting on a stern face, she said, "How can a student of alchemy and the Dao have such improper thoughts and make such improper remarks!" (MC: *When has he ever been a student of the Dao?*)

Mr. Pan said, "Didn't your husband sleep here with you, and wasn't he also engaged in alchemy? Don't tell me he did nothing as a husband!"

At a loss for words for a moment, she said, "This is a proper pursuit, and yet you're being so silly."

"To fulfill my predestined bond of love with you is also a proper pursuit." So saying, he abruptly put his arms around her and sank to his knees.

The young woman raised him to his feet and said, "My husband keeps strict discipline. I shouldn't get out of line, but on the other hand, my self-respect shouldn't stop me from acknowledging your assiduous attentions to me. Let's talk this evening."

"I beg you to be so kind as to grant my wish just this once, right here. Why wait until evening?"

The young woman said, "No, not here! Someone might come in!"

"In order to be with you, I've already arranged to keep the furnace attendant busy elsewhere. No one else will come in. What's more, the furnace room is in a secluded spot. No one will know."

"But this is an alchemical furnace. Any affront to it will have consequences. (MC: *The source of all trouble to come.*) Regrets will be too late. So this will never do."

By now, Mr. Pan was in the grip of lust. This was no time to care about affronting the furnace. (MC: *He can contain himself no longer.*) He gathered the woman tightly in his arms and said, "I don't care even if I have to die for it. You must help me out, now!" Without bothering to ask if she was willing or not, he carried her to a reclining couch, pulled off her pants, and had his way with her. The ensuing ecstasy was not any less in intensity than if he had ascended to heaven as an immortal. Behold:

*The one string on the lute trembled;
The holeless xiao pipe moved up and down.
The red stove burned with evil flames;
The black furnace churned with true lead.
The tongue stirring the pond
Was moist with fragrant wine;
The vital fluids wetting the petal
Brought joy as the body drank the nectar.
Why even bother to make elixirs?
Here and now came the ultimate bliss! (MC: A state of turmoil, as the
Daoists would say.)*

After their storm of clouds and rain was over, they straightened their clothes, and Mr. Pan said, "Thank you for accepting me, but the joy was over too soon. Please give me another chance tonight and make the fun last the whole night through!" With a plop, he fell on his knees again.

The young woman promptly raised him to his feet and said, "I did set aside this evening for you, didn't I? But you had to be so impatient. How could anyone do this next to an alchemical furnace?" (MC: *The transmutation is going to fail anyway. Why not "do this" while he can?*)

"If I had passed up that earlier opportunity, regrets would have been too late. At least I managed to get some fun."

The young woman then said, "This evening, shall I come to your study, or will you come to my bedroom?"

"Whatever you say."

"My two maids sleep with me in the same room. So that's not an option. I'll just slip out when they're not looking. Tomorrow, I'll give them some instructions and then bring you to my room."

That night, after all became quiet, the young woman did indeed emerge from her room into the anteroom of the main hall, where Mr. Pan was waiting. He then took her to his study, where they fulfilled their desires to the utmost. Henceforth, they indulged in the pleasures of the pillow either in her bedroom or in his study, with no restraint whatsoever. Mr. Pan kept marveling at his extraordinary good luck and wished that the husband would never return. If the alchemy operation was going to fail, well, so be it!

After they had indulged in sexual pleasures for more than ten nights in a row, the gatekeeper suddenly announced one day that the alchemist had returned. (IC: *So soon!*) Mr. Pan gave a violent start. He went out to greet the

alchemist and led him into the hall. After an exchange of amenities, he went to the young woman's bedroom and talked with her at some length before returning to the hall.

"The young lady says that the furnace hasn't been touched," he told Mr. Pan. "Now that the eighty-one-day cycle is over, the transmutation should have been completed, and this should be the right time to remove the lid to check the result. But it would be too hasty to do this today. Let's do it tomorrow after first making an offering to the gods."

That night, even though the young woman was not his to enjoy, Mr. Pan was nonetheless pleased at the prospect of harvesting gold and silver the next day now that the alchemist had returned. (MC: *He is a fool not so much because he wants to enjoy the young woman but because he is pleased at the prospect of harvesting gold and silver. And a big fool at that.*)

The next day, Mr. Pan respectfully bought some paper horses and other sacrificial offerings and held a prayer service. As soon as he and the alchemist entered the furnace room, the latter's face darkened. He looked thoughtful for a while and then said, "What happened to the air in this room? There's something strange about it." Opening the lid of the furnace with his hands, he stomped his foot and cried out, "It's ruined! The granules have vanished. Even the silver base is now a heap of useless dregs. Someone must be guilty of committing an affront to the furnace by engaging in filthy conduct."

Mr. Pan said nothing but turned pale with fright because the alchemist had spoken the truth. Gnashing his teeth, the alchemist turned to the furnace attendant and asked angrily, "Who else has been in this room?"

"Apart from the master of the house and the young lady, who come to check the furnace once a day, no one else would dare to come in."

"If so, how would you explain the failure?" asked the alchemist. "Go get the woman for me!"

The attendant accordingly went and brought the young woman to the furnace room.

The alchemist said harshly, "Weren't you supposed to be watching the furnace? What did you do that ruined everything in it?"

"I came with Mr. Pan every day to check the furnace and always found the furnace sealed and untouched. I have no idea why this has happened."

"Did I say anything about the furnace being sealed or not? You're the one who's been unsealed!"

Turning to the attendant again, the alchemist continued, "Were you here every time she and Mr. Pan came?"

The attendant replied, "There was one time when Mr. Pan said I had been working too hard, so he invited me to dinner. I drank too much and slept outside, and that was the only time when Mr. Pan and the young lady were here and I was not."

With an icy smile, the alchemist said, "That explains it!" Without a moment's delay, he went to extract a leather whip from his luggage (MC: *A dramatic move.*) and, on returning, said to the young woman, "It's all too clear that you, filthy whore, are to blame!"

As he flicked her with the whip, she dodged and said tearfully, "I did protest against doing that! Mr. Pan ruined me!"

His eyes popping wide, Mr. Pan could not find his tongue. How he wished for a hole in the ground that he could vanish into!

Turning furious eyes on him, the alchemist said, "What did you say the other day when I entrusted her to you? What a shameless thing you did so soon after I was gone! You're worse than a dog or a pig! (MC: *True.*) How can such a villain even hope to engage in alchemy! Oh well, I'm a poor judge of character. I just have to beat that filthy whore to death for bringing disgrace to my name. Why would I want to keep her?" Holding his whip, he ran after the young woman as she fled into her bedroom.

The two maids, to their credit, blocked his way and said, "Master, please calm down." Each of them got whipped once, but then the whip broke in half.

Not knowing how this violent outburst was to end, Mr. Pan saw nothing for it but to fall on his knees and apologize. "I did wrong in the excitement of the moment. I don't mind the loss of the silver I offered you the other day. (MC: *To his credit, he is generous enough.*) I only ask for your forgiveness."

The alchemist said, "You brought this on yourself! You did an evil thing, so it's only right that you lost your silver. You have no one to blame but yourself. Did I put my beloved woman at your disposal so that you could satisfy your lust? What am I going to do now that you've soiled her? Let me kill her off! And then it will be time for you to die. A life for a life!"

Mr. Pan said, "I'll gladly make reparations." Eagerly he told a servant to go to his main residence and bring back two ingots of silver. When the ingots were brought to him, he held them in his hands and begged, on his knees, for mercy.

With feigned unconcern, the alchemist said, "I can churn out silver easily. Why would I care about that?"

Busily kowtowing, Mr. Pan added two hundred taels (MC: *A tithe of the two thousand taels of silver he already paid.*) and said, "This sum of money

should be enough for you to take another concubine. It honestly was all my fault. Please forgive the young lady for the sake of our friendship before this happened!"

"I don't care about your silver," said the alchemist. "It's just that people like you won't repent and reform unless you suffer a monetary loss. (MC: *If he repents and reforms, whom are you going to live off?*) So I will take the silver. It can serve some useful purpose if I give it away to help the poor." And so he stuffed the three hundred taels into his trunk. Then he called together the young woman and his servants, male and female, and hastened to have all their clothes and luggage carried onto the boat on which they had come. As he left the gate, he kept grumbling aloud, "How abominable! To be humiliated like this!" And he kept up a stream of curses as the boat set out.

Shocked out of his senses, Mr. Pan had been afraid only that matters might get out of hand. Now that the alchemist had left of his own accord, he counted himself a lucky fellow in spite of his monetary loss. As for the silver in the furnace, he bought the alchemist's story that the affront done to the furnace caused the failure. But he was not without regrets. "I was too hasty," he thought. "I should have waited for the transmutation to succeed and kept them for a longer stay before I tried my chance with her. Wouldn't I have had it both ways? And it would have been all right if I hadn't done it in the furnace room. I was just too reckless. The loss of money would hardly matter, but it's too bad that the transmutation failed even though I engaged an accomplished alchemist. (MC: *A fool through and through.*) Really too bad!" Then he consoled himself by thinking, "But I did manage to have fun with a beautiful woman for some time. That's an escapade worth bragging about, and what a delight it was! There's no need to be regretful." It never occurred to him that he was in fact the victim of a scam.

Back when the alchemist was staying at West Lake, he had learned that a rich man, Mr. Pan, would soon be traveling there, and so he made arrangements for all that show of wealth, to impress Pan. When the latter invited him home, he feigned indifference and deliberately dragged his feet. When a messenger came to announce his mother's death, he left in a hurry with the two thousand taels of silver offered by Mr. Pan, "lifting the jar" and leaving the woman behind so as not to arouse suspicions. Later, Mr. Pan's dalliance with the woman was in fact part of his scheme, aimed at incriminating Mr. Pan, so that the guilty party, once found out, would feel too embarrassed to say anything in his own defense, would blame himself, and therefore would not bother to call him to account. Mr. Pan, destined for a loss of money at

this time, fell into the trap. He took the alchemist to be a man of immense wealth and a bona fide alchemist, little knowing that the golden and silver utensils were made of copper and lead and only plated with melted gold and silver. Under the influence of wine and by candlelight, who would think of testing the utensils with a touchstone? So he had been fooled in a distracted moment by an ingenious ruse.

But Mr. Pan did not awaken to the truth after being cheated out of his money. He blamed himself for having missed a good opportunity, and his enthusiasm for alchemy only increased. One day, another alchemist came to him, and they found each other so agreeable in their conversation about alchemy that Mr. Pan invited him home and said to him, "Some time ago, I had a guest who could change iron into gold. He demonstrated his art to me and had the furnace fire going for me, but then I got on the wrong side of him in a small way, and he left before the job was completed. It was really a shame."

"Are you saying my art is inferior to his?" said the alchemist. He asked that his skills be put to the test at the furnace, and, sure enough, they proved to be equal to those of the first alchemist. (MC: *If you've seen one, you've seen them all.*) The pinch of powder that he tossed onto the lead and mercury changed them into silver.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Pan. "It didn't work out last time, but it will surely work this time around!" As before, he offered silver to the alchemist, this time one thousand taels, so that he could produce more of it. The alchemist went out to summon a few assistants for the job. Having witnessed how the alchemist had easily transmuted base metals into silver, Mr. Pan grew bolder and saw no need to be on his guard. As it turned out, the group of men made off with his silver before the night was out, as he realized the following day.

By this time, having been cheated once again, Mr. Pan found that his fortune had dwindled. Enraged by the humiliation, he thought, "I went to such lengths and spent so many years on this business. Having missed the opportunity last time, I pinned my hopes on this one, and yet I was hit with another loss. Let me go out and search for those men, though I have no idea where they are. They must be performing alchemy at someone's home. Maybe I'll run into them, for all I know. If not, I may meet a true alchemist who will turn out gold and silver for me." (MC: *Still cherishing the illusion.*) Thereupon, he packed and set out on a wandering journey.

One day, he ran smack into the second alchemist's assistants on a crowded street by Chang Gate in Suzhou. Before he could burst out with an

angry word, the men, all calm and composed and beaming with smiles, grabbed his arm as cheerfully as if they had met an old friend in an alien land. They invited him to a grand restaurant and sat down around a nice, clean table. After ordering warm wine and food, one of the men said to him, all humility, "We're deeply sorry for having played you false last time. But this is how we make a living, so please don't take offense. Now I have a plan to compensate you for your loss. Please don't say no."

"What's the plan?"

"We've spent all of what we took from you, so we have nothing on hand with which to repay you. Now, there's a rich man in Shandong who has contracted us to perform alchemy for him. As soon as our master arrives, the man will deliver his silver to us. But our master is away traveling and won't be here anytime soon. Now you can pose as our master. After the silver is delivered, we'll give the silver to you by way of compensation. Won't that be as easy as turning a hand over? Otherwise, it's pointless for you to try and settle accounts with us. What do you say?"

"Who's your master this time?"

"He's an ascetic monk. If you shave off some of your hair and let us honor you as our master (IC: *Intriguing*.), we can go to the man and pull this off."

In his eagerness to lay his hands on the silver, Mr. Pan had his hair shaved, as suggested. The men deferentially danced attendance on him all the way to the rich man's house in Shandong. Claiming to have brought their master, they were ushered in. The rich man respectfully greeted them (MC: *Here comes another victim*.) and, in the main hall, engaged them in a conversation about alchemy. Being a practiced hand with much to say about the subject, Mr. Pan waxed eloquent and held forth on the dos and don'ts of the practice, much to the rich man's admiration. That very evening, the host weighed out two thousand taels of silver and agreed to start a fire the next day. The men plied him with wine until he drank himself silly and had to be carried off to a study in the interior of the house to sleep.

It was after daybreak when the men began to talk about getting the furnace ready. While they were assigning jobs to everyone, Mr. Pan, with his expertise, also gave instructions left and right. (MC: *Thousands of taels have been paid as tuition*.) That day, they added the rich man's silver to the furnace for smelting. While the men, as apprentices, watched the furnace, the rich man, wishing to get Mr. Pan's advice, invited him for a chat over a few cups of wine. It was an invitation that could hardly be turned down. While the

coast was clear, the men took the silver and bolted, “lifting the jar” and leaving the “master” behind.

The rich man thought nothing could be amiss as long as the master was in his house, but the next morning, when he learned that the apprentices had all disappeared, he seized the master and threatened to take him to the authorities and hunt down his accomplices.

Sobbing, Mr. Pan said, “I’m Pan from Songjiang. I’m no cohort of those men. Because of my passion for alchemy, they pulled a scam on me some time ago. When I ran into them on the street the other day, they told me that since they were on their way to your house to perform alchemy, they could compensate me. Then they cut my hair and made me pose as their master. I was hoping to get back what I’d lost, but as it turned out, they even fooled you and left me behind.” With that, he broke into a violent fit of sobs. The rich man questioned him further on his background and found every answer credible, for it turned out that Mr. Pan’s wealthy clan in Songjiang had a long-standing friendship with his own clan. Convinced that Mr. Pan was indeed the victim of a scam, he could not bring himself to come down hard on him and felt obliged to set him free.

With no money for traveling expenses, Mr. Pan begged for food in his attire as a mendicant monk. (MC: *As a victim of a scam, he lost his hair but gained goodwill from donors.*)

On reaching Linqing Wharf, Mr. Pan saw a beautiful woman watching the street from behind a raised curtain in a large boat, exposing her face. He thought he must have seen her before. Upon a closer look, he recognized her to be the first alchemist’s concubine, the one who had committed adultery with him. He wondered, “Why is she in that boat?” So he went up to the boat and asked around. It turned out that the boat had been hired by a young scholar on his way to the capital for the civil service examinations at the national level and that the woman was a celebrated courtesan in his service. Mr. Pan thought, “So did the man sell his concubine?” But then he thought, “Or maybe this woman just looks like her?”

As he kept pacing to and fro by the boat, staring into it, a servant emerged from inside and said to him, “The lady in the cabin wants to know if you’re from Songjiang.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Might you be Mr. Pan?”

Startled, Mr. Pan asked, “How does she know my name?”

At this point, the woman in the cabin said, "Ask him to approach the boat."

When Mr. Pan did, the woman behind the curtain said, "I'm none other than the woman the alchemist presented as his concubine. I'm in fact a courtesan from Henan. In order to fulfill a promise, I had to obey him and help him play that trick on you. I've done you wrong. But why are you in this place and in such a state?"

Crippled with grief, Mr. Pan told her about how he had been scammed time and again and what had led to his return journey from Shandong.

From behind the curtain, the woman said, "I mustn't be cold and heartless toward you. Let me give you some money for your journey home, so that you can reach home sooner. (MC: *The prostitute is a much kinder person than the alchemist.*) If you meet alchemists again in the future, please be sure not to believe them. As someone involved in one such scam, I know what a deceitful lot they are. Offering this advice to you is my way of repaying you for your love for all those nights." Having said that, she had a servant present Mr. Pan with a packet containing three taels of silver. Overwhelmed with gratitude, Mr. Pan took it. He realized only then that the alchemist had hired a prostitute for a sex trap, and now, to her credit, she was paying for his traveling expenses.

After returning home, Mr. Pan recalled the woman's advice with much emotion and stopped believing in alchemy. (IC: *Too late.*) Although he remained a non-believer the rest of his life, all of his relatives and friends who witnessed his unkempt hair and heard about what had happened to him made him a figure of fun. All those who are given to alchemy, be advised: Take warning from this story!

*Alchemists must first quench their carnal desires;
All bonds are predestined. Why run around?
Lustful men greedy for metal transmutations
Are only indulging in impossible dreams.*

Li Gongzuo Ingeniously Reads a Dream

Xie Xiao'e Cleverly Snares Pirates

THERE is an ode that says,

*Women scholars hold their own with male peers;
The army counts women among its ranks.
Some may not travel far afield,
Yet their plans have lasting impact.
As we observe the women at their exploits,
We feel ashamed of our lack of depth.*

The above lines are in praise of worthy women who are superior to men. As for women well versed in polite letters, there have been Ban Jieyu, Cao Dagu, Yu Xuanji, Xue Tao, Li Jilan, Li Yi'an, and Zhu Shuzhen.¹ They could equal the finest scholars, such as Ban Gu and Yang Xiong, and were at least as talented as Lu Zhaoling and Luo Bingwang.² And then there are the great women warriors, such as Lady Han, the Detachment of Women, Lady Xian of Gaoliang, and Mother Lü of East Sea.³ In strategy, they were the equal of Han Xin and Bai Qi.⁴ In bravery, they could hold their own with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.⁵ Some women were also good judges of character, such as Zhuo Wenjun, Hongfu, Wang Hun's wife, Zhong-shi, and Wei Gao's mother-in-law, Miao-shi.⁶ All of them had the discernment to recognize great men before they rose to prominence.

There are women who take revenge on their enemies, such as Sun Yi's wife, Xu-shi, Dong Chang's wife, Shentu-shi, Pang Zixia's wife, Eqin, and Zou

Jingwen's servant's wife.' They had the courage and the wisdom to fight and defeat brutal enemies.

Some women, curiously enough, donned men's attire, such as Mulan of the Former Qin dynasty [350–94], Lou Cheng of Dongyang of the Southern Qi dynasty, Madam Meng of the Zhenyuan period of the Tang, and Huang Chonggu of Linqiong in the Five Dynasties (907–60).⁸ They were adaptable and skilled at hiding their true nature—so much so that they were even able to serve as government officials without ever being exposed while also preserving their chastity. These accomplishments are beyond the reach of the average man. Nothing could have called for greater ingenuity, and nothing could have been more difficult to accomplish.

Let me now tell of a most remarkable woman, who disguised herself as a man and went through the worst trials and tribulations after calamity befell her. She strained every mental faculty in seeking revenge while preserving her chastity. The likes of such a story had never before been heard of. There is a poem in testimony:

*Knights-errant look to the Ancient Sword Spirit,
Who killed her enemies with wisps of smoke,⁹
And yet, a merchant's remarkable daughter
Single-handedly avenged two families.*

The story goes that in the Yuanhe reign period [806–20] of the Tang dynasty, there lived in Yuzhang Prefecture [in present-day northern Jiangxi] a rich man, Mr. Xie. With an immense family fortune, he kept a low profile and made himself out to be one of the many ordinary merchants in town. He had a daughter, Xiao'e. Her mother died when she was only eight. In spite of her tender age, she was as strong as a man. Mr. Xie betrothed her to a swordsman named Duan Juzhen of Liyang [present-day He County, Anhui]. Duan was a man with a strong sense of loyalty and honor. He associated with men of bold spirit and was also engaged in large-scale business ventures on the waterways of the region. Impressed by his fame, Mr. Xie betrothed his daughter to the man, even though his daughter had not yet come of age. The two families having merged into one, they transported goods on the same boats and traveled between the Wu and Chu regions. All the dozens of men in the two families—including the brothers, sons, nephews, and servants—worked on the boats. The business boomed, and the boats were

heavily laden. After several years went by in this fashion, the fame of the Xie family's boats spread far and wide. (MC: *The source of troubles to come.*)

At the time of our story, Xiao'e was fourteen years old and not yet one month into her marriage with Duan Juzhen. When their boat reached the mouth of Poyang Lake one day, they found themselves besieged by several pirate boats with armed men on board. The two ringleaders jumped onto the Xie family boat and killed Xiao'e's father and husband with their swords. Then the other pirates went into action together to finish off everyone else on the boat. Where was one to hide in the confined space of the boat? The few who made it out of the cabin were seized by the pirates and killed. Those who jumped overboard had no chance of survival in the rapid currents, but at least their bodies were spared mutilation. Xie Xiao'e was agile enough to hide behind the rudder while the pirates were on their killing spree, but she lost her footing and fell into the water. The bandits swept the boat clean of all valuables, dumped the corpses into the lake, and rowed off in their own boats, leaving the Xie family boat where it was.

As she floated down the current in a trance, Xiao'e drifted to the side of a fishing boat, as if she was being assisted by divine beings. The fisherman and his wife pulled her up, and on finding her chest still warm, they were relieved that the woman was still alive. They gave her a change of clothes, which were tattered but dry, and laid her flat in the cabin. Soon after throwing up a great deal of water, Xiao'e came to. Realizing that she was in a fishing boat and recalling how her father and husband had been killed, she burst into wails of grief. The fisherman and his wife asked why she was so distraught, whereupon she gave them a full account of how a band of pirates had slaughtered her father, her husband, and everyone else in their family boat. It so happened that the fisherman had benefited many times from the generosity of the famous Mr. Xie and Champion of Justice Mr. Duan. Shocked on hearing of their deaths, he asked Xiao'e to stay on in the boat.

After a few days of recuperation, Xiao'e felt that she had regained her health. With her quick mind, she noticed that the fisherman and his wife were not doing a brisk business. "How can I put them to extra trouble?" she thought. "I should thank them and say good-bye to them. I'll go ashore by myself and beg for food along the way while looking for a place to settle down." So she bade them farewell and begged for food as she went along.

She found herself at a Miaoguo Nunnery in Shangyuan County, Jianye [present-day Jiangning County, Nanjing], where the abbess, Jingwu, was

impressed by her articulateness. Out of sympathy for her misfortunes, the abbess kept her in the nunnery, meaning to make her a disciple. Willing to join the Buddhist order, Xiao'e said, "I have nowhere to go. Why wouldn't I want to spend the rest of my life as a Buddhist nun? But as long as I haven't avenged my father and my husband, I can't take the tonsure. (MC: *Her mind was already made up at that time.*) I'll just take things as they come and wait for a couple of years before I decide what to do next."

Henceforth, she begged for alms outside during the day and returned to the nunnery in the evening. Every morning and evening, she intoned the sutras with Jingwu the abbess. As she kept her head bowed before the Buddha's statue, she prayed silently for retribution.

One night, she saw her father in her dream. "You should know the name of my murderer," said he. "Remember this riddle: A monkey in the middle of a cart; grass atop an east gate." Before she could ask further, her father let go of her and disappeared. She woke up with a violent sob. She still remembered the words she had heard in the dream, but their meaning eluded her. Several days later, her husband, Duan Juzhen, appeared to her in another dream, saying, "My killer's name is also in a riddle: Crossing the field; husband for one day."

After having these two dreams, Xiao'e said to herself, "The departed souls have not perished and were able to manifest themselves to me. But why didn't they just tell me the names straight out? Why the riddles? (MC: *The departed souls do have a roundabout way of doing things, making up riddles like this. But only thus can Xiao'e's steely resolve be made clear.*) Maybe that's because heavenly mysteries are not to be revealed lightly. There must be an answer to each of the riddles. I don't have a clue, but there's no lack of wise people in the world. I must have the riddles solved, whatever it takes."

Thereupon, she went to Jingwu's room and told her about the dreams. Then she wrote the two riddles on a piece of paper and hid it on her person. "I'm going out to beg for food," she told Jingwu. "I'll ask everyone I see to help me solve the riddles."

Jingwu said, "There's an eminent monk in the nearby Waguan Monastery. His Buddhist name is Qiwu. He's a fountain of knowledge, and he associates regularly with officials and the elite. If you show him the riddles, he'll surely be able to solve them for you."

Heeding the advice, Xiao'e went straight to Waguan Monastery and asked to see Qiwu. After saluting the monk in the Buddhist fashion, Xiao'e said, "A cruel injustice was done to me, after which I was given two riddles

in my dreams. The riddles contain the names of the culprits. My wits are too dim to puzzle them out, so I'm here to seek help from Your Reverence." So saying, she produced the sheet of paper from her sleeve and gave it to the monk with both hands.

The monk looked at the riddles for a while before he shook his head and said, "I have no clue, but I have many visitors here. I'll remember your riddles and seek advice from everyone I see. If someone more accomplished than I solves them, I'll let you know."

With another salute, Xiao'e said, "I'm ever so grateful to Your Reverence for going out of your way to help me."

Henceforth, while begging for alms from street to street, Xie Xiao'e also sought help for answers to the riddles. Monk Qiwu, for his part, also consulted all his visitors about the riddles. (MC: *What a thoughtful man Mr. Qiwu was!*) From time to time, Xiao'e went to the monastery to check if Qiwu had an answer for her. Years went by in like fashion, but the riddles remained unsolved.

Storyteller, if no one could solve the riddles, what purpose did the dreams serve?

Gentle reader, please be patient. There is a right time for everything. Xie Xiao'e's time had not yet come at this point, which accounts for the way things were with her. When the right time comes, coincidences will happen.

To get on with our story, in the spring of the eighth year of the Yuanhe reign period [806–21], Judge Li Gongzuo of Hongzhou completed his term of office and left Jiangxi on a small boat, heading in an easterly direction.¹⁰ On reaching Jianye, he moored the boat and went on a tour of Waguan Monastery. Monk Qiwu, an old friend of his, greeted him and took him to a gazebo, where they looked out into the distance and chatted about things past and present. In the midst of their conversation, Monk Qiwu said, "You, sir, are a man of great learning. Please solve two riddles for me."

Li Gongzuo said with a laugh, "Your Reverence, your eagerness to learn shouldn't have made you stoop to such child's play."

"It's not child's play. Let me tell you the reason. A widow Xie Xiao'e who lives nearby showed me two riddles and often comes here to check if I've found answers to them. She says that the riddles involve the characters of her enemies' names. I haven't been able to figure them out. I've shown them to all my visitors, but in vain, and many years have gone by. That's why I need your help."

"Please write the riddles down. I'll try and guess."

Monk Qiwu picked up a writing brush and wrote out the two riddles. Li Gongzuo looked them over and said, "They should be solvable. I wonder why no one has been able to figure them out." He read the characters out loud over and over again, nodded his head a few times, leaned against the windowsill, and traced the characters in the air with a finger. After another few moments of silent reflection, he clapped his hands and said, "I've got it! I shouldn't be wrong!"

Monk Qiwu asked to be enlightened, but Li Gongzuo said, "I can't disclose the answer yet. Please bring the widow here. I'll explain to her."

Without a moment's delay, Monk Qiwu asked an acolyte to go to Miaoguo Nunnery and bring Xie Xiao'e over. When she arrived, Monk Qiwu said to her, "Please greet this gentleman. He can solve your riddles."

And so Xiao'e went up and greeted the visitor.

"Tell me first why you want to solve the riddles," said Gongzuo.

Xiao'e broke down in sobs and could not get a word out for quite a while. Eventually, she said, "My father and my husband were both killed by pirates. Some time after that, I had a dream in which my father said to me, 'The name of my killer is hidden in this riddle: A monkey in the middle of a cart; grass atop an east gate.' Then I had another dream in which my husband said to me, 'My killer's name is also in a riddle: Crossing the field; husband for one day.' I'm not smart enough to puzzle them out. I ask everyone I see, but I still get nowhere. Many years have gone by, but without knowing who the killers are, there's no way for me to seek revenge. This is my deepest regret." (MC: *Poor thing!*) With that, she burst into tears again.

With a smile, Li Gongzuo said, "Don't be upset. From what you said, I've solved the riddles." Xiao'e stopped crying and asked for enlightenment. Li Gongzuo announced, "The one who killed your father is Shen Lan. The one who killed your husband is Shen Chun."

"How did you deduce that, sir?" asked Xiao'e.

Li Gongzuo explained, "As for 'a monkey in the middle of a cart,' if you remove the top and bottom horizontal lines from the character for 'cart' (車), you get the character 申 (*shen*), which means 'monkey' in the twelve-animal zodiac—hence, a monkey in the middle of a cart. As for 'grass atop an east gate,' if a grass radical sits on top of the character for 'gate,' add the character for 'east' to the character for 'gate' and you get the character 蘭 (*lan*). Now, the other riddle. 'Crossing the field' means striking through the character for 'field' (田), so you get 申 (*shen*) again. As for 'husband for one day,' add the character for 'one' to the top of the character for 'husband' (夫), then add

'day' (日) to the bottom part of 夫, and you get the character 春 (*chun*). Clearly, Shen Lan killed your father, and Shen Chun killed your husband. I'm quite sure!"

Monk Qiwu, listening off to one side, rubbed his hands and cheered, "What a revelation for a mystery that remained unsolved for years! All thanks to Mr. Li's unrivaled intelligence!"

Sobbing in even greater grief, Xiao'e said, "If not for you, sir, I'd still have no clue as to my enemies' names and therefore would disappoint my father and my husband in the netherworld." After she kowtowed her thanks, she asked for a writing brush from Qiwu and wrote the names of Shen Lan and Shen Chun on a ribbon attached to the inside of her garment. (MC: *Frightening*.) Then she unstitched the ribbon, turned it inside out, and sewed it up again.

"Why did you write the names down?" asked Li Gongzuo.

"Now that I know who they are, I swear to hunt them down, even though I'm but a woman, and kill them, wherever they are, so that justice can be done."

Li Gongzuo turned to Monk Qiwu and exclaimed, "How admirable! But this isn't going to be easy."

Monk Qiwu commented, "Nothing is too hard for someone who has such determination. Over the past few years, I've gained a good idea of this woman's tenacity. She does not speak lightly."

At this point, Xiao'e said to Qiwu, "Please tell me this gentleman's name. I'll never forget him."

"He's Mr. Li the Twenty-Third, Judge of Hongzhou, Jiangxi."

Xiao'e prostrated herself on the ground in a Buddhist salute while reciting lines from the scriptures and then rose and bade the two elders a tearful farewell.

After having a few drinks in Monk Qiwu's room, Li Gongzuo took leave of him, reboarded his boat, untied the mooring rope, and set sail for home.

Let us follow another thread of the story and come back to Xiao'e. From the day she learned the killers' names from Judge Li, she was determined to hunt down the two men. Because it was unseemly for a woman to travel alone, she hit on an idea and used all her savings from years of begging alms to buy a man's outfit. Calling herself "Xie Bao," she also bought a sharp knife and hid it in her clothes. (MC: *Frightening*.) She thought, "The pirates we ran into must have worked on the river before. So that's where I should go to make inquiries."

Day in and day out, she hung around the wharf and hired herself out to boatmen who were looking for help. While on board, she gave her all and never loafed on the job. (MC: *She has a purpose in mind.*) So she became popular as a hired hand, and she was not picky. She took all job offers. Soon, she got to know all those who worked on merchant boats. When she went to the lavatory, she took extra care not to give herself away. Wherever her boat went, she would go ashore and make inquiries all around. Several years went by with no progress.

One day, the merchant boat on which she worked moored at Xunyang Prefecture [in present-day northern Jiangxi]. She went ashore and saw a poster on the bamboo gate of a house that read, "Help Wanted." Xiao'e asked a neighbor, "What kind of family is this?"

"This is the Shen family. The master of the house is Squire Shen Lan. He's often away, doing business on the rivers. There are only women in the house, with no helpful male servants to look after things. That's why they're hiring."

The name Shen Lan rang a bell for Xiao'e. She thought, "So, this name is for real! Can he be the killer?" To the neighbor, she said, "I'd like to have the job. Could you please take me to them?"

The neighbor said, "The Shens need help badly. They'll surely take you. But I expect you to treat me to a meal."

"Of course!" said Xiao'e.

After asking for Xiao'e's name and address, the neighbor led her to the Shen house. A man emerged from inside. You may ask, how did he look? Behold:

*A grotesque face, sunken in the middle;
A pointed chin with a few brown whiskers.
His cheekbones protruded;
His thick eyebrows sat atop bloodshot eyes.
He talked like a tiger roaring;
His voice shook the cold, rainy, wind-blown air.
He walked like a wolf running;
His long shadow stirred dragons and snakes to action.
From afar, he could pass
As the exorcist at a funeral.
Up close, he was more like
A fierce guardian spirit at a temple gate.*

Xiao'e was appalled. "Surely this man has the look of a murderous bandit!" She told herself to watch this man carefully. (MC: *She did keep her eyes open.*)

"Mr. Shen," said the neighbor, "you're hiring, and this Xie Bao, a native of Jiangxi, like us, wishes to enter your service."

Shen Lan asked, "What experience does he have?"

Xiao'e answered, "I'm a boat hand for hire. They all know me at the wharf and on the boats around these parts. You can go ask people about me, sir."

Shen Lan's house being not far from the wharf, all three of them walked to it. When asked about Xie Bao, all the boatmen praised him for his hard work, discretion, devotion, and honesty—all good qualities. Shen Lan was greatly pleased. There, at the wharf, Xiao'e borrowed paper, ink, a brush pen, and an ink slab from a broker whom she knew and drew up a contract, with the neighbor serving as the go-between. The contract was then given to Shen Lan for safekeeping.

Shen Lan took Xiao'e and the neighbor back to his home and set out wine in the go-between's honor. On being told to keep them company, Xiao'e went to the kitchen and offered her services, carrying this and that and delivering wine and dishes to the table. All this she did with the ease borne of practice. Shen Lan gave her an advance on her wages of two taels of silver and paid the go-between two maces of silver. Xiao'e weighed out two maces from her own savings and gave the money to the neighbor. Overcome with joy, the neighbor said his thanks and took himself off. Shen Lan then led Xiao'e to see his wife, Lin-shi. And so Xiao'e became a domestic servant in the Shen residence.

Judging from the way Shen Lan did things, Xiao'e gathered that he was no decent sort. Believing that the names she had heard in her dreams could not have been revealed to her without a reason, she knew this man was most likely her enemy. But she needed to make her way into his good graces so as to find out the truth and take action when the opportunity presented itself. Therefore, she obeyed his every command with never a complaint. (MC: *Ingenious.*) As for Shen Lan, as fate would have it, he took a great liking to Xiao'e the moment he laid eyes on her. As she proved herself so useful to him, he became all the more fond of this servant. He never budged an inch from Xie Bao's side. He consulted Xie Bao on every matter, entrusted to Xie Bao every job that he wanted to do, and put all his property at Xie Bao's disposal. In short, Xiao'e had become Shen Lan's closest confidant, and she was the one who handled all his money and valuables. Thus it was that she saw in the

house the fine clothes and prized possessions that had been looted from her family. Indeed, as the saying goes, “The sight of the saddle reminds one of the horse; the sight of the object recalls the owner.” Each time she came upon one of the looted items, she would sob for a long time if no one was around. She was by now fully convinced of the accuracy of her dream. Never for a moment did she forget the heinous crime, but afraid that she would arouse his suspicions, she grew even more careful.

Then she heard that Shen Lan had a cousin, known as Second Master, who lived in Dushupu across the river. Xiao’e thought, “Could he be Shen Chun? Since my first dream has been borne out, the solution for the second one shouldn’t be off the mark either. But I can’t very well ask his name, or I’ll arouse suspicions. I need to think of a way to make him come here, so that I can find out his name.”

After Xiao’e entered Shen Lan’s service, Shen Lan went more than once to Second Master’s home and stayed for about a month each time. And each time, he returned home laden with riches (MC: *All spoils from piracy*), which he gave to Xie Bao for safekeeping. But Second Master had never made an appearance there. Sometimes, Shen Lan said he would take Xie Bao on a business trip, but surmising that it must be business of a dubious nature, Xiao’e always declined, citing the demanding schedule of household chores. Shen Lan, for his part, worried about his family every time he went away. Since he needed Xie Bao to take care of his family in his absence, he dropped the idea of taking Xie Bao on his travels. So every time he went away, he left his wife, Lin-shi, with Xiao’e. One or two maids stayed with the mistress at all times, and Xiao’e slept in an outer chamber, from which she took care of household affairs. Whatever job Lin-shi had for her, she humored her by obliging. Everyone in the household liked her and looked up to her as a most reliable and resourceful person.

Storyteller, you are quite mistaken! Since Xiao’e was disguised as a man, why would Shen Lan leave him, a bachelor, at home in the company of his wife? Wouldn’t he be afraid of a scandal?

Gentle reader, let me explain. Shen Lan was a bandit who valued money above all else. Such people don’t care a thing about proper etiquette. What’s more, Xiao’e, as circumspect as she was, had already passed Shen Lan’s test as to her honesty and discretion. Since he did not need to worry on that score, he went away feeling absolutely safe.

In the meantime, with time on her hands, Xiao’e went out to cultivate friendships with the neighbors, bringing them wine and meat and spending

freely on them. (MC: *Meticulous in detail throughout.*) And in return, they enjoyed her company. Xiao'e also went out of her way to befriend those few among the neighbors who were of bold spirit and knew how to get things done. She gave them money if they were poor or pledged brotherhood with them. She was generous with Shen Lan's ill-gotten wealth. Shen Lan's money came easy, and he trusted her. Since he never bothered to check the ledgers, Xiao'e was only too glad to dispense favors left and right. Her mind preoccupied with exacting revenge, she thought it necessary to cultivate friendships as best she could. But not having established Shen Chun's identity, she wanted to keep her secret to herself, for fear that her enemy would get wind of it and give her the slip. For this reason, even though she had several opportunities to act when Shen Lan was home, she restrained herself and preferred to wait and bide her time. (MC: *Meticulous and merciless, too.*)

Two more years elapsed in like manner. Suddenly, one day, a servant announced, "Second Master north of the river is here!"

Lo and behold: A hulk of a man came in, followed by a group of men who were also strongly built. "Where's my big brother?" asked the leader.

Xiao'e replied, "Big Master is inside. Let me, Xie Bao, go and bring him out."

Xiao'e went in and reported to Shen Lan. Shen Lan came out to the hall and said, "You haven't come for so long, Second Brother! What brought you here? And you brought so many brothers along. What's up?"

Second Master said, "I caught two big carp today, each weighing twenty catties. I wouldn't presume to keep them for my own dinner table, so I bought a jug of wine and came to share the fish with you."

"Thank you so much for your kindness, Second Brother. Such large fish are rare. We've been enjoying blessings from the gods for so many years. I propose to offer the fish and the wine, plus some chicken, meat, and fruit, to the gods first, to thank them for their blessings. (MC: *What kind of gods are they?*) We can enjoy the food and wine after that. Otherwise, it wouldn't be much fun to have only fish to go with the wine. What's more, with so many brothers present, how could I eat a free meal without paying anything? What do you say, Second Brother?"

The men all clapped their hands and cheered, "Well said! Well said!"

Shen Lan called for Xie Bao and made him greet Second Master. To his cousin, he said, "This is a servant I hired. He's very honest, hardworking, and reliable. He'll do the shopping for us."

Xiao'e obediently went off to do his bidding. Before long, a fine spread was laid out on the table. Shen Chun commented, "He's indeed a capable

man. No wonder Big Brother has no worries about home when traveling. It's because he leaves his family in such capable hands!"

As the men all broke into praise, Shen Lan told Xie Bao to put the offerings in front of the image of a guardian god. Shen Chun said, "We should all have our names written down so that the god will know who we are when we pray. But we're almost illiterate. This isn't a job for us."

Shen Lan said, "Xie Bao writes a good hand."

"He can also write?" asked Shen Chun. "He's a rare find! A rare find!"

Xiao'e walked up and, equipped with paper and brush pen, began to write down their names. As was only to be expected, Shen Lan and Shen Chun headed the list, followed by the others, one by one. Xiao'e committed the names to memory as she wrote (MC: *Frightening*.) and learned, for sure, that Second Brother was none other than Shen Chun.

After the prayer service was over, the offerings were taken away but, after some rearrangements, were laid out on the table again. While the men fell to with gusto, Xiao'e, with her plan in mind, eagerly wrote down all the other names on a piece of paper and hid it. She said to herself, "What a wonderful man, that Judge Li! He has a spiritual connection with the other world, and he was right on target when he solved the riddles. And it was thanks to the unperished spirits of my father and my husband that Heaven gave him inspiration. Now that both my enemies are here, my wish will be fulfilled."

She rushed to wait on the men. She picked large bowls and kept refilling them with wine for Shen Lan and Shen Chun. Being heavy drinkers, both were delighted by her attentiveness. They downed one bowl after another, little suspecting any ulterior motive on her part. When afternoon gave way to evening, the bandits went their separate ways, all rolling drunk.

Shen Chun was the only one to spend the night in his cousin's house. Xiao'e filled a bowl to the brim with warm liquor and, offering it to Shen Chun, said, "In the two years that I, humble Xie Bao, have been in this house, I haven't had an opportunity to serve Second Master. Today, let me 'present Buddha with borrowed flowers,' as the idiom goes, and offer you an extra toast." Then she refilled another bowl and offered it to Shen Lan, saying, "Big Master, please play his drinking companion."

Shen Chun exclaimed, "You're a fine one, Xie Bao! (MC: *Yes, a fine one indeed!*) You do know the right things to say when pressing wine on people!"

"Let's not disappoint him in his good intentions," said Shen Lan. "Let's drink as much as we can." While he told Shen Chun about Xie Bao's many

good qualities, Xiao'e offered one toast after another, each time saying a few self-deprecating words, and insisted that they drain the bowls. The two men drank themselves silly. As a matter of fact, this region along the river did not produce good wine. What those bandits usually drank was liquor of inferior quality, but what Shen Chun had bought that day so that they could thoroughly enjoy themselves was very strong stuff. Having tossed down such large quantities of it, they were bound to get drunk.

Shen Lan, dead drunk and feeling hot, could hardly walk. So he took off his clothes and lay down right there in the courtyard. Shen Chun was also sleepy, but since his legs could still carry him, Xiao'e helped him into one of the rooms and laid him down on the bed. Then she entered the interior of the house to check how things were. It so happened that Lin-shi got a whiff of the aroma of the wine while preparing the meal in the kitchen, and so she drank one or two bowls of it with her supper. The two maids who brought the wine to the men's dining table also stole some for a taste. How much liquor could a woman hold? All three of them were stretching and yawning as if they had been visited by the Monkey King's sleep bugs.¹¹ Seeing this, Xiao'e thought, "If I don't act now, when will I have another chance?" Then again, she thought, "The women don't matter. But if Shen Chun isn't fast asleep, he'll be hard to deal with." She picked up a padlock and locked the door of the room where Shen Chun was sleeping. (MC: *She does take care of the minutest details.*) Then she went to the courtyard, pulled the knife from her clothes, and cut off Shen Lan's head.

She would have liked to kill Shen Chun as well but thought better of the idea because she was, after all, a woman, and Shen Chun had been able to walk before he went to sleep. If he was not dead drunk, it would not be wise to provoke him. Instead, she quickly went out of the house and shouted to the neighbors, "Please help me capture a bandit!"

The neighbors were all her friends. Having heard her cries, they came to her and asked, "Where's the bandit? We'll help you get him!" (MC: *The friendships have not been cultivated for nothing.*)

"He's no ordinary bandit," said Xiao'e. "He's a big bandit leader who kills indiscriminately. His loot and his weapons are all here. I've gotten him drunk and locked him in a room. Please help me capture him."

The neighbors, including those busybodies whose friendship Xiao'e had cultivated, said, rubbing their hands in excitement, "Who's that bandit?"

"My master and his cousin are both bandits. Their enormous wealth is all loot."

One of the neighbors said, "You live in the house, so it's no surprise that you know what goes on there. But without a victim, we can't make a rash move."

"I'm a victim. My father and another family member, plus tens of members of both clans, were killed by these bandits. Some of the gold and silver vessels in the house bear the name and other marks of our two families. They're easy to recognize."

An older and wiser neighbor said, "I believe you. There's indeed something questionable about the Shens. Shen Lan is often away, and they're not engaged in any business, but they suddenly became fabulously rich. We haven't been able to find any evidence against them, and we were afraid of their viciousness, which is why we haven't dared say anything. But now, with little brother Xie as witness, let's help him capture Shen Lan and his cousin and deliver them to the yamen for the authorities to investigate."

"I've already killed one of them," announced Xiao'e. "You need only help me capture the other one."

On hearing that one of the men was already dead, the neighbors realized that this case must be reported to the authorities. Because all those present were Xiao'e's friends and quite a few among them hated Shen Lan, they entered the gate of the Shen house with lit torches in hand. There, in front of everyone's eyes, lay Shen Lan's dead body in a pool of blood. Then they opened the door of the room where Shen Chun was and found him snoring thunderously in his sleep. As they tied him up with a rope, he said, struggling, "Big Brother, don't kid me!" The neighbors called him a bandit, but their curses fell on deaf ears, for he remained asleep. They tied him up tight and, together, barged into the women's quarters.

Not having drunk much, Lin-shi woke up quickly and rose in alarm. At the sight of the torch-carrying men, she thought it was a robbery and said, "So here come robbers to hit another robber." (MC: *The gods this family prays to do work wonders, speaking through Lin-shi's mouth like this!*)

This remark further convinced the neighbors of the truth of Xie Bao's accusations. They barked, "Nonsense! Who's robbing you? Your husband's crimes have come to light!"

As they trussed up Lin-shi and the two maids, Lin-shi said, "My husband and his cousin are the guilty ones, not me!"

The neighbors countered, "This isn't for you to say. You can explain to the authorities."

Afraid that, with many men in the house, some of the looted items might disappear, Xiao'e had taken the precaution of putting her family's valuable items in a safe place and locking them up. (MC: *Again, meticulous.*) She planned to ask the local headman to put a seal on them the next day and then seek justice from the yamen authorities.

The commotion lasted the whole night through. The next day, the suspects were taken to the yamen of Xunyang County. With Prefect Zhang presiding over the court session, the local headman and the neighbors brought the suspects into the courtroom. Holding a written complaint in her hand, Xiao'e charged the bandits with murder and robbery. By this time, Shen Chun had sobered up and realized that his crimes had come to light. Seeing that the plaintiff was Xie Bao, he thought that Xie Bao must be in possession of his cousin's secrets. With no inkling as to the real reason behind it, he cried out, "These are all lies that the hired hand fabricates about his master!"

Pointing at Shen Chun, Xiao'e said to the prefect, "He and his cousin are the ringleaders. Ten years ago, they killed tens of people from the Xie and Duan families from Yuzhang. How can he deny that?"

The prefect said, "Is it possible that, as a hired hand in his family, you were in this together? And you're now charging him with a crime only because he has somehow treated you unfairly?"

"I've been working for his family for only two years. That crime was committed ten years ago."

The prefect pressed further, "But how did you learn about this? What evidence do you have?"

"Items looted from the Xies and the Duans are still in his house. They constitute sufficient evidence."

"Who are you to the Xie family? How do you know those are looted items?"

"Mr. Xie was my father, and Mr. Duan was my husband."

"But you're a man. How could you have had a husband?"

"Your Honor, I am in fact a woman, not a man. When the bandits killed members of our two families, I fell into the water and was rescued. Later, my father and my husband appeared to me in my dreams and told me the names of their killers, but these were contained in two riddles that I failed to solve. I asked for enlightenment everywhere, without success. Luckily, Judge Li of Hongzhou solved them and came up with the names Shen Lan and Shen Chun. So I disguised myself as a man and went everywhere to hunt down

the two culprits. On arriving in this county, I saw a 'Help Wanted' poster and, after inquiring, learned that Shen Lan was the hirer. I purposefully applied for the job and entered his service. I took note of his frequent absences from home, and I came upon our families' belongings. No doubt remained in my mind that he's the bandit who killed my father, but I didn't think it prudent to take action without establishing Shen Chun's identity as well. Yesterday, he appeared for the first time for a feast. So I killed Shen Lan with a knife, reported to our local headman, and captured Shen Chun with the help of neighbors. Everything I'm saying is true."

Intrigued by the deposition, the prefect asked, "What were the riddles?"

After Xiao'e told him the riddles, the prefect continued, "Why are the answers 'Shen Lan' and 'Shen Chun'?" Whereupon Xiao'e repeated Li Gong-zuo's explanations.

The prefect repeatedly nodded his head and said, "Yes, yes. Brilliant! What a powerful mind Mr. Li has! He's a friend of mine. (MC: *It's a good thing Mr. Li was involved.*) I believe what you said. But you've been posing as a man for quite some time now. Why hasn't anyone seen through your disguise?"

"Bearing the burden of my plan for revenge, I had my heart in my mouth day and night. I just couldn't afford to be found out. Should any telltale signs give me away, how was I going to get revenge?"

The prefect marveled inwardly, "What a determined woman this is!" He then called forth the local headman and the neighbors and questioned them, whereupon they told the prefect in detail that there had always been something suspicious about Shen Lan's comings and goings, that Xie Bao had been hired two years earlier, about the killing of Shen Lan the previous night, about the capture of Shen Chun and Shen Lan's family members, and about how they had delivered the suspects to the yamen.

"Where are the looted items?" asked the prefect.

Xiao'e replied, "He entrusted them to me. I locked them up and put a seal over them last night with our headman."

Right away, the prefect ordered the police to take Xiao'e and the headman to Shen Lan's house and seize all the looted items. They were found to be worth tens of millions. Xiao'e recorded the value of each item in a ledger, down to the last penny, and promptly delivered the ledger to the yamen.

The enormous wealth convinced the prefect that Shen Chun and his cousin were indeed bandits. He put Shen Chun under torture and applied the finger-squeezer to Lin-shi. Both confessed. The prefect asked about their

cohorts, but Shen Chun refused to give him the names, whereupon Xiao'e retrieved from her sleeve the strip of paper bearing the names of the other bandits and presented it to the prefect, saying, "The names of all the rest of the gang members are here."

"How did you learn such details?" asked the prefect.

"They told me to write the names down yesterday when they prayed to their god. I then wrote down the names from memory. Every name is there."

The prefect was even more impressed with her efficiency in getting things done. He verified the addresses of the men with Shen Chun and matched them with the names one by one. He sent Shen Chun to jail and ruled that Li-shi and the maids be sold by the government. Then he called the arrest officers into action and ordered them to bring all the suspects to court. The officers got hold of every one of the gang members, like catching turtles trapped in a jar (MC: *Thanks to Xiao'e's ingeniousness.*). None had anything to say in defense of himself. The prefect sent every one of them to death row, to be with Shen Chun. To Xiao'e he said, "The guilt of the men having been established, no more need be said about them. However, you acted on your own and killed a man without reporting in advance to the yamen. Therefore, you're also guilty of a capital crime."

"Having already obtained vengeance, I have no regrets if I die."

The prefect continued, "Although that's what the law says, you're to be commended for your filial piety and moral rectitude. The law is not applicable to you in your case. Let me appeal to the emperor and ask for an imperial pardon."

Xiao'e kowtowed in gratitude.

When the prefect ordered that Xiao'e be released on bail for the time being, Xiao'e said, "Now that my identity has been revealed, I can't share quarters with men any longer. I wish I could go to a nunnery to await further sentencing."

"Good point, as usual," said the prefect. So he ordered that Xiao'e be taken under guard to a nearby nunnery and be held in detention there while awaiting an imperial decree.

The prefect's memorandum on the case contained the following:

Xie Xiao'e, in her determination to seek revenge, was able to communicate with the departed souls of her father and her husband in her dreams and had the riddles solved after many years had elapsed. This case of revenge in fact

involves felonies. It is proposed that she be pardoned for her act of unauthorized killing and that she be commended for her moral fortitude.

The fourth month of the twelfth year of the Yuanhe reign period

The imperial decree, when it arrived, read: "On account of her outstanding moral fortitude, Xie Xiao'e is hereby granted exemption from the death sentence. A memorial archway is to be erected in her hometown. Shen Chun is to be executed forthwith." Soon, the decree arrived at Xunyang and was read out in the courtroom. The prefect ordered that Shen Chun and the other convicts on death row be brought to the courtroom, where he dictated the words to be inscribed on the criminals' name plaques. With the name plaques attached to their backs, each plaque stating the condemned person's name and offenses, the criminals were taken under guard to the public square for execution.

By this time, Xiao'e had resumed her female attire. In white mourning clothes, she watched the execution of Shen Chun and then went back to the yamen to thank Prefect Zhang. When the prefect ordered that she be escorted to her hometown in a grand procession complete with artificial flowers and percussion music, she said, "My father and my husband having both passed away, even though I'm ever so grateful to you, sir, for having obtained an imperial pardon for me, I won't accept any fanfare."

All the more impressed by her sense of decorum, the prefect ordered that a woman serving in the yamen accompany Xiao'e home. Then he issued a separate order for the erection of a memorial archway in Xiao'e's honor.

The news caused great excitement in Yuzhang County. Members of the clans of Xiao'e's father and husband, as well as other relatives, came to greet her. When their conversation turned to past events, everyone lamented in grief and gaped in amazement. Not a day went by without matchmakers from leading families in the area flocked to Xiao'e's door out of admiration for her fame, but Xiao'e vowed not to remarry, saying, "I disguised myself as a man for years out of necessity. If I remarry, where's my chastity as a woman? I'd rather die than remarry." (MC: *It may be quite a challenge to be a husband to such a woman.*)

With more and more matchmakers pestering her, her impatience got the better of her. She thought, "I wanted to be a nun when I was in Miaoguo Nunnery and didn't take the tonsure only because I had not yet exacted vengeance. Now that my mission has been accomplished, why don't I join the Buddhist order and spend the rest of my days in the nunnery? I'd better take

the tonsure now so as to put an end to their hopes." (MC: *An even tougher decision to make.*) So thinking, she cut off her hair-bun with a pair of scissors and shaved off the rest of her hair with a razor. Putting on the hempen cape of an itinerant nun, she bade her relatives farewell and took to the road in search of the Way. After she left her hometown in this manner, without any fanfare, the local inhabitants admired her all the more, and her name spread wider, but enough of this.

In the sixth month of the thirteenth year of the Yuanhe reign period, Li Gongzuo was summoned by the imperial court, and he set out for Chang'an the capital. When passing Sijin, he went to visit Shanyi Nunnery, whose abbess Dade was well versed in Buddhist scriptures and whom he had met many times. When Abbess Dade led him into the reception hall, he saw that there were tens of newly recruited disciples standing on both sides of the abbess's seat, all with shaved heads and looking solemn and dignified. (MC: *Quite a sight to see!*) One of the novices looked hard at Li Gongzuo and asked the abbess, "Might this gentleman be Judge Li of Hongzhou?"

The abbess nodded. "Yes, it's him. How did you know?"

Dissolving in tears, the novice said, "It's thanks to Judge Li's kindness that I was able to avenge my family." Tearfully, she stepped forward and saluted Mr. Li in gratitude.

Li Gongzuo did not recognize her. He rose from his seat in surprise, returned the salute, and said, "I don't know you. What kindness did I do?"

The novice replied, "I'm Xiao'e, the widow who begged for alms in Waguan Nunnery. You, sir, solved two riddles for me and figured out the names of two criminals: Shen Lan and Shen Chun. Have you forgotten that, sir?"

Li Gongzuo searched his memory, and a dim recollection of the event came back to him. But unable to recall all the details, he asked what the riddles were. Upon Xiao'e's recitation of the riddles, the memory suddenly flashed back to him. He said, "I'd forgotten about this. Now that you mention it, yes, I do remember now. Did you do anything about it? Did you find the two men?"

Thereupon, Xiao'e told him in detail about how she had disguised herself as a man, entered Shen Lan's service, and captured Shen Chun and the other gang members and about the trials and tribulations she had gone through. "I have nothing with which to repay you for your kindness, sir," added she. "From now on, I'll chant the sutras and pray for the Buddha's blessings for you."

"I wonder what could have led to this chance meeting of ours here," remarked Li Gongzuo.

“Well, after the revenge was complete, I shaved off my hair, put on a mendicant nun’s cape, and went to Ox Head Mountain in my quest for the Way. There, I practiced austerities for a year under the eminent abbess Jiang at Dashi Nunnery. I was ordained at Kaiyuan Nunnery at Sizhou in the fourth month of this year and came here. I never expected to be able to meet my benefactor. This is indeed a blessing from heaven!”

Li Gongzuo said, “Since you’re ordained, what’s your Buddhist name?”

“I dare not forget my past, so I’m still using my old name.”

With a sigh, Li Gongzuo said, “Such a determined woman has no equal under heaven! It was quite by chance that I figured out the names of the two criminals, but she persevered in her investigations and eventually hunted them down and won revenge for herself. In addition, she managed not to let anyone see through her disguise as a man among the motley crowds of hired laborers and servants. Wasn’t that a formidable challenge? It behooves me to spread the word about her virtues.”

Moved to tears, Xiao’e took leave of Li Gongzuo and returned to Ox Head Mountain. From there, she took a skiff and traveled through the southern regions, and no one knew what happened to her later. “The Biography of Xie Xiao’e” was written by Li Gongzuo and passed down to later ages, as it was included in *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility*.¹²

As the poem says,

*Her heart frosty as her knife and hard as iron,
Her spirit will not perish even after ten thousand years.
With the will to fill the East Sea with West Hill rocks,
She harbored hatred that burned with fury.*

Another poem says,

*Her dreams revealed cosmic secrets;
Heaven showed her its mysteries.
With the riddles revealed, she got her revenge;
Truly, the dead souls didn’t return in vain.*

Li Kerang Sends a Blank Letter

Liu Yuanpu Begets Two Precious Sons

As the poem says,

Duke Pei once brought about a blissful union;¹

Fan Shi gained a lasting name by aiding a funeral.²

Far too few are men of such generosity;

Pin no such hope on everyone with wealth and rank.

The above quatrain makes the point that in this world of ours, those who help further enrich the wealthy far outnumber those who donate to the needy. This is why the philosophical say, “All too many rush to add flowers to the brocade; all too few offer help with charcoal on snowy days.” This comment speaks volumes about the ways of the world. Those who admire the wealthy and the powerful flock to them as if, in idiomatic sayings, “sailing before the wind” or “flying like pigeons to where the rich families live.” Such behavior is taken for granted when monetary gain or personal interests are at stake. When it comes to marriage alliances for one’s children, members of the royalty, if hungry for money, would gladly enter into a match with a beggar chief in spite of his lowly status. On the other hand, those of distinguished lineage, once reduced to poverty, may be spurned by a mere local headman. A modicum of power and a couple of strings of cash are enough to make one look down on others who are less fortunate. As for those who are of exalted status but help people in need or reach deep into their own pockets and go to great lengths to bring off a match for others, such cases are all

too rare, past or present. In the unseen world, the lord of heaven surely misses nothing. In point of fact, the relationship between husband and wife is of paramount importance. It is something that calls for a good deal of thinking, and retribution for vice or virtue in marriage is all too clearly in evidence. It must never be taken as child's play and messed around with. One remark may bring about a marriage, and by the same token, one written note may break up a long-standing marriage. Even if the parties involved have no inkling as to the causes, the operations of karma never fail.

Let me tell of a farmer Sun, who lived in Changzhou in the Nanjing region. At age fifty, he took a young second wife. His deceased first wife left him a son and a daughter-in-law who were very dutiful and unquestioningly believed every word that the father and his new wife said, whether true or false. The old man and the son worked the fields every day to provide for the family. The two women stayed at home weaving in order to make a living.

There was one strange thing: The mother-in-law was in her thirties but still had not learned the right moral values. As they say, only when a woman is dead and buried will her desires fade away. Displeased that the old man was a family man not much interested in frivolity, she got involved in a few clandestine affairs, and her indiscretions were not lost on the daughter-in-law. But the daughter-in-law was an honest and hardworking woman determined to do her duty by her parents-in-law. Far be it from her to catch her mother-in-law in wrongdoing. So one had a clear conscience, but the other had secrets to guard. Every time her daughter-in-law happened to cross her path in one of her acts of lewdness, the mother-in-law felt nervous and awkward and afraid that rumors would reach the ears of her husband and his son. Turning the tables on her daughter-in-law, she began to speak ill of her to her husband. As the saying goes, "Complaints made on the pillow are most effective." The old man believed her lies and lashed out at his son several times, heaping shame and scorn on his head. The filial son was puzzled by the invective, and sharp words began to be exchanged between him and his wife until there was no more domestic peace to be had.

Gentle reader, mark this: A one-husband-one-wife marriage with no change of partner is the most proper relationship, in which neither husband nor wife will stoop to playing petty-minded tricks. A young wife married to an older widower is the most vicious, crafty, and short-sighted kind of woman. Either she has been married before, maybe more than once or she is from a low-class background, a loser in the market of marriage candidates. Along with fallen women and women cast off by their husbands, she uses her

cunning to please or ruffle tempers, and to engage men's hearts until they take her word as law. With the exception of women of high moral integrity, women take delight in you-know-what, but men begin to lose their energy after they hit middle age, and those who take on young wives are mostly men of mature years, a lot older than their new wives. When an aging man takes a pretty young thing for a wife, he may be able to offer her all his wealth for her enjoyment, but he may fail to perform when it comes to you-know-what. (MC: *This strikes right to the heart of the matter.*) Feeling apologetic, he does her bidding in spite of all her faults. Such women, therefore, wreak havoc on otherwise peaceful families.

But I digress. Let me pick up a different thread of that story and tell of a scholar who lived in Wujiang [south of Suzhou]. Xiao Wangbin by name, he was steeped in learning and wielded a dexterous pen. Of scanty means, he made a living by tutoring the children of a family that lived near his house and left home early and returned late. Next to his employer's house was a wineshop owned by a Mr. Xiong Jingxi. In the front of the store was a small shrine in honor of the Five Wutong Gods.³ With his frequent visits to his employer's house, Scholar Xiao was on familiar terms with the owner. One night, the owner, Mr. Xiong, had a dream in which the five gods said to him, "We feel very much ill at ease, witnessing Number One Scholar Xiao visit this shop day in and day out. You may want to build a low fence to block him from us."

On waking, Mr. Xiong thought, "What a strange dream that was! What Number One Scholar Xiao were they talking about? Could it be Scholar Xiao who teaches next door? Can a poor man like him win first place on the national-level civil service exams?" Bewildered, he thought further, "But he's the only Xiao I know. As they say, 'Don't judge a person by his appearance; don't measure the sea with a dipper.' Since this is advice from the gods, it is better to believe than not to believe."

After getting up the next day, he did indeed erect a low fence in front of the shrine to shield the gods, but he did not tell anyone why he did so. We shall drop this thread of the story for the moment.

A few days later, Scholar Xiao went to Changzhou to visit his family. While passing a village house, he saw a crowd raising a clamor. As he thrust his way into the crowd for a look, people pointed at him and said, "Here comes a gentleman who looks like a scholar! What good timing! Let's ask this gentleman to do this for us, to spare us the trouble of finding a school-teacher." Eagerly, they offered Scholar Xiao a seat and, handing him a sheet

of paper and a brush pen, said, "Please write this down for us. We'll pay you, of course."

"What do you want me to write? Please explain."

At this point, an old man and a young man stepped up. The old man said, "Sir, we live in this village. Our surname is Sun. We're father and son, living together with my wife and my daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law has fallen into bad ways and picks quarrels with the mother-in-law all day. The two of us men have to work to provide for the family, and we spend little time at home all year-round, so we don't want to keep that source of trouble at home. We'd like to send her back to her parents today, so that she can marry someone else. Everyone present is a local resident and a witness. We'd like to draw up a divorce paper, but no one in our village can write. Now, you look like a scholar. Since you happen to be passing by, please write it for us."

"I see," said Scholar Xiao. "What's so difficult about that?" (IC: *It will turn out not to be easy.*)

In a moment of bravado, he wrote a statement of divorce with one sweep of the writing brush and handed it to the father and son. When they offered him five maces of silver by way of payment for his services, he laughed and said, "These few lines are worth nothing! I can't take payment from you!" He turned down the silver time and again, and, with a flick of his long sleeves, he left the crowd and went his way.

The two men gave the divorce paper to the daughter-in-law. Having served dutifully as the daughter-in-law for three or four years, the poor woman was now being sent away for no reason. Filled with resentment, she seized her husband and burst into loud wails of grief. (MC: *This is enough to establish Scholar Xiao's guilt.*) Refusing to let go of him, she said, "I honestly have never done you any wrong, but you take one person's word against mine and demand a divorce. If I can't defend myself while alive, I'll surely get the facts straightened out after I become a ghost. I won't be able to see you for the rest of my life, but I'll never forget you, not even in death."

Everyone present was moved to tears. Her husband was also distraught and could not hold back his tears. The mother-in-law was afraid that the son would change his mind, so she and the old man promptly pulled the hands of the young couple apart and pushed the daughter-in-law out the door. (MC: *How ruthless!*) In resignation, the daughter-in-law went off, her face wet with tears. Of her, no more.

Let us go back to Mr. Xiong, owner of the wineshop. Again, he had a dream in which the gods appeared to him and said, "Quickly tear down that fence for us! It's suffocating!"

"But you told me only the other day to build the fence. Why tear it down so soon?"

"We told you the other day to build it in order to block out Scholar Xiao, who was often here. We felt ill at ease because he was destined to win first place on the exams in the future. Then he wrote a statement of divorce for someone on a certain day of a certain month and helped break up a marriage. For this, the lord of heaven demoted him, to a rank lower than ours. Since he no longer poses any threat to us, the fence can be torn down now."

Before he could ask further questions, Mr. Xiong woke up with a start. He thought, "How very strange! This is unbelievable! Let me ask Scholar Xiao tomorrow if he's written a divorce statement or not. Then I'll know the truth."

The next day, while he was tearing down the fence as instructed, Scholar Xiao happened to saunter in. Mr. Xiong went up to him and said, "I have something to say to you, sir. Please come inside with me."

Once they were in an inner room, they sat down, and tea was served. Mr. Xiong asked, "Did you write a statement of divorce for someone on a certain day of a certain month?"

The scholar thought for a while and replied, "Yes, I did. But how did you know?" Whereupon Mr. Xiong told him about the gods' words in both of his dreams. After hearing him out, the scholar was dumbfounded. His eyes glazed over; his mouth dropped open. Remorse swept over him. Later, he did indeed pass the imperial examinations, but only at the provincial level and never rose above the position of a subprefectural magistrate. Because of one inadvertent misjudgment made on the spur of the moment, Scholar Xiao lost his title as number one scholar at the national-level exams. One must use discretion in everything one does. A poem puts it well:

*Busybodies know not what their doings may lead to;
When first starting out, think of how it will all end.
A small move may have a far-reaching impact;
Once caught in the cosmic net, regrets are too late.*

Now that we have seen how one who breaks up a marriage will suffer, it follows that one who brings about a match will be richly favored by fortune.

This leads me to my next story, one about a distinguished gentleman of an earlier dynasty who treated several strangers from other places as his own flesh and blood and brought about a few marriages, offered succor to orphans and widows, and gave the remains of the dead proper burials. The credit he accumulated in the unseen world did not end with his help in bringing about marriages, which was why he was blessed with heavenly favors that were quite exceptional.

Our story takes place in the reign of Emperor Zhenzong [r. 998–1022] of the Song dynasty. In Luoyang County of Xijing [the Western Capital], there lived a gentleman named Liu Hongjing, courtesy name Yuanpu, who retired at age sixty from his post as prefect of Qingzhou and returned to his hometown. His wife having passed away, he took on a second wife, Wang-shi, who was not yet forty years old. (MC: *Another case of a second marriage. The difference is in the worth of the wife or the lack of it.*) Without children of his own, he entrusted his wife's nephew, Wang Wenyong, with the management of his vast wealth, including all the landed estates and shops. He himself devoted his time to charity work, fighting injustice and helping the poor. He offered aid to goodness knows how many people, scattering his money about as if it were dust. His name spread far and wide, but his lack of children preyed on his mind day and night.

When the Clear and Bright Festival rolled around, Liu Yuanpu instructed Wang Wenyong to prepare sacrificial offerings and libation wine for a visit to the family graveyard.⁴ He and his wife, each in a small sedan-chair, went to the graveyard, followed by servants. After the libations were poured, Yuanpu prostrated himself in front of the grave and intoned the following lines:

*How sad that this old man remains childless,
Guilty of the first unfilial offense!
Since few ever live beyond seventy,
I will soon depart from the mortal world.
Today my wife and I bow to the grave,
But who will perform these duties in the future? (MC: Pitiable.)
I grieve not for my forlorn, childless old age
But for the end of a long line of offerings.
Heaven is too high and far away;
Clansmen are the ones to pity and love.
With these words, my tears almost run dry;
Where, oh where, might my dear ancestors be?*

At this point, Liu Yuanpu burst into loud sobs. Everyone around him was also distraught with grief. Lady Wang, a most virtuous woman, wiped away her tears and said soothingly, "Don't feel so sad. You may be getting on in years, but you're still going strong. Since I'm barren, you should take a young concubine. You may still have children. Indulging in grief doesn't get you anywhere."

On hearing these words, Liu Yuanpu forced back his tears and told the servants to escort his wife home by sedan-chair, whereas he himself took only a page boy and followed slowly behind on foot, to divert his mind.

He was drawing near his home when he ran into a Daoist holding a tablet that bore the words "Divine Revelations." Realizing that the man was a fortune-teller, Yuanpu invited him home, meaning to ask him about his chances of having children. After they finished drinking tea, Yuanpu sat up stiffly so that the fortune-teller could examine his physiognomy. After a careful survey, the fortune-teller said, without mincing words, "Judging by your complexion, I think that you'll not only remain childless but also meet your end soon."

Yuanpu said, "I'm going on seventy. Death won't be premature in my case. And at my age, wishing for children is like trying to lift the moon out of the water. Looking back on my life, I see I may not have done great virtuous deeds, but I've devoted myself for many years to helping the poor and the weak. I wonder what sins I'm guilty of, to deserve an end to my family line?"

The fortune-teller replied with a smile, "You've got it wrong, sir. As the ancients put it, 'Complaints against the rich abound.' With your vast wealth, it's quite impossible for you to attend to every detail. Those managers of yours care only about lining their own pockets rather than upholding justice. They give short weight and short measure and devise a hundred ways to exploit by usury, thus giving rise to a great deal of resentment from the little people. You may have done much charity work, but your demerits offset your merits. You therefore do not qualify for heavenly blessings. But if you put an end to the abuses and expand the reach of your charitable work, you'll easily be blessed with happiness, longevity, and sons."

Yuanpu listened in silence. After that speech, the fortune-teller rose and, without accepting payment, departed with the floating lightness of an immortal.

Realizing that he was no ordinary man, Yuanpu was deeply convinced of the truth of his words. So he took out the account books for his landed estates and shops and checked them one by one. Then he quietly visited the

shops and the villages, making inquiries all around, in order to establish the facts. He issued warnings to all his managers and even chided his wife's nephew, Wang Wenyong. Henceforth, he threw himself with greater enthusiasm into works of charity.

Let me now tell of a thirty-six-year-old scholar named Li Xun, courtesy name Kerang, who lived in Bianjing [present-day Kaifeng, He'nan]. His wife, Zhang-shi, bore him a son, Li Yanqing, nickname Chunlang, now seventeen years old. They were natives of Western Yue [in present-day Guangxi] and, being impoverished and so far removed from the capital city, had been unable to go take the civil service examinations. It was only several years earlier that Li Kerang had taken his wife and son on a journey to the capital, where they stayed on, and, to his great joy, he passed the examinations held that year and was assigned to be magistrate of Qiantang County [in present-day Zhejiang]. On a chosen auspicious day, the family set out for his duty station. The sight of lakes and hills that could just as easily have been in a fairyland gladdened his heart. But fate was against the poor scholar. Less than one month into his term of office, he was struck down by a fatal illness that confined him to his bed. Truly,

*Bitter frost descends on grass already rootless;
Disasters hit those already luckless.*

Zhang-shi and Chunlang engaged physicians for treatment, but nothing worked, and it looked like he was at death's door.

One day, Li Kerang called his wife to his bedside and said to her, "Having passed the exams after spending a lifetime laboring at my studies, I'll die without regrets. But without a home, without relatives to turn to, what will happen to the widow and orphan I leave behind? How sad! How pitiable!" With that, he burst into tears. As his wife and son tried to calm him down, he thought, "I've long heard that Liu Yuanpu of Luoyang is known throughout the empire as a righteous and generous man who helps everyone who appeals to him, strangers or not. Why don't I commit my wife and son to his charge?"

Aloud, he said, "Wife, help me sit up." Then he told his son to bring him his writing implements. He was about to lift his writing brush when he stopped in a torment of indecision. "I'm a total stranger to him," he thought. "How am I going to compose this letter without including some small talk?"

But in a flash, an idea came to him. He sent his wife and son away, telling them to fetch warm water. By the time they came back with what he had asked for, he had already sealed his letter tightly. On the envelope was written "To Luoyang: For the eyes of my kind brother Liu Yuanpu only—from your unworthy younger brother Li Xun." (MC: *What an extraordinary man!*) He handed it to his wife and son and said, "I have a sworn brother Liu Yuanpu, former prefect of Qingzhou, who's a native of Luoyang. A man of the utmost loyalty and honor, he'll surely help you, mother and son. Take my letter to him and put yourselves under his protection. He won't turn you down." Turning to his son, he continued, "Pay Uncle Liu proper respects and tell him that I regret not being able to see him before I die." To his wife, he added, "After twenty years of a loving marriage, I now bid you farewell. If Prefect Liu keeps you two, you must be discreet in your relationship with him and be sure to give our son a proper education until he makes a name for himself, so as to succeed where I've failed. You're already two months pregnant. If the baby is a son, make him a scholar like me. If it's a daughter, wait until she grows up and marry her to a good man. I'll then be able to rest in peace." Turning again to Chunlang, he went on, "You must treat Uncle Liu as your father and Auntie Liu as your mother. You must also be a dutiful son to your own mother and devote yourself to your studies so as to make your mark in the world. If so, I'll be able to live on in spirit. If you don't do as I say, I won't rest easy in my grave." After the mother and son tearfully promised to do as he wished, he continued, "After I die, deposit my coffin in Fuqiu Monastery for a while. After you go to Uncle Liu for help, you can take your time making arrangements for burial. Just bury the coffin locally. There's no need to escort it back to Western Yue."

Having said all that, he felt a tightness in the chest and cried out, "O Heaven! Am I to understand that I, Li Xun, in my poverty, cannot even finish my term of office as a county magistrate?" (MC: *If he hadn't been poor, he would probably have been destined for greatness. Heaven has never been other than snobbish.*) With that, he fell back in bed and failed to respond when his name was called. Truly,

By imperial grace he took up his post with wife and son happily in tow.

Little did they know that his life span would soon be over.

Grieve not over Mr. Li's early death;

He outlived Yan Hui by four full years.⁵

Zhang-shi and Chunlang cried until they fainted. On coming to, Zhang-shi said, "What wretchedness we are left in—a widow and a fatherless son! If Mr. Liu refuses to take us, what are we going to do?"

"We have no other option than to fulfill Father's last wishes," said Chunlang. "Father was an excellent judge of character. (MC: Yes, *indeed*.) Perhaps Uncle is a good man."

Zhang-shi checked the family possessions but found no cash left in the house. The fact was that Li Kerang, a scrupulously honest man, had been living in grinding poverty and had been less than a month into his term of office. Payments for his medicine had exhausted what little salary he had received. Thanks to help from his colleagues, a coffin was bought. After the corpse was lowered into it, it was deposited in the yamen. Mother and son kept tearful vigil at its side until the end of the forty-nine-day mourning period. Per Mr. Li's deathbed instructions, the coffin was carried to Fuqiu Monastery and deposited there. Mother and son put together their few belongings and what little travel money they had and, taking Mr. Li's will with them, set out on a journey to Luoyang County, eating and drinking only when hunger and thirst compelled them and traveling by day and resting by night.

Now, back to Liu Yuanpu. One day, he was idly leafing through his collection of ancient books when the gatekeeper announced, "A mother and a son are at the gate, saying that they're natives of Western Yue and are close relatives of yours, Master. They have a letter with them."

Yuanpu wondered to himself, "Do I have relatives from that far-flung part of the country?" But he ordered that they be brought into his presence. After the obligatory exchange of greetings, Yuanpu said, "This old man does not seem to recall where we met before. Please enlighten me."

Li Chunlang replied, "As a matter of fact, my mother and I never met you before, but my departed father was a close friend of yours, Uncle."

When Yuanpu asked for his father's name, Chunlang replied, "My father was Li Xun, courtesy name Kerang. My mother is Zhang-shi. I'm Yanqing, courtesy name Chunlang. We're natives of Western Yue. My father went to the capital and stayed on in order to sit for the exams. Later, he won honors on the exams and was appointed magistrate of Qiantang County. He passed away one month later. On his deathbed, he felt sorry for leaving me and my mother to fend for ourselves, so he told us that I have an Uncle Liu in Luoyang, his sworn brother since childhood. And he instructed us to carry his letter and come here from his duty station to pay our respects to you after his passing. That's why my mother and I are here, putting you to this inconvenience."

This explanation confused Yuanpu. While he was at a loss for words, Chunlang presented him with the letter. The characters inscribed on the envelope further surprised him. Then he tore open the envelope, only to see a sheet of blank paper. Stunned into silence, he hunted through his mind for possible explanations, and all of a sudden, a light dawned on him. He said to himself, "That must be it! But I shouldn't say this straight out. I'll just make proper accommodations for the mother and son." (MC: *Who else would be willing to do this?*)

Zhang-shi and her son mistook his silence for reluctance to accept them, little knowing that he was drawing up plans with the best of intentions.

Yuanpu put the letter away and said to the mother and son, "Brother Li was indeed a sworn brother of mine. I was hoping to see him and didn't know that he had passed away. How sad! From now on, you, mother and son, will live here as my own flesh and blood."

Having said that, he called forth his wife, Lady Wang, and explained to her who they were, and the two women began to address each other as sisters-in-law. Chunlang greeted Lady Wang as her nephew. A feast was then laid out in honor of the mother and son. At the dinner table, the conversation turned to the location of Mr. Li's coffin. On learning that it was deposited in a monastery at Mr. Li's duty station, Yuanpu pledged to take care of the burial. Lady Wang learned, in further conversation with Zhang-shi, that the latter was two months pregnant with Mr. Li's posthumous child. With dinner over, the mother and son were led to the southern wing of the house to retire for the night. The rooms allotted to them were fully furnished, and a team of servants was put at their disposal. All three meals of the day were lavish affairs. The fact that they had been taken in had already exceeded the expectations of the mother and son. The effusive hospitality overwhelmed them.

After some time went by, Yuanpu grew to respect Chang-shi for her gentle disposition and Chunlang for his talent and brilliance as well as his discretion and prudence. In the meantime, he sent servants to bring Li Kerang's coffin from Qiantang.

One day, Yuanpu was sitting idly with Lady Wang when he found himself in tears. In answer to Lady Wang's solicitous question as to why, he replied, "From my observations of young Mr. Li's appearance and his aspirations, I believe he'll go far. If I had such a son, I could die without regrets. But I'm already over the hill and still without issue. This is what saddens me."

"I did repeatedly urge you to take a concubine, but you never listened. Now I'm determined to find one for you, to give you a son."

"Don't say such things, wife! I may be old and rickety, but you're not yet past your prime. If Heaven doesn't mean to put an end to my family line, who's to say you can't have children? If the family line is destined to end with me, even an army of concubines won't help." (MC: *He does take things philosophically.*) With that, he went out.

But this time, Lady Wang was not to be shaken in her resolve to get her husband a concubine. Knowing that he would surely reject her plan if she were to consult him, she acted behind his back and told a servant to summon Madam Xue, a matchmaker. When Madam Xue came, she told her about the situation and added, "Don't let on about any of this to Mr. Liu until we succeed. You must do your best to find one who is both virtuous and pretty. Perhaps only such a woman is likely to inspire love in the master." (MC: *What other wife would think in this way?*)

Madam Xue promised to do her bidding and left. A few days later, she came back with several candidates, but none of them satisfied Lady Wang. Madam Xue said, "They're the best candidates available in these parts. Good ones are to be found only in the capital, Bianliang, with its varied and teeming population."

It so happened that her nephew Wang Wenyong was about to go to the capital on business, so Lady Wang secretly gave him a hundred taels of silver and asked Madam Xue to join him on the journey and search for a candidate. Since Madam Xue had another match to take care of in the capital, it worked out nicely on both accounts, and the two travelers started on their way. Of this, more later.

Let me now start another thread of the story. In Xiangfu County of Kaifeng Prefecture, Bianjing, there lived a *jinshi* Pei Xi, courtesy name Anqing, fifty years of age at this point in our narrative. He had a sixteen-year-old daughter, Lansun, by his now deceased wife, Zheng-shi. An only child, Lansun was an unrivaled beauty. Pei Anqing was promoted to prefect of Xiangyang after serving as a bureau director for several years. Someone said to him, "You've never enjoyed any of the comforts of life. Now, with this nice promotion, you can say good-bye to poverty and worry only about having more money than you can spend!"

"Where will the money come from, pray?" said Anqing with a smile. "I've seen any number of greedy and corrupt officials with itchy palms. People under their jurisdiction are fleeced until they sell their children and their wives so as to line the pockets of officials who are as rapacious as wolves. I'm appointed by the emperor to serve as a government official and a parent to

the local population, not to harm them. Once I'm there, I'll only be content with the plainest of the local fare. Poverty is a natural human condition. A government salary is enough to keep me from hunger and cold. I certainly have no wish to get rich!"

Determined to be a good official, Pei Anqing chose an auspicious day and set out with his daughter on the journey to assume his post. Before many days had passed, they arrived in Xiangyang. In half a year, the prefecture prospered and the people enjoyed peace, so much so that law enforcement departments had little to do. The locals made up a ditty that went,

*To the Xiangyang yamen one day
Came the wise and good Prefect Pei.
Clerks of the six bureaus went to take naps;
Lictors and runners went to chop firewood.*

Time sped by swiftly. The hot sixth lunar month of the year rolled around. One day, after eating lunch with his daughter Lansun in the suffocating heat, Anqing asked for some well water to cool himself. Promptly, well water was brought to him. He downed two full cups and urged his daughter to drink some. After taking a few sips, Lansun said, "Father, this is just plain water. Did you drink so much of it because you found it delicious?"

"What a thing to say! It will ruin any good luck that you may have! You and I are as fortunate as the immortals to be able to drink this water. How can you find it too plain for you?"

"Father, how will I ruin my luck? In such weather, descendants of the nobility eat iced lotus roots and melons and plums, and there's nothing extravagant about that. But you, a prefect, take nothing but a cup of plain water and find it enjoyable. Aren't you being too impractical?"

"My child, you should know better. Listen: Those descendants of the nobility flaunt their forefathers' influence and spend their inheritances, knowing nothing about farming, and they don't engage in any useful work. They pursue nothing but gratification and the good life. Little do they know that extreme joy begets sorrow. There will come a time when their horses die and their gold runs out. If it doesn't turn out that way, it's only because their fate dictates so. Your father comes from an impoverished family, and I have an imperial mandate to fulfill for the benefit of the people. You must not compare me with them. There are also people who, in this weather, are guarding the empire at the borders day and night, wearing heavy armor, holding lances

and spears in their hands, and putting their lives on the line. There are also farmers with hoes in hand, merchants, and laborers who work their fingers to the bone in the fields and trudge on muddy roads, dripping with sweat that is mixed with rain. Plus they have to endure the heat of the sun right over their heads. Compared with them, isn't your father as fortunate as an immortal? (MC: *A man who keeps to his own lot in life this way shouldn't be visited by calamities.*) Then there are also those of a lower class, who have been convicted of a crime for a momentary lapse of morals. In prison, they're flogged and shackled at the wrists and ankles. In this weather, they're holed up in dark cells that never see the light of day. They don't even have muddy water, let alone nice, cold water. It's too painful for them to live on but too early to die. They're also made of flesh and blood that their parents gave them. Don't they feel pain? Don't they itch? Why is it that only they can bear the misery? Compared with them, isn't your father as fortunate as an immortal? There are still about two hundred convicts in the prefectural prison. I'd like to have their shackles removed and let them have a drink of chilled water once a day until autumn arrives."

"Father, you mustn't act rashly. Prisoners are no angels. If you go soft on them, you'll be implicated if something bad happens."

"I'm all kindness. Why would they betray me? (IC: *It doesn't necessarily work that way.*) I'll just tell the wardens to keep a tight watch over the gates."

Something was destined to happen, and it was to lead to an outcome in which

*Prisoners on death row escaped the net,
And tragedy befell the kind prefect.*

The next day, in his court session, Anqing ordered the wardens to remove the prisoners' shackles and serve them chilled water every day and to guard them with extra alertness. The wardens acknowledged the order and, that very day, released the prisoners from their shackles and gave them chilled water to drink. The wardens kept a tight watch over them without ever letting down their guard, but after about ten days, they began to relax.

In a trice, it was the first day of the seventh month. It was established custom in the prison to hold a prayer service for good luck on the first day of each month. That day, after sacrificial paper coins had been burned, all the wardens gathered to share the wine and food offerings. They started sometime in the afternoon, and by dusk, every one of them was stinking drunk.

At the first signs of weakened discipline, the prisoners had taken it into their heads to break out of prison. Some of them had their relatives and friends smuggle sharp objects into the prison and hid these on themselves. That day, with the wine taking its toll on the wardens, they seized the opportunity and put their plot into action. Before midnight, all two hundred or so convicts gave a rallying cry, sprang into action, and killed the wardens on duty. As they forced their way out through the prison gate, they cut down every warden who crossed their path. Those wardens who dived into the shadows heard the prisoners cry, "The prefect has been kind to us. Let's spare him!" (IC: *There is some fairness after all.*) But they did hack their way to the yamen offices and made short work of a few junior officials. Since the city gate remained open at that hour in those times of peace and order, the convicts gave a roar and ran out of the city. Indeed,

*The sea turtles broke free from the golden hooks,
Shook their heads, flicked their tails, and vanished for good.*

The raucous hubbub came to Pei Anqing's ears as he lay asleep. He woke up with a start and scrambled out of bed. In the next instant, someone came to report the situation to him. His three souls took leave of his body through the top of his head, and his seven spirits gave him the slip through the soles of his feet. He gave one cry of anguish after another and said with regret, "I got into this mess because I ignored Lansun's advice. I had no idea my kindness was to be repaid with such cruel ingratitude!" Immediately, he called together members of the militia who then fanned out to hunt down the convicts. But it was like trying to search for a needle in the ocean. There was just no hope of finding even one of the men.

The very next day, the matter was reported to higher authorities. As was only to be expected, an impeachment memorandum was submitted to the emperor. In less than half a month, the document was delivered to the imperial court in the capital, and the emperor consulted court ministers about the case. If Pei Anqing had been a graft-hungry official bent on currying favor with his superiors, he might have found sympathetic ears in the court. (MC: *Such are the ways of the world.*) But he was a man of unbending integrity with an aversion to fawning over the powerful and influential. In addition, in his scrupulous honesty, he never took even one extra penny beyond his salary. Where was he to get hold of the money to grease the palms of the high and mighty? And so no one came forward to put in a good word for

him. The consensus was that “Pei, as the prefect, must be held accountable for allowing convicts to break out of prison. Moreover, several junior officials were killed, and he was the only one spared. These questionable circumstances call for face-to-face interrogation.” The emperor approved the demand and promptly decreed that the Department of Justice bring Pei Anqing under guard to the capital city. Even if he had been as good a parent-official as Zhao Xinchun and Du Shi, Pei Anqing had no alternative but to lower his head and let himself be tied up, but he believed his good reputation as an official might help exonerate him to some degree.⁶ (MC: *This was exactly what he should not have counted on.*) He told Lansun to pack, and father and daughter, under guard, set out on the road.

In a matter of days, they arrived in the Eastern Capital [Kaifeng]. Pei Anqing’s old residence in the capital had been confiscated by imperial decree, and the few servants had fled in all directions, leaving him with no place to stay. Luckily, his deceased wife Lady Zheng had socialized with nuns of the Pure and True Convent. Thus, he managed to rent lodgings from them and moved in with Lansun. The next day, wearing a black gown and a small hat, he went with the guards to the imperial court to await the next imperial decree. When it came, the decree was that he be taken to the prison of the Court of Judicial Review to await interrogation, and the decree was executed without a moment’s delay.

Lansun saw no option but to bribe high and low with what little money she had so that she would be allowed to deliver messages as well as food and beverages to her father. As it turned out, his advanced age, his weak constitution, the shock, the maltreatment in prison, and the ceaseless worry combined to worsen his health until he was unable to take a bite of food or a drop of water. The money Lansun spent on bribes in order to deliver food to him went down the drain. One day, during Lansun’s visit to prison, he said to her, “I can hardly breathe. It will probably be all over with me today. It’s my kindness that led to this calamity and got you involved, my child. Although, by law, a parent’s crime should not implicate the children, you have no one to turn to for help after I die, so you’ll most likely end up being a bond servant.” At this point, Anqing felt as if his heart was being pierced by ten thousand arrows. He let out a few wails of grief and drew his last breath. He was, in fact, lucky that, with his death, he was spared the misery and humiliation of wearing a cangue and a bag over his head.⁷

Lansun stomped her feet and pounded her chest and cried until she fainted. She wanted to claim her father’s remains but was told that she was

not authorized to do so, since her father was a criminal arrested by the imperial court. Recklessly, Lansun forced her way into the Court of Judicial Review and gave the presiding judge a tearful and moving account of what had led to the jailbreak. Fortunately, the presiding judge was a man with a sense of justice. Saddened by the circumstances of this case, he wrote a memorial to the imperial court, saying,

I, presiding judge of the Court of Judicial Review, found, after investigations, that Pei Xi, former prefect of Xiangyang, was a benevolent and hardworking official, albeit incompetent in guarding the prison. However, even though his lax rules deserve punishment by the imperial court, there is no evidence of disloyalty on his part. Now that he has died in prison, it is advisable to grant him leniency and have his remains sent back to his hometown for burial, to demonstrate the imperial court's goodwill toward government officials. It is with great trepidation that your humble subject makes this submission.

Emperor Zhenzong, also of a kind disposition, was disinclined to be harsh to a dead man, and he approved the judge's request. For Lansun, the news provided her with her only comfort in her distress. She bought a coffin with what money she had been left and had her father's remains carried out of prison and put into the coffin. After she deposited the coffin at the Pure and True Convent, she offered sacrificial food and poured libations and again broke down in passionate weeping.

Pei Anqing had not brought much money to his duty station to begin with. By this time, nothing was left. Even though the coffin had been paid for, there was no money for burial expenses. Lansun searched her mind for a possible way out and said to herself, "My uncle Commissioner Zheng is now the regional commander of Xichuan and is at his duty station with his family. But the road to Xichuan is too long and formidable. There's no way I can get help from him." At her wit's end, she decided to do what she would never have done in better circumstances. She wrote on a piece of paper the characters "Girl for Sale to Pay for Father's Burial," plastered it on a tablet, and, holding it in her hand, bowed four times in front of the coffin and prayed, "Father, while your spirit has not gone far, please help me find a good buyer." Having said that, she rose and, with tears in her eyes and grief in her heart, swallowed the humiliation, took to the streets, and cried out for buyers. (MC: *This was hard on her.*) Pei Lansun, poor thing, had been a delicately brought up gentleman's daughter prone to blushing in the

presence of a stranger. Who would have foreseen that she would be reduced to parading herself around like this! Recalling her father's last words, she was consumed with aching grief. Truly,

*In nature, there are unexpected storms;
In life, there are unforeseen vicissitudes.
Born to a sorry fate,
She swallowed the humiliation.
The father died in chains,
Leaving his daughter sobbing on the streets.
Just like cuckoos that cough blood till they die from grief,
The poor girl was forsaken by Heaven.*

But as another saying goes, "Heaven always leaves a door open." Lansun was trying to sell herself when an old woman approached her on the street and, with a slight bow, asked, "Young lady, what makes you want to sell yourself? And why do you look so sad?" Upon a closer look, the old woman gave a start and said, "Well, if this isn't Young Mistress Pei! Why have you been reduced to this?" It turned out that the old woman was Madam Xue of Luoyang. When Lady Zheng was still alive, Madam Xue had often visited the Peis on her sojourns to the capital and therefore knew Lansun. Raising her head, Lansun recognized Madam Xue and took her to a secluded spot, where she tearfully told her what had happened.

Tears came easily to Madam Xue. On hearing the heart-wrenching details, Madam Xue also burst out in sobs. "What a tragedy for Master Pei!" she said. "You're an official's daughter. How can you be a bond servant? If you really have to sell yourself, with your looks, you can be a concubine rather than a servant."

"For my father's sake, I'm not afraid of even death, let alone being a servant!"

"Well, you have nothing to worry about. Prefect Liu of Luoyang County is getting on in years but is still without a son, so his wife, Lady Wang, asked me to get him a concubine. I've been looking around these parts for quite some time now without being able to find a suitable candidate. I'm now in the capital because a distinguished family in Luoyang asked me to offer a match to the prime minister's family, and Lady Wang, taking advantage of this opportunity, gave her nephew Wang Wenying money and sent him to

join me on this trip to search for a candidate. It's destiny that I should meet you here. Lady Wang wants someone both virtuous and good-looking. Now, you're a beauty, second to none, and you're trying to sell yourself so that you can bury your father, which is a remarkable act of filial piety. Ten to one you'll make it! Prefect Liu is righteous and generous, and Lady Wang is most kind and gentle. Although you may be of a lower status once you join the family, you'll get to enjoy soft living the rest of your life. What do you say?"

"I'm in your hands, madam. But because I'm bringing disgrace to my family by selling myself as a concubine, please be sure not to tell them the truth. Just present me as a girl from an ordinary family."

Madam Xue nodded in assent and led the young lady to Wang Wen-yong's lodgings. While Madam Xue was telling him about Lansun, Wang Wen-yong eyed the young lady standing some distance off and was impressed by her striking beauty. "My aunt will surely be satisfied with such a beauty," said he. Verily,

*Iron boots were worn out on a hunt for the right one,
But here she is; you need not have searched.*

With a damsel in distress on one side and a wealthy family on the other, the deal was made quickly with no need for prolonged negotiations. Wang Wen-yong weighed out one hundred taels of high-grade silver, gave all of it to Miss Pei, and asked her to set out on the journey with him. Lansun said, "I came here to sell myself in order to bury my father, so I must first take care of the burial before I can go."

"Young lady," said Madam Xue, "how can you take care of the burial when you're all alone? Why don't you wait until you're in Luoyang? After your wedding ceremony, you can ask Prefect Liu to have his men take care of the burial. That will be so much easier." Lansun felt obliged to agree. (MC: *If so, what need for a hundred taels of silver?*)

A responsible and capable man, Wen-yong thought it prudent not to lose time on a matter as important as finding a concubine for his uncle-in-law. He instructed Madam Xue to be Lansun's companion all along the way while he himself either went in front of them or brought up the rear. There being only four hundred *li* between the Eastern Capital and Luoyang, they arrived at the Liu residence in a matter of days. Wen-yong went straight to the family pawnshop to take care of business there, while Madam Xue

quietly took Lansun inside to greet Lady Wang. Raising her head, Lady Wang saw that

*Unadorned with rouge or powder,
She glowed with natural beauty.
A light toilette sufficed
To restore her spotless purity.
She carried herself with ease and grace;
She spoke with a plaintive voice.
Her frown reminded one of Xishi
When that beauty first went to Wu.⁸
Her look of sorrow recalled Wang Qiang
When she left the court of the House of Han.⁹
Pity the lovely and chaste maiden,
Reduced to being a concubine!*

Filled with delight, Lady Wang asked her name and ordered that a room be prepared for Lansun and a maidservant be put at the young lady's disposal.

The next day, Lady Wang called her husband to her and said in a measured tone, "This old woman has something to say to you. Please don't take it amiss."

"Just say whatever you want to say. Don't hold anything back!" said Liu Yuanpu.

"Husband, don't you know the saying 'Few ever live beyond seventy'? Now, you're going on seventy. How many more years can you have ahead of you? Yet you have no children. As they say, 'To be healthy is a blessing; to have a son is to be content.' I've long been meaning to get you a concubine, but I've been biting my tongue, partly because I don't want to say the wrong thing when you're so strict about your principles and partly because I haven't been able to find the right one. But now, I've got the daughter of a Mr. Pei of Bianjing. She's in the flower of her youth and is both beautiful and talented. If you could accept her as a concubine, she may give you a son to carry on the Liu family line."

"I was only afraid that I was fated to have no son, and I didn't want to ruin a young woman's life. (MC: *This kind thought ensures the continuation of his family line.*) I had no idea that you went to such lengths to do this! All right, you may call her in for me."

Thereupon, Miss Pei Lansun emerged from her room and made a low obeisance. Liu Yuanpu said to himself, "Judging by her looks and the way she carries herself, I don't think she's of humble background." Aloud, he said, "What's your name? What kind of family are you from? Why were you trying to sell yourself?"

Lansun replied, "I'm Pei Lansun, daughter of a humble resident of Bianjing. I was trying to sell myself because I needed the money to bury my deceased father." While saying this, she shed furtive tears.

After surveying her with fixed intensity, Liu Yuanpu continued, "You can't be from a humble family. Don't try to fool me. Your look of sorrow tells me that you're trying to hide a painful experience. Tell me everything. I'll stand up for you and relieve you of your sorrow."

Lansun's initial resistance to telling the truth melted away under Liu Yuanpu's rigorous questioning. Resignedly, she gave a full account of what had happened, beginning with her father's criminal conviction for the jail-break and sparing no details. As her tears fell like rain, Liu Yuanpu turned pale and found himself also in tears. "I just knew that you weren't from a humble family," said he. "My wife almost made me do the wrong thing. How tragic that such a good official died so unjustly!" Whereupon he hastened to apologize to Miss Pei over and over again, adding, "Since you don't have a place to stay, why don't you stay here while I pick a burial lot for your honorable father?"

"Such a perfect arrangement is indeed a blessing from Heaven," said Lansun. "Please accept a bow from me."

Liu Yuanpu promptly raised her to her feet and instructed the designated maidservant to take unfailingly good care of Miss Pei. Then he went to the hall and dispatched servants to Bianliang to bring Mr. Pei's coffin to Luoyang.

Before many days went by, the servants returned with the coffin. It so happened that the coffin of Prefect Li of Qiantang County arrived at the same time. Liu Yuanpu had both coffins placed in one of the halls and prepared two feasts for a memorial ceremony. Zhang-shi led her son in paying homage to the late Mr. Li's shrine, and Yuanpu led Lansun in paying homage to the late Mr. Pei. A celebrated feng shui master was engaged to pick two burial lots, and an auspicious date in the twelfth lunar month of the year was chosen for the burials.

One day, Lady Wang spoke up again to her husband: "Although Miss Pei is from a distinguished family background, you helped her out in her distress.

If she'd been stranded in another place, who knows how low she might have fallen? You took care of her father's burial, which is an act of great kindness. I'm sure she'll gladly agree to be your concubine. Since she's from a prominent family, she may be in fortune's favor and bear you a son. If so, you'll have an heir and she'll be well provided for. What's so wrong about that? Please give this another thought."

It would have been all right if she had not said this, but she did, and Liu Yuanpu lost his temper. His face hardening, he said, "What kind of talk is that! The world abounds with beautiful women. If I wanted a concubine, I could have made my choice elsewhere. How could I ever dream of sullyng Mr. Pei's daughter? (MC: *Words of an honorable gentleman.*) Heaven knows if I ever entertained such a thought!"

Realizing that she had put her foot in her mouth, Lady Wang was reduced to silence.

Feeling sick at heart, Liu Yuanpu gave himself up to thought and said after a while, "I was being an idiot. Since I have no children, why don't I adopt her as a daughter, pure and simple? And you can drop that idea of yours." (MC: *Most judicious.*) Thereupon, he had a maid lead Miss Pei out to him.

"I'm much older than your father," said he to Lansun. "And I was also a prefect, but at my advanced age, I have no children. If you're not disdainful of us, may we adopt you as a daughter? What do you say?"

"Because you, sir, and Lady Wang so kindly took me in, I'll gladly serve you as a maidservant. I don't deserve more!"

"What a thing to say!" exclaimed Liu Yuanpu. "You're the daughter of an official. You're just going through a trying time. How can you descend to such lowliness? My mind is made up. Don't be so self-deprecating."

"You, sir, and you, madam, have given me a new lease on life. I'll never be able to repay your kindness, not even in death. Since you do me such honor and adopt me as a daughter, I cannot decline. Please accept a bow from your daughter right now."

Beside himself with joy, Liu Yuanpu said to his wife, "Since Lansun is our daughter now, let's accept her bows, the whole set of them!"

Then and there, Lansun kowtowed eight times, as if offering votive candles. Henceforth, she called them "Father" and "Mother." She proved herself to be a most dutiful daughter, and all three quickly warmed to one another.

Then Lady Wang had another idea. "Now that you've adopted her," said she to her husband, "it behooves you to pick a husband for her. My nephew Wang Wenying is a young widower. (MC: *This is woman talk!*) He has many

years of experience managing the estates, and he has quite a sharp and shrewd mind. Our daughter won't be shortchanged. Why don't you pull off the match for them?"

Smiling ever so slightly, Liu Yuanpu said, "It does behoove me to pick another wife for your widowed nephew. I know what to do. Your job is just to prepare the dowry."

Lady Wang obliged him. Right away, Yuanpu chose an auspicious wedding date. When that date rolled around, pigs and goats were slaughtered and a grand feast of celebration was laid out to which members of the local landed gentry, kinsmen, and friends, as well as Mrs. Li and her son and Lady Wang's nephew Wang Wenyong were invited. The guests assumed that they were to witness Mr. Liu taking on a concubine, while Lady Wang thought it was her nephew's wedding. (MC: *They were, one and all, benighted mortals.*)

The Moon Palace is so far out of reach.

*Whose home will Chang'e visit tonight?*¹⁰

When the auspicious hour was drawing near, Liu Yuanpu ordered that a suit of clothes for the bridegroom be laid out in the hall for all to see. Saluting the guests with clasped hands, Liu Yuanpu announced, "May I have everybody's attention please? I have something to announce. As it is said, 'It is ruthless to profit by a woman's beauty; it is heartless to take advantage of other people's distress.' Lansun, daughter of Prefect Pei of Xiangyang, who died unjustly in prison, has just come of age [fifteen], and my wife wanted me to take her as my concubine. But I'd rather remain childless than insult Prefect Pei's good name. As for my wife's nephew Wang Wenyong, he may be an excellent manager, but he's not a government official and therefore not a suitable match for a young lady of such exalted status. (MC: *Good point.*) Now, Li Yanqing, son of my old friend County Magistrate Li, with his distinguished family background, his youth, his good looks, and his literary talent, is a perfect match for the young lady. What do you say if I marry them to each other today?"

With one voice, the assembled guests broke into praise of Mr. Liu's magnanimity. Li Chunlang, thus caught off guard, tried to raise objections, but Liu Yuanpu turned a deaf ear. With his own hands, he put proper bridegroom's attire on the young man. Amid the resounding notes of *sheng* pipes, the tinkling of jade girdle pendants came to their ears as Madam Xue, the matron of honor, and several maidservants shepherded Miss Pei into the

brightly lit hall. The groom and the bride, standing on a floral patterned carpet, exchanged nuptial vows and became husband and wife. Indeed, words are inadequate to describe the lavish ceremony. Behold:

"Lovely Children" trim the lamps;¹¹

"Seven Ladies" hold the fans.

"Crazy Scoundrels" and "Pockmarked Women" all praise

The "Fairies at Magpie Bridge" and "Isles of the Blest."

In service are "Good Sisters" and "Willow Green Girls,"

Helping the "Happy Groom" lift the "Gilt Curtains."

The groom is prepared but doesn't need "Flowers of the Rear Court";

With mixed feelings, the bride meets "The Oar in the Water" tonight.

"Shedding the Cotton Shirts" brings much joy;

"The Fluttering Heart" is filled with delight.

Zhang-shi and her son, Chunlang, had never imagined this blessing from Heaven even in their wildest dreams. By the light of the candles, Miss Pei Lansun was inwardly pleased by her husband's prepossessing appearance. She had thought she was going to marry the Star of Longevity, but the groom turned out to be the Star of Civil Virtue. (MC: A major credit for Liu Yuanpu's record in the unseen world.)

After the ceremony was over, the newlyweds were led to their sedan-chairs. Liu Yuanpu himself escorted them to the southern wing, where the bridal candles were lit and the wedded couple drank the nuptial cup. After the dowry worth a thousand taels of silver was delivered to the bridal chamber, Liu Yuanpu went back to the feast hall to entertain the guests. Amid loud music, they drank until almost daybreak before the party broke up. As for the beauty and the gifted youth in the bridal chamber, they spent the blissful night as inseparable as lacquer and glue and as happy in their union as fish in water. When their pillow talk turned to Mr. Liu's great kindness, both were overwhelmed with gratitude.

After rising at daybreak, they went to pay their respects to Zhang-shi, who then joined them in paying respects to Mr. Liu with many expressions of gratitude. Then Zhang-shi prepared some sacrificial offerings and took her son and daughter-in-law to her husband's coffin so that they could pay homage to the departed. Stroking the coffin, Zhang-shi said tearfully, "Husband, a man as honorable as you were when alive is surely still living on in spirit. Uncle Liu took us in, widow and fatherless son, and married our son

to the daughter of a distinguished family. His bounty is as vast as the sky. For kindness of such magnitude, please protect him from where you are in the unseen world and help him acquire a son and live to be one hundred."

Chunlang and his wife also said their prayers, but silently. Henceforth, the young couple lived in harmony with the older generation, with the wife following her husband's lead. Day and night, they burned incense and prayed for blessings from the netherworld for Mr. Liu.

Time flashed by unnoticed. It was now the middle of the twelfth lunar month, and the auspicious day for burial arrived. Liu Yuanpu called together a team of workmen who carried the two coffins to the graveyard, escorted by Zhang-shi and her son and daughter-in-law, dressed in deep mourning. After the coffins were lowered into the pits and the grave mounds were completed, a tombstone was erected on each grave, one bearing the inscription "Tomb of Pei Anqing, Prefect of Xiangyang of the Song Dynasty" and the other "Tomb of Li Kerang, Magistrate of Qiantang of the Song Dynasty." All around stood pines trees and cypresses against a background of hills and water, accentuating the proximity of the two graves. Liu Yuanpu laid out three kinds of sacrificial meat required for the ritual. Zhang-shi and the young couple burst out crying. (MC: *Why all this grief?*) After they had their cry, all three turned their eyes to Liu Yuanpu and prostrated themselves on the grass-covered ground. Liu Yuanpu hastened to return the courtesy, saying, in all modesty, that he did not deserve the veneration. There was not even the faintest glow of self-conceit on his face. (MC: *Quite exceptional.*) Then they went back home and parted company.

At the third watch that night, Liu Yuanpu saw in his dream two men—each with an official's cap on his head, an ivory tablet in his hand, and a golden waistband around the middle of his purple robe—prostrating themselves on the floor at his feet, calling him their "great benefactor."

In astonishment, Liu Yuanpu promptly rose and raised them to their feet, saying, "Venerable gods, what brought you down to this humble place? This is too much of an honor for me!"

The man on the left said, "I'm Pei Xi, prefect of Xiangyang, and this is Li Kerang, magistrate of Qiantang. The Lord on High, in his compassion, and out of regard for our integrity and loyalty, appointed me a god of the city of His residence on earth and Mr. Li a judge in the yamen of heaven. After I died in prison, my little daughter had no one to turn to for help, but you, in your great kindness, found her a good husband, gave me a nice resting place, and made me and Mr. Li in-laws in the netherworld. Your kindness to us is

beyond all repayment. We've already written a memorial to the heavenly court. Out of consideration for your virtuous conduct, the Lord on High gave you a one-grade promotion, added thirty years to your life, and granted you two sons who will both attain high status. Though we're in two separate worlds, we deem it necessary to inform you about this."

The one on the right said, "I sent you a message in the form of a blank letter because I found it hard to unburden my heart to you without knowing you personally. To my surprise, you deciphered my message in one glance and most readily adopted my son. By supporting the living and burying the dead, you already exceeded the normal bounds of friendship. And then, your arrangement of marriage for my son went beyond my wildest hopes. Adding years to your life and granting you a son do not suffice to repay a fraction of your kindness. My posthumous daughter Fengming will be born tomorrow morning. I venture to betroth her to your son, so that you'll be my daughter's father-in-law, just as I'm your daughter's father-in-law. This will be, in a small way, my personal contribution to the repayment of your kindness."

With that, they saluted Mr. Liu with folded hands and took their leave. Liu Yuanpu made haste to escort them out, but they pushed him back. He woke up with a start, and on realizing that he was in bed with Lady Wang, he told her about his dream. (MC: *An optimal moment for planting the seeds.*)

"I also admire you," said Lady Wang. "Such great kindness has rarely been witnessed in all of history. You'll surely be richly blessed. I take it that the gods meant what they said."

"Mr. Pei and Mr. Li became gods after they died due to their moral integrity. It stands to reason that they chose to appear in my dream out of gratitude for my arranging their children's marriage. But about adding thirty years to my life, can there be centenarians in this world of ours? And about granting me two sons, I'm already seventy years old. I may be as energetic as before, but it's hardly likely for a seventy-year-old to father a son. I don't think that's going to happen."

The next morning, recalling what had been said in the dream, Liu Yuanpu adjusted his cap and his clothes and went to the southern wing. Before he could tell Zhang-shi and the young couple about it, Li Chunlang and his wife came out to greet him. "Mother has just given birth to a little sister and is now in bed," said Chunlang. "Last night, all three of us had strange dreams. We were about to report the good tidings to you, but here you are!"

On hearing that Zhang-shi had given birth to a daughter, Liu Yuanpu was struck by the accuracy of Mr. Li's words, but since he remained childless, he thought it prudent not to reveal his dream. He inquired after Zhang-shi's health and went on to ask about their dreams. Li Chunlang said, "In our dreams, my father and my father-in-law had both become gods. They said that the heavenly court, touched by your kindness, has increased your life span and granted you sons, and all three of us had the same dream."

Inwardly marveling at the coincidence, Liu Yuanpu told them about his own dream, whereupon Chunlang said, "This is all thanks to your accumulation of credit in the unseen world. Nothing can be more natural by heavenly principles. It's not a figment of anyone's imagination."

When Liu Yuanpu returned to his own quarters and told his wife about everything, both were struck with awe and sighed prodigiously. Then they sent servants to the Li family residence to offer congratulations. When the baby girl was one month old, Zhang-shi carried her to Yuanpu's quarters so that she could greet her uncle and aunt. When Yuanpu asked for her name, Zhang-shi replied, "Her nickname is Fengming, as my husband instructed in my dream." Liu Yuanpu was all the more amazed that Zhang-shi's dream tallied with his.

Let me try to be brief. Lady Wang, already forty years old by now, began to have cravings for salty and sour foods and often felt queasy. Attributing the symptoms to middle-age ailments, Liu Yuanpu engaged physicians, but none of them could make a diagnosis from taking her pulse. One or two among them knew enough to say that her pulse suggested a pregnancy. But well aware that Liu Yuanpu was seventy and Lady Wang was forty and had always been barren, they dared not give prescriptions and confined themselves to saying, "The lady doesn't need any medicine. She'll recover on her own."

Liu Yuanpu also said, "Such a minor ailment shouldn't do much harm." No more physicians were engaged, and everyone's mind was put at ease.

After some time passed, Lady Wang did indeed get over the symptoms, but she felt heavier in the middle by the day. Her skirt sash seemed to shrink, her face was puffy around the eyes, her breasts were swollen, and her abdomen began to protrude. Doubtfully, Liu Yuanpu thought, "Could the words said in that dream really be prophetic?"

The sun and the moon shot back and forth, and before they knew it, the due date was upon Lady Wang. By this time, Liu Yuanpu had dismissed all

doubts about the pregnancy and made preparations for the delivery. He hired a midwife and a wet nurse. One night, Lady Wang had just gone to sleep when a peculiar fragrance assailed her nostrils and the air echoed with notes of otherworldly music. As her labor pains began, the women all came in to offer their services. In less than an hour's time, a baby boy was born. After he was bathed in scented warm water, he was seen to be a big baby with finely marked eyebrows, bright eyes, a straight nose, and a well-formed mouth. Husband and wife were beside themselves with joy. Yuanpu said to his wife, "The prophecies of Mr. Pei and Mr. Li in that dream of mine have been borne out. The baby is indeed a blessing from heaven." Whereupon he named the baby Liu Tianyou [Heaven Blessed], with the courtesy name Mengzhen [Dream Auspicious]. The story soon spread throughout the city of Luoyang, along with a jingle that said:

*The prefect was born with a unique streak;
He makes it his business to do good deeds.
He married off Miss Pei, only to get a son;
At age seventy, he was blessed with his first one.*

Soon, the baby was one month old. A celebration feast was held, as was the usual practice. Members of the local landed gentry and kinsmen and friends descended on the Liu residence to offer their congratulations, and the feast lasted three to five days. Chunlang and Lansun took money out of their private savings for a separate feast to mark the occasion, but so much for the celebrations.

Let us now turn our attention to Li Chunlang. After his marriage and the burial of his father's remains, he applied himself with greater assiduity to his studies of the classics and history, aspiring to carve out a career for himself in order to repay the immense kindness he had received. With Liu Yuanpu's support, he enrolled in the National Academy. While he was consulting his uncle, his mother, and his wife about a journey to the capital to attend the academy and await the next round of civil service examinations, a messenger came from the commissioner of military affairs in Bianjing with the mission of taking Miss Pei's family to the capital. The fact was that Lansun's maternal uncle Mr. Zheng had been promoted a few months ago from regional commissioner of Xichuan to vice commissioner of military affairs. On arriving in the capital, Commissioner Zheng learned that his brother-in-law, Prefect Li, had been convicted of a crime and died. He went to the Pure

and True Convent to ask about his niece and was told that she had been sold and taken to Luoyang. Then he sent someone to Luoyang to make inquiries, and on learning that Mr. Liu had made a match for his niece in an act of magnanimity, he burst into sighs of admiration. Sorely missing his niece, he invited her, her husband, and her mother-in-law to the capital for a family reunion. The invitation could not have suited Chunlang better. Lansun was also overjoyed that her uncle had been transferred back to the capital.

After reporting the news to Mr. and Mrs. Liu, they picked an auspicious day on which to set out on the journey with Zhang-shi and Fengming. When that day drew near, Liu Yuanpu laid out a farewell feast. As the dinner table talk turned to the dreams, Liu Yuanpu said to Zhang-shi, "In that dream of mine last year, your husband told me that there's a predestined marriage bond between your daughter and my son. I didn't bring this up because there was no sign of a son for me at the time. But now, if you don't find us beneath you, shall we form a marriage alliance?"

With a slight bow, Zhang-shi replied, "Since my husband said so and you don't find us beneath you, and we haven't been able to repay you for your great kindness, why would I deny my daughter the honor? It's just that my son and I are as poor as before. It would be too presumptuous of us to aspire to claim connections with you. Once my son makes a name for himself, I'll surely have my daughter serve your son."

After the feast was over, Mr. Liu turned to Lansun and said, "Your husband's journey will lead him to a brilliant career. The two of us will be fine at home. Don't worry about us." Everyone shed tears and felt sad at the thought of parting.

When it was time to depart, the young couple kowtowed time and again with words of gratitude for the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Liu before they tearfully set out on their journey. Luoyang being not far from the capital, they kept up a regular correspondence, but we need not go into detail about that.

Let me now tell of the baby Liu Tianyou. With the passing of the days and months, he was now one year old. One day, the wet nurse carrying him went outside for some fun with a maid called Morning Cloud. At eighteen, Morning Cloud was a pretty girl. After she played for a while with the nurse, the latter said, "Sister, hold the baby for me for a while. It's getting windy. I need to go get more clothes for him." And so Morning Cloud took the baby. On reemerging from the house, the nurse heard the baby cry. In consternation, she rushed over and saw Morning Cloud holding the baby with one hand and rubbing the baby's head with the other. Upon a closer look, the nurse

saw a big bump on the baby's head. Flying into a rage, she said, "You had to drop him the moment I turned my back! Don't you know what he means to Master and Madam? If they learn about this from other people, you'll also get me in trouble. I'm going to report to them right now. Let's see if you'll be spared punishment, you little lowlife!" With that, she picked up the baby and went away in a huff.

At this ominous turn of events, Morning Cloud exploded. Returning the insult, she said, "You old sow, you bitch, using the young master to throw your weight around and call me names! Who do you think you are? You're just a nurse! As for the young master, I've never heard of any seventy-year-old fathering a son, and a first-born, too! (MC: *Showing her true colors as a woman.*) Maybe the baby was abducted or adopted. Who knows? And you had to walk all over me like that just because of one little fall!" For all her verbal ferocity, Morning Cloud was quite unnerved and dared not follow the nurse to the inner chamber. Little did she know that the nurse repeated to Liu Yuanpu every word she had said.

After hearing the nurse out, Liu Yuanpu said affably, "She's not to be blamed. It's indeed rare for a seventy-year-old man to beget a child. Why give so much weight to something said in the heat of the moment?"

The nurse had thought that her report against Morning Cloud would at least get her beaten half to death. Such unexpected tolerance on the master's part turned the fire in her chest into half a cup of icy water. With the baby in her arms, she went inside.

That very evening, after eating supper with Lady Wang, Yuanpu went to his study to rest. There, he said to a maid, "Bring Morning Cloud here, to the study."

The maidservants assumed that the master was going to give Morning Cloud a dressing-down because of what had happened earlier in the day and were holding their breaths for her. With the speed of a hawk swooping down on a sparrow, they brought her in. With her guilty conscience, Morning Cloud, poor thing, stood trembling with fear in front of Liu Yuanpu and braced herself for a severe lecture. Yuanpu said to the other maidservants, "Go, and leave only Morning Cloud here."

In obedience to this command, all the maidservants went away. Yuanpu then ordered Morning Cloud to close the door. As Morning Cloud wondered what he had up his sleeve, Liu Yuanpu told her to approach him, adding, "Infertility is caused in most cases by the weakness of sperm at the point of union, but if the sperm are healthy and strong, an old man can be as fertile

as a young man. You thought that old men could not sire children and accused me of resorting to adoption or some devious means. I'm keeping you here tonight precisely in order to try my energy on you, to dispel your suspicions." (MC: Mr. Liu's main concern is to dispel her suspicions. He is no lecher.)

The fact was that Liu Yuanpu had suspected he was infertile and therefore had been averse to taking on young women. Now that he had already fathered a son, he felt emboldened. Moreover, according to his dream, he was supposed to have one more son. And so he changed his mind. As for Morning Cloud, she had no idea that her thoughtless remark would lead to this. In no position to disobey, she attended to him, removed her clothes, and went to bed with him. Behold:

*He is like the eight-hundred-year-old Peng Zu;¹²
She is like the short-lived student Yan Hui.¹³
With rainy clouds, the Luo River Goddess
Pours water on the longevity star.
As if fishing by the creek, Lü Wang's rod
Probed for the right spot to land.¹⁴
Laozi on a buffalo embraces
The Dragon King's daughter holding a pearl plate.
Old Man Zhang riding a donkey
Hugs a fairy maiden holding a strainer.¹⁵
Twisting vines wind around a peony blossom;
A mossback gathers lotus pistils.
The old Vesper Star lapses into lust;
The jade maiden is seized with desire.*

In spite of his advanced years, Liu Yuanpu was still going strong. Morning Cloud resigned herself and submitted to him, putting up with the pain. The union lasted for about two hours until he ejaculated. Liu Yuanpu slept through the rest of the night with Morning Cloud.

At daybreak, Morning Cloud left the study and went to her own quarters. After Liu Yuanpu rose and told his wife about what had transpired, she burst out laughing without saying anything. The maidservants and the nurse had always been impressed by their master's decency and were surprised by this lapse in his moral character, but no one foresaw that Morning Cloud would get pregnant after that one encounter. Liu Yuanpu had been motivated mainly by an urge to show his prowess so as to bring an end to Morning Cloud's

suspicions. The pregnancy, so easily achieved, also took him by surprise. Lady Wang furnished a servant's room and advised her husband to take on Morning Cloud as a concubine. He agreed. Morning Cloud changed into attire befitting her new status, and Liu Yuanpu spent nights with her from time to time. Morning Cloud was pleased that her thoughtless remark, blurted out in the rush of the moment, had elevated her to such a nice status. In jest, Liu Yuanpu said to her, "Now you know that the young master was not abducted or adopted, don't you?" (MC: *This is an important point.*) Morning Cloud reddened to the roots of her ears and dared not venture a word.

In the twinkling of an eye, the pregnancy reached full term. As Morning Cloud's contractions began, a peculiar aroma assailed her nostrils and permeated the room, and a baby boy was born. At this very moment, a commotion broke out at the gate outside. Liu Yuanpu went out to see what it was all about and learned that the stir was caused by messengers announcing that Li Chunlang had won first place on the civil service examinations at the palace level. Liu Yuanpu's heart leaped for joy because this success justified his adoption of the young man as a nephew, and it was also a most auspicious omen for his newborn son. The messenger presented him with a letter from Mr. Li, winner of first place on the exams. Liu Yuanpu opened it and read:

When my mother and I, widow and orphan, were going through a difficult time, you, Uncle, took us under your wing and provided for us all these years. My success at the exams is also attributable to your kindness. I hope this letter finds you and my aunt well. I wanted to ask for a leave of absence so as to visit you, but my duty as tutor to the crown prince requires my presence by His Highness's side at all times of the day, and I have not been able to fulfill that wish. So I am sending, for your enjoyment, two jars of wine bestowed by the emperor as well as the two flowers that I wore at the imperial banquet for successful candidates, to serve as a good omen for your son. How I wish to be with you and better express my sentiments!

After reading it through, Liu Yuanpu took the wine and the flowers and was entering the inner chamber to tell his wife about this when his son Tianyou walked up to him. He called the boy to a halt and, handing him the two flowers, said, "Your cousin won first place on the exams in the capital city and sent these flowers for you, hoping you'll do the same in the future and join the banquet for successful candidates."

The boy happily took the flowers, stuck them on his head, and, to the old couple's great mirth, made two deep bows to them while chanting words of salute. Liu Yuanpu promptly wrote a congratulatory letter to Li Chunlang and informed him of the birth of the new baby. After sending off the messenger from the capital, he offered libations at the shrines of Mr. Pei and Mr. Li with the wine bestowed by the emperor before sharing what remained of the wine with his wife. He then named his second son Tianxi [Heaven Bestowed], with the courtesy name Mengfu [Dream Sign].

The brothers grew apace, and well-behaved boys they turned out to be. Liu Yuanpu engaged tutors for them, expecting them to make something of themselves. Out of gratitude for Heaven's blessings, he devoted himself to public works, building bridges and paving roads and doing good deeds far and wide. He also paid his respects to the graves of Mr. Pei and Mr. Li every spring and autumn, but let us leave Liu Yuanpu and tell of what happened to Li Chunlang in the capital city.

Commissioner Zheng and his wife Wei-shi had only one child, a daughter named Sujuan, still in swaddling clothes. Because his sister and brother-in-law had died early, the commissioner loved his niece Lansun dearly, which was why the Zhengs were very favorably disposed toward the entire Li family.

After Li Chunlang rose to fame and was assigned to be the crown prince's tutor, he made his way into the latter's good graces. After more than ten years, Emperor Zhenzong died, and the crown prince ascended the throne as Emperor Renzong [r. 1023–63]. Giving preferential treatment to his tutor, he promoted Chunlang, official name Li Yanqing, to secretary of the Ministry of Rites as a first-grade official. When Emperor Renzong was still the crown prince, Chunlang had informed him several times of Liu Yuanpu's acts of kindness, and now, Chunlang wrote a memorial to the new emperor, asking to be allowed to go back to Luoyang to pay homage to the family graves and requesting commendations and rewards. Accordingly, Emperor Renzong issued the following decree: "Li Xun, ex-magistrate of Qiantang County, is hereby posthumously promoted to secretary of the Ministry of Rites and Pei Xi, ex-prefect of Xiangyang, is hereby posthumously restored to his former post. Items of sacrificial offerings are hereby bestowed for each departed soul. Liu Hongjing [Liu Yuanpu], prefect of Qingzhou, is to be promoted by three grades. Li Yanqing, secretary of the Ministry of Rites, is hereby granted a six-month leave of absence, to resume his duties upon his return to court."

Equipped with the imperial decree, Secretary Li took his mother, his wife, and his sister to say good-bye to Commissioner Zheng and returned to Luoyang posthaste in an extravagant procession that was several *li* long, complete with horse-drawn chariots and banners. Prefectural and county officials went out through the city gates to greet them. Secretary Li had been twenty years old when he left and was now returning as a court minister at the young age of thirty. The populace of Luoyang turned out en masse to view the procession, praising Liu Yuanpu not only for his kindness but also for his judgment of character.

Secretary Li's family members dismounted at the Liu residence first. On learning of their arrival, Liu Yuanpu and his wife hastened to lay out a table for receipt of the imperial decree. After kowtowing and crying "Ten thousand years to the emperor" three times, Lady Zhang, Secretary Li, and Lady Pei, in red robes and jade belts, led the young lady Fengming in prostrating themselves on the floor to voice their thanks to the emperor for his bounty.

After Liu Yuanpu raised the secretary to his feet and Lady Wang raised Lady Pei and Fengming to their feet, they called forth their two sons, so that they could greet their aunt, cousin, and cousin's wife. Everyone was impressed by the two youths' imposing looks and their strong resemblance to Liu Yuanpu. In delight, they exclaimed, "It's thanks to his accumulated credit in the unseen world that our benefactor is blessed with two such gems of sons!" Then they carried the items of sacrificial offering bestowed by the emperor to the graves of Mr. Pei and Mr. Li, where they burned sacrificial paper and poured libations. Zhang-shi and the other three members of her family cried their hearts out and then cleared up the offerings and returned home.

Liu Yuanpu laid out a banquet to celebrate the occasion. After three courses of food and several rounds of wine were served, he rose and said to the secretary and his mother, "I've harbored a secret for more than ten years, and I must share it with you today. In fact, Mr. Li Senior and I had never even laid eyes on each other. (MC: *He was put on the spot at the time.*) When you, mother and son, came to ask me for help, I was totally at sea. When I opened the letter, I found it to be a blank sheet of paper without even half a character on it. I didn't understand at first, but after I gave the matter some thought, I figured that he must have heard of my undeserved reputation (MC: *Surely not undeserved!*) and wanted to entrust his wife and son to my care, but since we'd never met before, he found it hard to say it. So he stuffed a blank sheet

of paper into an envelope as a cryptic message. That day, I played along and pretended it was all true. I never even told my wife the truth. What I said about my sworn brotherhood with Mr. Li was nothing but fiction. Now that my good nephew has made his mark in the world and brought honor to his ancestors, I'd be guilty of hiding all the pains that Mr. Li had taken if I didn't come out with the truth." Having said that, he handed the blank sheet of paper to the secretary and his mother. Both burst into tears and expressions of gratitude. On learning only at this moment that Liu Yuanpu's admission of the mother and son into his home was based on nothing but a blank letter, everyone broke into effusive praise. Indeed,

*Entrusting orphans to friends is nothing new,
But none ever claimed brotherhood when there was none.
If everyone follows Liu Yuanpu's example,
Need one cultivate friends at all?*

When Liu Yuanpu again asked Zhang-shi for permission to betroth his older son to Fengming, the old lady readily agreed. At this point, Lady Pei rose and said, "I haven't been able to repay even one fraction of my father's kindness to me. My uncle Commissioner Zheng has a daughter named Sujuan, of the same age as my younger brother. I offer my services as a matchmaker." Liu Yuanpu thanked her, and of events of the rest of that day there is no more to tell.

Soon thereafter, Liu Yuanpu betrothed Tianyou to Miss Li Fengming. In the meantime, Secretary Li wrote a memorial to the emperor, to report to him how Liu Yuanpu had taken him and his mother in on the basis of a blank letter, and also wrote a letter to Commissioner Zheng, to propose marriage. Before long, Emperor Renzong read the memorial and was immensely pleased. Praising Liu Yuanpu for his moral character, he issued a decree ordering the erection of a memorial archway in his honor and bestowed on him the title Secretary of the Ministry of Rites as commendation of his extraordinary deeds. Commissioner Zheng, in admiration of Mr. Liu's magnanimity, readily granted the latter's request for betrothal of his son to Zheng's daughter. Secretary Li was now Tianyou's brother-in-law and Tianxi's cousin-in-law. With these added ties, the domestic blessings were complete.

Later, Tianyou came out first in the civil service examinations at the palace level, and Tianxi also obtained the *jinshi* degree that same year. Liu Yuanpu lived to see both sons marry and have children of their own.

Then, one night, Mr. Pei appeared to him in a dream and said with a bow, “My term of office as god of the city of the Lord on High’s residence on earth has expired. The Lord on High has ordered you, sir, to come and replace me.”

The next day, Liu Yuanpu died peacefully without an illness, one hundred years old to the day. Lady Wang passed away in her eighties. Secretary Li and his wife gave way to their grief and wept with abandon. Treating Mr. and Mrs. Liu as their own parents, they observed mourning in their hearts for six years. Even though the Liu family had its own offspring, Secretary Li still went to pay homage at the Liu family graveyard every year, returning the kindness he had received. Mr. Pei was the only one without male issue, but offspring of the Li family paid homage at his grave generation after generation, for the Li family had made its home in Luoyang in order to take care of the ancestors’ graves and never returned to Western Yue. Lady Pei Lansun’s son also had a distinguished career in officialdom. Liu Tianyou rose to be prime minister, and Liu Tianxi an imperial inspector. Liu Yuanpu received many honorable titles, and the Liu clan multiplied. This is a case of acts of kindness getting their returns.

This story is taken from “The Story of the Empty Letter” and retold so as to exhort people to virtue, as is attested by a poem:

*Yin and yang are of the same principle;
Weal and woe are up to the individual.
Say not that Heaven is too far away;
Look no further than the case of Prefect Liu.*

Yuan's Face-Reading Skills Impress the High and Mighty

Zheng's Good Deed Wins Him a Hereditary Title

As the poem says,

*The mighty heroes of Yan and Wu—
One put lead in his lute, the other knife in a fish.¹
They died in acts of loyalty to their kings.
To them, Mount Tai could be as light as a feather.*

The story goes that during the reign of Emperor Dezong [r. 780–804], there lived an untitled scholar named Lin Ji, courtesy name Shanfu. He was a native of Nanjian Prefecture [in present-day Fujian]. With his abundant intelligence, he was well versed in poetry and the classics and knew all there is to know about the nine classics and the three histories.² He was also remarkably upright in character. While pursuing his studies at the Imperial Academy in the capital city, he took home leave to take care of his ailing mother. After his mother recovered, he was obliged to return to the capital to resume his studies, as was only to be expected. So he said good-bye to his mother for the time being, bade his relatives and neighbors farewell, and set out on his journey, with a servant named Wang Ji carrying their luggage on a shoulder pole. As they went along,

*They passed wooded hills
 Where woodcutters' songs soared to the clouds.
 They passed bodies of water
 Where fishermen sang on the misty waves.
 Their way led them through villages;
 Their steps took them past city markets.
 They saw green poplars and weeping willows
 Embowering gazebos here and there.
 They came upon chirping birds and fallen petals
 And wondered which family's yard it was.
 There was no end to the scenic splendors;
 There remained a long way for them to go.*

They stopped for food and drink only when they felt the need, rested by night and traveled by day, and took a boat when no land routes were available. Several days later, they came to Caizhou [in present-day Runan County, Henan] and stopped when evening had closed in on them. Behold:

*A fog spreads ten li long;
 Radiant stars shine from the ninth layer of heaven.
 Merchants from eight directions unload their goods;
 All the seven-story stupas are brightly lit.
 Birds, with their six-quilled wings, land on trees to rest;
 Boats painted with five flowers are rowed back to shore.
 Cattle and sheep from all four fields around
 Return to the fold;
 Fishermen working the three rivers
 Come home with their gear.
 Two merchants making a deal both lodge here;
 One blow of the bugle warns of hardships ahead.*

Lin Shanfu and his servant Wang Ji went into an inn. The desk clerk led them to a large, clean room of their choice, and Wang Ji found a spot to deposit his load. After resting for a while, Shanfu asked for warm water with which he washed his feet, ate whatever was served him by way of supper, and sat around idly with nothing better to do. The lamps having long been lit before he was aware of it, he instructed Wang Ji to make preparations for bed so that they could start out early the next morning. Wang Ji

bedded down on the floor in front of his master's bed. Lin Shanpu also removed his clothes and lay down, but he felt something bothering his back and could not fall asleep. Since the lamp on the wall had not yet burned out, he rose and raised the straw mat to see what was there. It was a cloth parcel. On opening it, he found a brocade bag containing a hundred large pearls. Shanfu put the parcel in his trunk. But more of this later.

When day broke, behold:

*A morning fog has settled on the fields;
Fading sunrise clouds dye the wilderness red.
O'er the ridges of the fields sinks the pale moon;
By the weaving loom, the sun is about to rise.
The herdboys are still asleep,
The silkworm maids not yet astir.
Barking dogs are heard outside the farmhouses;
The monks are seen still abed in the monasteries.*

At the crack of dawn, Shanfu rose and washed up. After getting dressed, he instructed Wang Ji to get the luggage ready. Then he went out of his room and asked the innkeeper, "Who occupied the room before I did?"

"A very rich merchant," replied the innkeeper.

"He's an old friend of mine," said Shanfu. "He was supposed to be waiting for me, but we missed each other." Looking directly at the innkeeper, he continued, "If he comes back to look for me, please tell him to go to Guandao Hall in the Imperial Academy in the capital and look for Student Lin Ji, courtesy name Shanfu. Please be sure to do this for me. Do not fail me!" With that, he paid his bill, bowed to the innkeeper with locked hands, and departed.

With Wang Ji carrying the luggage ahead of him, Lin Shanfu followed along the twists and turns of the road. Lest the innkeeper forget his request, Lin Shanfu had Wang Ji put up posters all along the way that read "On the _th day of the _th month of the _th year of the calendar cycle, Lin Ji, from Jianpu, stayed in the inn called such and such on his way to the Imperial Academy in the capital. He has with him some pearls belonging to an old friend of his. Please visit him at Guandao Hall." (MC: *Honest to the utmost degree!*) On arriving several days later at his destination, he reported back at the academy after his leave of absence and returned to his hall to continue with his studies.

To pick up another thread of our story, that bag of pearls belonged to a rich merchant named Zhang Ke. He did not realize his loss until he was at the market, trying to retrieve them as payment for his merchandise. Shocked out of his senses, he said, "Woe is me! It took me years of hard work to acquire this bagful of pearls. Now that I've lost it, what am I going to say to my wife and children after I get home?"

He searched his memory, but it yielded no clue as to where he could have lost it. He saw no choice but to go back the way he had come, asking from inn to inn. On reaching the inn where Student Lin had stayed, he asked the desk clerk, but the latter said, "I don't know anything about your lost item."

"After I left, did anyone else stay in the room I occupied?"

The innkeeper put in, "Yes, I forgot! After you left, another gentleman stayed in it for one night and left early the next morning. Before his departure, he told me that anyone coming to look for him should go to Guandao Hall of the Imperial Academy in the capital and ask for Student Lin Ji."

Mr. Zhang was puzzled. Without saying anything out loud, he thought, "Could this be the man who's holding my pearls?" So he left the inn and set out for the capital. All along the way, the sight of posters mentioning "pearls" took some of the weight off his mind.

After a few days, he arrived in the capital. Before he went to find lodgings and rest for a while, he headed straight to the Imperial Academy. There was a teahouse across the street from the academy. Behold:

*A wooden board sits high over the door;
A paper scroll hangs across the wall.
The famous paintings on display
Are all by Wu Daozi of the Tang;³
The newly picked tea leaves in the cups
Would have pleased the tea expert Lu Tong.⁴*

Mr. Zhang entered the teahouse for a cup of tea. After finishing his tea, he asked the waiter, "Is there a Student Lin around here?"

"There are a lot of students named Lin. Which one might you be looking for?"

"Lin Ji, courtesy name Shanfu, of Guandao Hall."

"Oh, him! He's a very kind person."

This remark took some more weight off Mr. Zhang's mind. "He's a distant relative of mine whom I haven't seen for so long that I'm afraid I may

have forgotten what he looks like. If he comes here, please point him out for me.”

At this point, the waiter said, “The gentleman who just came out of the academy is him! He’s coming here, and he’ll be checking his gown and hat with us.”

Mr. Zhang saw the man but dared not make a rash move. It was only after Lin Shanfu had entered the teahouse and removed his hat and outer gown that Mr. Zhang walked up and, looking him in the eye, chanted a greeting and dropped to his knees.

Student Lin said, “Why do this? Don’t you know the saying ‘Men’s knees are as precious as gold’?”

Knowing nothing about what had brought this man to him, Student Lin watched him shedding copious tears and suppressing his sobs without being able to get one word out. Only after he calmed down did Mr. Zhang come up with the reason he was there. After hearing him out, Lin Shanfu said, “Don’t worry! The object is with me. But let me ask you: What’s inside it?”

“It’s a cotton parcel containing a brocade bag within which are one hundred large pearls.”

“Yes, you’re right,” acknowledged Student Lin, whereupon he took Mr. Zhang to his place and returned the parcel to him.

At the sight of the parcel, Mr. Zhang said, “Yes, that’s it! I’m not going to take all the pearls. If I could take only half of them to provide for my family, I’ll be deeply grateful.”

Lin Shanfu objected, saying, “What kind of talk is that! If I wanted half of them, I wouldn’t have put up posters all along the way hoping you’d come and claim them.”

Again and again, Mr. Zhang refused to take all the pearls and insisted on taking only half of them while Lin Shanfu adamantly rejected the offer. After multiple rounds of back and forth, Mr. Zhang yielded to Student Lin’s strenuous resistance and departed with effusive thanks. He then sold half the pearls at the market and donated the proceeds to the monks of a celebrated monastery for the dedication of a hall in honor of Student Lin as repayment for his kindness in returning the pearls. (MC: *This man is by no means an ingrate.*)

Later, Shanfu passed the civil service examinations at the national level on the first try. As the poem says,

*Lin Ji’s return of the pearls is quite unheard of.
Money did not motivate him; virtue did.*

*Heaven blessed him for his good deeds;
On the first try, he gained fame and a title.*

Later, Shanfu rose to the highest echelon in officialdom, and both of his sons had successful careers as government officials. As the ancients put it, “Good is returned with good; evil is returned with evil. Families that do good deeds will be blessed; families that do evil will be punished.” Truly,

*The heavenly designs are all too clear.
Who can dissolve a crisis in one’s fate?
The road to lasting bliss is there for all to see,
But the human heart too often yields to greed.*

The story above is titled “Accumulate Good Deeds That Gain You Credit in the Unseen World.” It is a story passed down by previous generations of the capital’s storytellers. Why did this humble storyteller repeat it? Because people in this world of ours are mercenary-minded. The sight of other people’s possessions stirs their greed and prompts them to act against the dictates of their conscience and to pocket other people’s lost items. Who would be willing to return such items to their rightful owners? But as a matter of fact, the credits accumulated in the unseen world carry a great deal of weight. Duke Pei, judged by his physiognomy, was destined to die of hunger, but because he returned a jade belt to its rightful owner, he later rose to be prime minister.⁵ Inspector Dou Yujun of the Song dynasty was destined to be heirless, but because he returned lost silver to its rightful owner, he came to sire five sons who all passed the civil service examinations. Other small acts of kindness that brought heavenly blessings are too many to enumerate here.

Now let me tell another story, one about a poor man’s act of kindness that led to his extrication from poverty and his rise to prominence. Gentle reader, you will then know that my exhortations to virtue are not without good reason. You may well ask, where does the story take place?

Well, when His Majesty Emperor Yongle [r. 1403–25] of this dynasty [Ming] was still the Prince of Yan, a physiognomist by the name of Yuan Liuzhuang, courtesy name Gong, happened to see a group of military officers, by the looks of them, drinking in a wineshop in the capital. After studying one of the men, Liuzhuang gave a violent start and bowed deeply, saying, “You, sir, are destined to be an emperor.”

The man waved a hand in objection and said, "You're talking nonsense!" But he did ask for Liuzhuang's name before he left.

The next day, an order came from the Prince of Yan, summoning the physiognomist. Once in the prince's mansion, Liuzhuang raised his head and saw that the prince was none other than the man he had met in the wineshop. As a matter of fact, the Prince of Yan had donned the uniform of a military officer when traveling incognito with several of his personal guards and had now quietly summoned Liuzhuang so that the latter could take his time reading the prince's face again. At the end of the face-reading session, Liuzhuang offered his congratulations, and at this time the Prince of Yan made up his mind about his grand plan. Later, after his campaign to restore order, the prince ascended the throne and rewarded the physiognomist with a third-grade official post in the capital. Liuzhuang's son Zhongche was appointed Holder of the Great Seal. Liuzhuang's divine skills as a physiognomist were known far and wide, but very few people knew that Zhongche, a disciple of his father's, was also most accurate in his prophecies as a physiognomist and that every eminent person in the capital at that time sought his company and engaged him in face-reading sessions.

There was a Vice Minister Wang, whose family members suffered from recurrent bouts of ill health. One day, Holder of the Great Seal Yuan Zhongche came for a visit and, observing his worried look, asked, "Sir, I detect a blockage of the energy field in your face, which means trouble for members of your family. But rather than something you were born with, it seems to have come from outside and can therefore be removed."

"Please tell me how to remove it," said the vice minister.

In the midst of the conversation, a page boy came in with a tray, to serve tea. Mr. Yuan looked him over and said to himself in alarm, "This explains it!" Soon after the tea was finished and the page boy cleared away the tea-cups and left, Mr. Yuan asked the vice minister in a subdued voice, "What's the name of that little boy with the tea tray?"

"Why ask about him?"

"He's the very reason for the illnesses in this house."

"He's Zheng Xing'er. I hired him locally less than a year ago. He's honest, hardworking, and very competent. How can he be the reason for the illnesses in this house?" (MC: *I'm afraid that this is also absurd.*)

"His physiognomy dictates that he's an obstruction to anyone who employs him. If you keep him for more than a year, the consequences will be far worse: Death will descend on your family."

"Is that so?" The vice minister was not convinced.

"Sir, don't you know the stories about inauspicious Dilu horses bringing misfortune to their masters and inauspicious tablets of court ministers bringing harm to kings?"

Light dawned on the vice minister. "In that case, I'll have to fire him."

After walking the Holder of the Great Seal to the gate, Vice Minister Wang went to the inner quarters of the house and repeated to his wife what Mr. Yuan had said. Women tend to be most gullible when it comes to such allegations. Plus, who had not heard of Mr. Yuan's skills as a physiognomist? The vice minister, being a scholar, at least had a streak of stubbornness in him and was not easily influenced, but his wife's mind was darkened with suspicion. And so the vice minister summoned Xing'er and told him that his services were no longer needed.

Aghast, Xing'er said, "I've never done anything wrong, Master. Why are you firing me?"

"It's not because you've done anything wrong. It's just that members of this family get ill every so often, and Mr. Yuan, Holder of the Great Seal, read your face and said that you're the cause. I have no alternative but to send you away for now. We'll see what happens after a while."

Xing'er, having also heard about Mr. Yuan's divine skills as a face-reader, knew that it was impossible for him to stay on. Loath to part with his master, he burst into sobs and prostrated himself on the floor. (MC: *A good servant, not one of those heartless people.*) It also pained the vice minister to see him go, but out of necessity he forced himself to send Xing'er packing. Sure enough, after Xing'er's departure, the family members regained their health. The entire Wang family put even greater faith in Mr. Yuan and gave full credence to his words.

Our story forks at this point. Let us follow Xing'er after he mournfully left the Wang family. Without a patron to turn to for help, he made his home in an old temple.

One day, when relieving himself in the outhouse, he noticed a package hanging on the wall. He took it down and found it to be quite heavy and tightly stitched up. He opened it and saw more than twenty packets of silver in it. Sticking out his tongue in amazement, he thought, "Lucky me! With this much silver, my days as a poor man are over! It's all right even if I'm out of a job." But then again, he thought, "But I was born to be poor. I found a job as a servant, but my face was said to be bringing harm to my master, and for that I've been fired without having done anything wrong. My fate will never

allow me to enjoy this windfall. (MC: *If this is the way he thinks, fate will dictate otherwise.*) The money must have been left here by someone who needed it urgently but forgot to take it after hanging it on the wall and doing what he had to do in this outhouse. Lives may be involved, for all I know! If I take it, even though no one will know, I'll only be ruining my credit record in the netherworld. I'd better wait here for the owner to show up and return it to him." Turning his thoughts this way and that, he kept vigil at the outhouse, parcel in hand. Thus, he brooded in silence until evening, but no one came. Still feeling uneasy, he found a straw mat, spread it across the cover of the latrine pit, and slept on it, with the parcel serving as a pillow. (MC: *This alone is a difficult thing to do, not to speak of returning the silver.*)

At first light the next morning, a man with disheveled hair and puffy eyes entered the outhouse. On noticing a man in it, he checked the walls and said, appalled, "It's gone! How can I go home now?" So saying, he charged headfirst at the wall.

Xing'er hastened to stop him and said, "Take it easy! Tell me what this is all about."

The man said, "My master sent me on business to the capital with a bag of silver. Yesterday, when I was in this outhouse, I found a bamboo nail on the wall and hung the parcel on it. After I finished my business, I went off, forgetting all about the parcel. And now the silver's gone, and I can't do what my master wants me to do for him. How can I go back to face him? Why would I want to hold on to this life?"

"Don't worry, my brother! The silver is right here, with me. It's all yours!"

The man broke into a happy smile. "If you return it to me, I'll give you half of it by way of thanks."

Xing'er replied, "If I wanted a reward, why didn't I take the parcel last night and run? Why did I bother to sleep through the whole night here in spite of the terrible stench? Please don't make me do anything against my conscience!" With that, he swung the parcel into the man's hands.

Impressed by the youth's honesty and generosity, the man asked, "What's your surname?"

"My surname is Zheng."

"My master is also a Zheng. He's a native of Hejian Prefecture [in present-day Hebei] with a hereditary military title. He sent me to the capital to ask for a job for him and gave me the silver to offer bribes. I lost it yesterday and, surprise, surprise, got it back today from you! After my mission is accomplished, I'll take you to my master and tell him about your good deed. He'll

surely do something for you in return.” (MC: *As they say, “One good turn deserves another.”*)

Cheerfully the two of them went to a restaurant, where the man eagerly treated Xing’er to wine and asked him about his background, whereupon Xing’er told him everything about how he had worked for the Wang family, how he had been fired because of a face-reader’s words, and that he was now in desperate straits with nowhere to go.

The man said, “You came upon money when you were in desperate straits but didn’t take it. This makes you even more of a rare exception. You need not look elsewhere for a job. Stay with me for now. After my mission is accomplished, I’ll take you to Hejian Prefecture.”

When Xing’er asked his name, he replied, “My surname is Zhang. I’m the majordomo of the Zheng family. People all call me Majordomo Zhang. I’ll be able to provide for you for a couple of months with my salary alone, not to speak of my master.”

Naturally, in his desperation, Xing’er was delighted to hear this. And so Xing’er kept watch over Majordomo Zhang’s luggage at the inn while the majordomo went about his business at the Ministry of Defense. Greasing palms left and right, he accomplished his mission, as was only to be expected. (MC: *If everyone in this world were like Xing’er, gold would be as useless as muck.*) Officer Zheng won an appointment as the standard-bearing commander under the provincial governor.

Majordomo Zhang triumphantly returned to his lodging and said to Xing’er, “Thanks to your kindness, my master has received an appointment. This is clearly all thanks to you. Let’s go back and report the good news. We need not stay here a moment longer.” Without delay, they got their things together, hired two pack animals, and set out on the journey together.

On arriving at home, Majordomo Zhang settled Xing’er outside and went inside alone to report to his master. Overjoyed that he had received an appointment, Zheng praised his steward, saying, “You made all this possible with your able hands.”

Majordomo Zhang said, “I mustn’t claim all the credit. It’s partly due to your good luck and partly thanks to a benefactor. If it were not for him, I wouldn’t have kept my life, let alone gotten a job for you.” (MC: *This man is also quite exceptional in not claiming credit for himself and not forgetting a kindness done to him.*)

“What benefactor are you talking about?”

Thereupon, Majordomo Zhang gave a full account of everything that had happened, from his loss of the silver, to his encounter with Zheng Xing'er, who had slept the whole night on the cover of a latrine pit, to the return of the silver, untouched.

Commander Zheng was astounded. "What a man of honor!" he exclaimed. "Where is he now?"

"I couldn't forget his kindness, so I invited him here to greet you, Master. He's outside."

"You did the right thing. Invite him in!"

Majordomo Zhang went outside and brought Xing'er to greet Commander Zheng.

With his background as a page boy, Xing'er made the obligatory kowtow at the sight of a master. Commander Zheng also dropped to his knees and, stopping Xing'er with a hand, said, "You're my benefactor. How can you stand on such ceremony?"

After Xing'er stood up, Commander Zheng surveyed him intently and commented, "You don't have the looks of a lowly man. In addition, your largeness of spirit and kindness will do you good." (MC: *How quickly his physiognomy changed!*) Commander Zheng then offered him a seat, but he adamantly declined. It was only after many demurrals that he finally obliged and sat down.

"What's your surname?" asked Commander Zheng.

"My humble surname is Zheng."

"The same surname as mine! This is even more of a wonder! I'm going on sixty, still childless, and I have nothing with which to repay your great kindness. Not that I want to take advantage of you, but I'd like to adopt you as a son so that I can do for you what you did for me and repay one fraction of your kindness. What do you think?"

"I was born to be a servant. How could I aspire to such a high status?"

"Don't put it like that. The good faith you have shown me eclipses that between friends in ancient times. I thought of offering you a reward of gold and silk, but since you value moral principles more than money, it wouldn't make sense for you to forgo a windfall only to receive a trifle. And if I do nothing, wouldn't you think of this old man as an ingrate? The very fact that we share the same surname shows that there's a predestined bond between us. I'm only afraid that I'd be shortchanging you. Why go the other way and make yourself out to be a stranger?"

With Commander Zheng pressing his point and Majordomo Zhang egging them on from the sidelines, Xing'er could not do other than agree. Then and there, he made four bows and honored Commander Zheng as his adoptive father. (MC: *With his broadmindedness, Mr. Zheng fully qualifies as Xing'er's father.*) Henceforth he became known to all and sundry as Young Master Zheng. His name was changed to Zheng Xingbang. Even Majordomo Zhang called him "Young Master."

Being a northerner, the young master had learned archery and horse riding at an early age. After Commander Zheng moved to Jizhou to take up his new post, taking Young Master with him, competent teachers were easy to find. Every day, the young master practiced under their guidance, and Commander Zheng was even more favorably disposed toward him because of the progress he made. In addition, Young Master was amiable, discreet, and cautious—qualities that endeared him to the entire family. Commander Zheng applied for a hereditary title on his behalf, a request that was granted.

Commander Zheng, working under the provincial governor, gained the latter's approval. At the end of the year, Commander Zheng was transferred, through repeated recommendations, to the garrison in the capital as a mobile corps commander. His family, including Young Master Zheng, followed him to the capital. Once there, the young master mounted a tall horse and rode down the streets. As memories of the old days flooded back to him, sad tears trickled down his cheeks. There is a poem in testimony:

*He had come upon lost silver at this spot
When he was in a beggar's tatters.
Dressed in finery now and on a high horse,
He found himself in tears, just as before.*

Commander Zheng went to more expense on behalf of the Young Master and obtained the hereditary title of commander for him, to await further assignment. As the Young Master went about the capital city, paying courtesy calls in grand style, it is useful to recall that he had risen to this status only three years after his departure from the city. As Vice Minister Wang was also in the capital, the young master thought, "One must not forget one's roots. Granted, I was driven out of the Wang family, but the master had in fact treated me well. It was because he believed what Mr. Yuan said about my getting in the way of the family that he fired me. He hadn't meant to do

that. But since I joined my adoptive father's household, I haven't gotten in anyone's way, have I? My old master shouldn't take the blame for Mr. Yuan's nonsense. Now that I've come so far, I should go see him, to show that I bear him no hard feelings. But I'm not sure my adoptive father will approve, because he may think that dredging up the past would put me in a bad light." So he acquainted his adoptive father, Commander Zheng, with all the details of the past events and sought his opinion.

The commander burst into words of praise: "It's only right that he who achieved higher status shouldn't turn his back on his humble past, and he who has made new friends shouldn't forget his old ones. What's wrong with these useful, good personal qualities? Since ancient times, there have been any number of mighty kings and princes, emperors, and prime ministers who rose from humble beginnings. (IC: *Words of a wise man.*) Men of true worth shouldn't harbor ill feelings in such situations."

Thus advised, the young master changed into simpler clothes, adorned only with a golden waistband made of rhinoceros horn, and went straight to Vice Minister Wang's residence. His visiting card read: "Zheng Xingbang, your servant, hereditary commander, requests an audience."

Card in hand, Vice Minister Wang thought, "Who is this person asking to see me? Since he calls himself a servant, I must have met him somewhere." Let us leave him as he was thus wondering to himself and explain that civil officials in the capital were not richly paid and usually stood to gain from visits from military officials, with their deeper pockets. And so Vice Minister Wang called out, "Invite the visitor in!"

At the sight of the minister, Young Master Zheng quickly dropped to his knees and kowtowed, although his old master, Vice Minister Wang could hardly be expected to recognize him immediately in his changed attire. The minister promptly helped him up and said, "Why stand on ceremony when you're not a subordinate of mine?"

"Master, don't you recognize Xing'er from the past?"

Upon a closer look, the vice minister did recognize him from his bearing, if not from his build. Much taken aback, the minister said, "You've come a long way! What happened?"

Thereupon, Young Master told him that he had been adopted as a son, that he had obtained a hereditary title as an officer, and that his adoptive father was now a mobile corps commander of the garrison of the capital. He added, "I ventured to come and see you out of gratitude for your past kindnesses to me."

Having heard him out, Vice Minister Wang felt obliged to offer him a seat, but the Young Master declined the offer over and over again, saying, "I should remain standing in attendance."

"But you're a court-appointed official now. You mustn't be bound by rules that are no longer applicable to you."

The Young Master gave up and sat down off to one side.

"Since you've attained such prospects, you're just not meant for a life in my household. It's too bad that Mr. Yuan's nonsense misled me and made me do you an injury. I'm so ashamed of myself."

"Everything is dictated by fate," said the Young Master. "If I'd stayed in your household, Master, I wouldn't have been adopted and got to where I am today."

"It might very well have been so, but Mr. Yuan's skills as a physiognomist are so laughable. Clearly, his reputation is quite undeserved." (MC: *He does Yuan an injustice.*)

Preparations for dinner in the Young Master's honor were about to begin when the gatekeeper delivered a visiting card and said, "Mr. Yuan, Holder of the Great Seal, requests an audience."

Bursting into hearty laughter, the vice minister rubbed his hands and said, "That joke of a fortune-teller is here! Just in time for a good teasing!" Turning to the Young Master, he said, "You go inside and change into clothes befitting your former status. After he has sat for a while, come out with a tea tray. Let's see if he can still recognize you."

Thus instructed, the Young Master went inside, took off his hat and his waistband, asked a former coworker for a blue robe, and put it on. On hearing an order for tea from Mr. Yuan, who had sat down comfortably outside, he proceeded to the reception hall, respectfully holding a tea tray with both hands. Mr. Yuan looked at him intently and suddenly rose to his feet and asked, "Who is this person serving tea in this place?" (LC: *His status has changed.*)

The vice minister replied, "The very page boy Xing'er who was fired some time ago. With no place to go, he has come back to serve this family."

Mr. Yuan exclaimed, "How can you lie to me like that! I won't talk about the future, but at this moment, he's a military official worthy of a golden waistband. He's no page boy of yours!"

With a hearty guffaw, the vice minister said, "My dear Mr. Yuan, have you forgotten what you said about his obstructing the fortunes of his master and bringing ill health to the family?"

Only then did the Holder of the Great Seal recall his own words. After another careful examination of the Young Master's physiognomy, he said affably, "How very strange! I did say those words before, but I wasn't wrong then, and I'm not wrong now."

"Pray explain!" said the vice minister.

"This gentleman has multiple facial lines that bespeak an excellent credit record in the netherworld. He must have either saved someone's life or returned lost property to the rightful owner. His physiognomy has changed, and it appears that his good deed has been repaid. This explains his exalted status today. This humble student did not make a mistake."

A cry escaped the Young Master. "Mr. Yuan is divinely accurate!" With that, he launched into a detailed account of his return of the silver forgotten in an outhouse, his adoption as a son in Hejian Prefecture, and his hereditary title with its attendant hat and waistband. Then he added, "I'm here today because I missed my old master."

Vice Minister Wang had been told before about the adoption but not about the return of the lost silver. Now that he had heard the whole story, awe surged through him. He said, "Mr. Zheng's moral character and Mr. Yuan's divine skills both deserve to be immortalized." Turning to the servants, he continued, "Bring Mr. Zheng's hat and waistband here, quick!"

After the young master was properly attired, he exchanged greetings anew with the Holder of the Great Seal. The vice minister invited Mr. Yuan to join them at the dinner table, and the three of them did not part company until they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

The next day, Vice Minister Wang went to pay Commander Zheng a courtesy call, which doubled as a return visit to Young Master Zheng. Henceforth, the two families formed close ties and made frequent mutual visits. Later, Young Master Zheng rose to be a mobile corps commander before he passed away, and his descendants were all given privileges in honor of his meritorious service. It was thanks to his kindness that he virtually gained a new lease on life and got to enjoy such imperial bounty. Hence, this advice to everyone: Do good deeds only; Heaven will not shortchange you. There is a poem in the classical style in testimony:

*Yuan's face-reading skills are no less divine
Than those of Tang Ju and Xu Fu of old.⁶
One word from him astounds the gods and spirits;
One roll of his eyes predicts fortune's rise or fall.*

*The boy who brought harm to his master
Wandered homeless on the streets, poor thing!
His return of lost silver deserved praise;
His kind thoughts led quickly to actions.
Mr. Zheng, untrammelled in his ways,
Tried every means of thanking his benefactor.
By fate they shared the same surname;
The title with its trappings was a repayment.
In the capital, he called on his old master;
The meeting with Mr. Yuan was a shock.
Divine rewards for good deeds are nothing new,
And Mr. Yuan fully deserved his fame.*

With Money, a Commoner Gains an Official Post

Out of Luck, a Prefect Becomes a Boatman

As the poem says,

Life's ups and downs are only to be expected.

Why hoist the sails fully when the wind is against you?

The vagaries of fate can happen in one day;

Reversals of fortune may occur in a trice.

Our story begins with the observation that the wealth and glamour that the human world has to offer may not be for real and should not be taken as such. Nowadays, those who have risen to prominence fool themselves into thinking that their power will last for ten thousand years, and people watching them from the sidelines subscribe to the same notion. As it turns out, what they have gained may go up in smoke in the twinkling of an eye. It does not take much for the great Mount Tai to change into an iceberg that can melt. As the proverb rightly says, "It's far better to build from nothing than to lose what you already have." A poor man who strikes it rich savors the sweetness that began where bitterness ended with greater relish. But the rich and the eminent, once out of power and reduced to poverty, will find life nothing but a sea of misery, and their hangers-on disperse, bearing out another proverb, "When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter." And yet, the

rich and the eminent tend to think only of the present as they harden their hearts against the dictates of their consciences and wallow in vice with abandon. What do they care about how it will all end?

There is a joke about an old man with three sons. On his deathbed, he said to them, "Tell me honestly all your wishes. After I die, I'll ask the Lord on High to grant them."

One of the sons said, "I wish I'd be made a top-grade official."

Another son said, "I wish I could have ten thousand acres of land."

The last one said, "I wish I could exchange my eyes for a pair of bigger ones." (MC: *The wish of a sober-minded man.*)

The old man asked in astonishment, "Why would you want that?"

"I want to open my eyes wide and observe how they acquire wealth and power."

This may be just a joke, but it chimes with these lines by the ancients:

With a scornful eye, I watch the crabs run wild.

For how much longer is the insolence to last?

Be all that as it may, with the exception of those put to death by the imperial court or brought to ruin by unworthy offspring, there are few who fall from dizzying heights of wealth and status to dire straits and make themselves figures of fun by bringing earthly punishment upon themselves in one single lifetime. Gentle reader, this leads me to my prologue story today, one about such a figure of fun.

When Emperor Xizong [r. 873–88] of the Tang dynasty ascended the throne and changed the reign title to Qianfu [874–79], the eunuchs dominated the court. Among them was a Tian Lingzi, who had started out as a minor officer of the royal horse stable. He had won the good graces of the emperor when the latter was still the Prince of Pu. Upon assumption of the throne, the new emperor assigned him to the military council and promoted him to commander of the imperial guards. At age fourteen, the emperor spent all his time on games and frivolity and entrusted all the affairs of the empire to Tian Lingzi, whom he called "Daddy." Thus it was that Lingzi had control over appointments and dismissals of officials without having to report to the emperor. (MC: *A daddy doesn't have to report to his son, of course.*)

There was in the capital a rogue by the name of Li Guang, who did little but play up to Lingzi and cultivate his favor. Lingzi took a great liking to him and placed full trust in him, so much so that he made him vice military

commander. One day, he further promoted the man to commander of the northern region. As it turned out, however, that Li Guang was just not meant for such great fortune. On the very day the imperial decree on his appointment was announced, he died from a sudden severe illness, leaving behind a son, Dequan, who was in his twenties at the time.

Feeling sorry for the young man, Lingzi wanted to do something for him and, caring nothing about his qualifications, appointed him to an important post. When Huang Chao conquered Chang'an, the capital, in the first year of the Zhonghe reign period [881–84], Chen Jingxuan dispatched troops from Chengdu to bring Emperor Xizong out of the capital.¹ Lingzi advised the emperor to accept the offer and go to Sichuan in his company, and Lingzi took Li Dequan along. During the emperor's residence in Chengdu, Tian Lingzi and Chen Jingxuan, in collusion with each other, usurped power and struck fear in everyone's heart. Li Dequan, in the meantime, danced attendance on the two of them. Those scheming overlords, bent on seeking fame and gain, bribed Dequan richly so as to win favors from both his bosses. Within a few years, Dequan had received bribes totaling tens of millions of taels of silver and rose in rank until he became Grand Master of the Palace with Golden Seal and Purple Ribbon and, later, vice director of the Imperial Secretariat. (MC: *No minor posts!*) For a time, he was all-powerful.

Later, upon Emperor Xizong's death, Emperor Zhaozong [r. 889–904] succeeded to the throne. In the fourth month of the second year of the Dashun reign period [890–92], Wang Jian [847–918], regional commander of Western Sichuan, repeatedly asked to have Lingzi and Jingxuan put to death, but the imperial court did not approve the request out of fear of the two men. Thereupon, Wang Jian gave orders that Chen Jingxuan be accused of rebellion and Lingzi of collusion with the rebellious regional commander of Fengxiang. Without waiting for approval from the imperial court, he had the two men executed. (MC: *Tyrannical, but how gratifying!*) His draft memorial to the emperor said, "When the tiger escaped from its cage, Confucius did not hold others to blame. And Sun Shu'ao acted beyond self-interest when killing the two-headed snake on the road.² I had the criminals executed outside the city gates because the most opportune moment may easily be lost if the execution is reported to the imperial court in advance."

While the police were hot on the trail of the two men's cohorts, Dequan made his escape to Fuzhou [in present-day Hubei]. For all the prodigious wealth in his possession, he was not able to take even one tiny piece of silver with him but had to take flight empty-handed. (MC: *Much good his*

moneygrubbing does him!) After several days on the road, his clothes had mostly gone to pay for his meals, and all along the way he begged for food with nothing but unlined rags on his back. How sad that all the glory and splendor he had enjoyed had vanished into thin air.

However, Heaven always leaves a door open. In Fuzhou, there lived a groom by the name of Li An, who had been acquainted with Li Guang before the latter's rise to prominence. It so happened that when walking down the street one day, Li An saw a man in tatters begging for food. Upon a closer look, he recognized the beggar to be Li Guang's son, Li Dequan. Saddened, he invited Dequan to his home. Once there, he said, "I heard that you and your father had enjoyed great wealth and power in Chang'an before going into decline. But what reduced you to this?"

Thereupon, Dequan told him about the police hunt for cohorts of Tian Lingzi and Chen Jingxuan and his desperate escape, which had led to his current sorry condition.

"I was a friend of your father's," said Li An. "Why don't you stay here with me for a while? If you don't want to be found out, you can give yourself another name and say that you're a nephew of mine. That way, nothing can happen to you."

Heeding his advice, Dequan changed his name to Yansi, acknowledged the groom as his uncle, and stopped begging on the streets. In less than half a year, Li An was stricken by a fatal illness. Coveting the groom's job with its government salary, Yansi asked Li An to draft a letter of application that said, "As I lie succumbing to illness, I humbly request that my nephew Yansi inherit my post as groom for the royal stable." (MC: *To start a new life*.) A few days later, Li An took his last breath, and Yansi inherited his position as groom. Without having to worry about his food and clothing anymore, he counted himself a lucky man. But gradually, word got out that he had once held the title Vice Director of the Imperial Secretariat. The imperial court being at sixes and sevens at that time, with no law and order to speak of, no one bothered to check his background, but he was given a nickname: Vice Director Li the Groom. Whenever he showed himself in public, people pointed their fingers at him and made him a figure of fun.

Gentle reader, won't you agree that "Vice Director of the Imperial Secretariat" is an awe-inspiring official title and a groom in the royal stable is the lowliest of the low government jobs? Isn't it laughable for a vice director of the Imperial Secretariat to end up as a groom? But again, those who attach themselves to eunuchs are in fact clinging to nothing but icebergs that can

melt. There's nothing surprising about a bigwig losing his power and dying in destitution. (MC: *There is no lack of such cases. Why don't people listen?*) But to be able to survive and spend the remainder of one's life taking care of horses is actually not that bad a deal. No eyebrows need be raised.

Now I propose to tell my next story. It is about another official of those times. He may have landed his official post by devious means plus a stroke of luck, but at least he made the effort. However, fate was against him. His was a post that did not yield him any wealth. He did not run afoul of any enemy, nor did he do anything wrong. It was all a matter of fate. His ignominious end made him more of a figure of fun than Li Dequan of the above story. As the poem says,

*Wealth, rank, glory, and splendor—they all mean nothing;
The affairs of this world are all like clouds floating.
Puppets on the stage, do not take fright!
To boatman Mr. Guo, please turn your eyes.*

This story takes place during the reign of Emperor Xizong of the Tang dynasty. In Jiangling [present-day Jingzhou, Hubei] lived a man named Guo Qilang. His father had been a rich merchant in the shipping business, and Qilang had traveled frequently with his father. After his father's death, he took over the business, and it was a huge business concern with assets worth hundreds of millions, landed estates stretching farther than the range of a crow's flight, and hills of gold and silver that even robbers despaired of ever being able to remove. He was indeed the richest of the rich in the region. Brokers working the rivers borrowed substantial sums of capital from him. Now, all wealthy men have one common trick up their sleeves: They give short weight and short measure, all in favor of themselves and at the expense of their customers. (MC: *A common characteristic of the rich.*) Brokers depending on him for their capital got the short end of the deal, to a man, but they all swallowed their resentment and continued to do business with him. You may ask why. Well, it was because he provided the capital. The brokers who did the hard work had to depend on capital to run their businesses and make a profit; however, he played them false when it came to the account books. If they got on the wrong side of him and he withdrew his capital as a result, they would all be out of a job. Therefore, however unfair the business practice, the rich get away with it. Their capital grows ever larger, and the rich get ever richer.

At that time, there was a big merchant who had borrowed tens of thousands of taels of silver from Guo Qilang to do business in the capital, but Guo Qilang did not hear from him for years on end after his departure. In the first year of the Qianfu reign period [874], Guo Qilang remembered that sum of money. Although he did not think such a big merchant would renege on the debt, he did wish he could send someone to the capital to demand repayment of the loan. Then again, he thought, "They say the capital is a glamorous city full of fun. I should take this opportunity and go on a tour, partly to get the money back, partly to amuse myself, and partly to see if there's any chance I can land a government post so that I'll be able to take it easy the rest of my life." (MC: *But isn't he rich enough? Why ask for more? It's higher status he is after.*)

Guo Qilang lived with his mother, a younger brother, and a younger sister. He had numerous maidservants but no wife yet. So he instructed his brother and sister to take care of their mother, entrusted household affairs to his majordomo, and ordered all others to go on with their own business. He himself picked several servants who were experienced travelers and good at getting things done and went with them to the capital. Having grown up by the river and associated with brokers in their boats, Qilang was quite skilled at punting and sculling (MC: *Now, these are real skills.*) and thought nothing of the hardships of the journey. In a matter of days, they arrived at the capital.

The merchant Qilang had come to see was Zhang Quan, nickname Moneybags Zhang. He owned several pawnshops and silk shops in the city and specialized in loans for large government transactions. He also served as an intermediary in matters related to the buying and selling of government posts and titles. A word from him sufficed to close a deal. He was also given the nickname Zhang the Guarantor because of his dependability in ensuring the success of his deals. As Zhang Quan was known throughout the capital, Guo Qilang easily found his way to the Zhang residence without having to ask twice for the address. At the sight of Qilang, the big creditor whose loan in the amount of tens of thousands of taels of silver had laid the foundation for his now booming business when he first started out in the capital, Zhang Quan joyfully greeted him and, after an initial exchange of amenities, set out a wine feast. In the meantime, he had a few of the more celebrated courtesans brought in sedan-chairs to his house. In the company of the courtesans, host and guests enjoyed themselves to the full. After the feast was

over, the best of the courtesans, a Wang Sai'er, was told to stay the night and keep Qilang company in the study. I need hardly describe the exquisite furnishings of the accommodations that one rich man prepared for another.

After getting up the next morning, Zhang the Guarantor presented Qilang with about a hundred thousand taels of silver without even waiting for the latter to broach the subject. This included the original loan plus what he had calculated to be the interest. As he presented the silver to Qilang, he said, "I've been too busy to get away from the capital. What's more, with so much silver to carry, the going would be too difficult, and I can't very well entrust the job to just anyone. That's why I've been dragging my feet these past few years. Now that you've come in person, I can settle the account. So this works out perfectly for both of us."

Delighted that the man was so straightforward, Qilang said, "Having just arrived in the capital, I don't yet have lodgings of my own. I'm very grateful to you for paying back the loan plus interest, but since I don't have a place to stay, could you find one for me?"

"But I have plenty of unoccupied rooms. I regularly put other guests up in them, so how could I let a close friend like you stay somewhere else? Just stay in my house. Before you leave, I'll make all the necessary preparations for your departure. You need not worry."

Overjoyed, Qilang took a large apartment adjacent to the Zhang residence. That very day, he gave Wang Sai'er ten taels of silver as payment for her services the previous day. That evening, Qilang had a feast laid out, returning the courtesy, and again asked for Wang Sai'er's presence at the table. Zhang the Guarantor did not want to put Qilang to more expense, so he paid Wang Sai'er ten taels of silver and told her to return to Qilang what the latter had paid her, but Qilang stoutly declined the offer. The demurrals went back and forth, with both sides refusing to give ground. Wang Sai'er was the one who stood to gain. Only when she tucked away both payments were the two men satisfied.

That night, host and guest played drinking games with Wang Sai'er as they wine and dined together. As a greater familiarity grew between them during the merrymaking, they got roaring drunk before they parted company. With designs on Qilang's deep pockets, Wang Sai'er, a first-class courtesan registered with the Music Bureau, put her skills in seduction to full use. Having spent two nights under her spell, Qilang found himself unable to budge an inch from her side whether walking or sitting. Since he refused to

let her return to her own quarters, Sai'er invited other courtesans over to play Qilang's drinking companions and provide amusement. Qilang's rewards for them were more than generous. The procuress also came up with various excuses to use Qilang's money, such as birthday celebrations, shopping trips, and loan repayments. Qilang spent money like water and never begrudged a penny. Such being his profligate ways, those who made a living out of sponging off the rich gravitated toward him and urged him to pick up more women. Generally speaking, spendthrifts flush with cash are a fickle lot. Like weeds that take root wherever they touch the soil, they warm up to every woman they see. In addition to Wang Sai'er, he also took up with Chen Jiao, Li Yu, Zhang Xiaoxiao, and Zheng Pianpian and spent extravagantly on each one of them, as much money as on Wang Sai'er. Those hangers-on also brought to him quite a few scions of the nobility who were prone to gambling. They laid traps for him so that he lost more often than he won at the gambling games, thus cheating him out of goodness knows how much money.

However, in spite of his overindulgence in sex and high living, Qilang was, after all, head of his own household and manager of a business, keen on making money. He was spending freely because his business was turning a good profit, but after more than three years went by in like manner, a realization of his excesses began to dawn on him. He went over his account books to see how much he had left for the future and found that he had squandered more than half his fortune. Suddenly seized with a longing for his family, he wanted to return home. (MC: *At least he awakes to the truth quickly. Little does he know that Heaven is punishing him. If he had known what was to come, he could have enjoyed himself more at this point.*)

When he consulted Zhang the Guarantor, the latter said, "With Wang Xianzhi of Puzhou [in present-day Shandong] in rebellion, the roads are impassable because of all the looting and robbery. Where can you go with all your silver? I'm afraid you won't be able to make it home. You'd better stay here for a while longer and start on your way after things quiet down and it's safe to travel again. You'll still make good time." In resignation, Qilang stayed for a few more days.

One fine day, one of the hangers-on, a certain Bao Da, nickname Bao the Swindler, claimed that because the imperial court had need of funds in the current military emergency, anyone who made a monetary contribution would be rewarded with a government post, at a level commensurate with the amount of the contribution. His greed stirring, Guo Qilang asked, "If I contribute several million, what post will I get?"

Bao Da replied, "With the imperial court as idiotic as it is, if you pay through the regular channels, you'll be able to land only a low-ranking post, but if you bribe the official in charge of appointments with your millions, you should be able to secure a post as a prefect." (MC: *So, it was already like this in the Tang dynasty.*)

With a start, Qilang asked, "Can a post as important as that be bought with money?"

"Such are the ways of the world now!" said Bao Da. "What justice is there to speak of? Money gets you everything. Haven't you heard that Cui Lie [of the Eastern Han dynasty] got his post as the minister of education by paying fifty million? Now, the title of general costs only what you pay for a few drinks. It doesn't take much to be a prefect. As long as the connections are right, I'll make sure that you get the appointment."

At this point, Zhang the Guarantor came out. Exultantly, Qilang repeated Bao Da's words to him.

"Yes, this can be done," said Zhang the Guarantor. "I've pulled off a number of such deals, but I don't advise you to do this." (MC: *He has foresight.*)

"Why?" asked Qilang.

"It's by no means easy to hold office in this day and age. Those with high ranks have solid bases with their own henchmen. Their kith and kin are in powerful positions at the imperial court, and their cohorts are deployed all over the land. Only when they have grown such deep roots can they enrich themselves and rise through the ranks. You may exploit the little people and shamelessly embezzle and steal, but as long as you grease the right palms and have the right connections, you won't be censured, not even in ten thousand years. (MC: *How can one not lament the depravity of the times!*) For someone like you, with no academic honors, even if you land a high-ranking post, you have no network of connections. Once at your duty station, you may not be able to hold your own. Even if you do, court officials who are now bent on hitting people up for money will find out that you got your post through bribery, and once they do, they'll be coming down hard on you about one or two months into your term of office, when things have become clearer. When you're suddenly dismissed from office, won't you have spent all your money for nothing? If it's easy to hold on to an official post, I'd have got one for myself long ago." (MC: *Words of the older and wiser.*)

"That's not the way to look at it," objected Qilang. "Money I do have, aplenty, but of government posts I have none. Since I have so much money on me but can't carry it home with me, why shouldn't I spend it here and now? If I can

put on the golden belt and purple robe of an official, my life will be worthwhile. I don't mind if I don't get any money out of it. And if I don't succeed at the job, I'll at least have occupied an official post, such as it is, and the glory will have been mine to enjoy, however briefly. (MC: *If his family fortune had not been diminished, this might not have been a bad idea.*) I've made up my mind. Please don't be such a spoilsport."

Zhang the Guarantor said, "Since you've made up your mind, I'll surely offer you my services." Right away, he consulted with Bao Da and Zhang the Guarantor on the details of his bribery plan. Bao Da being a master of his trade and Zhang the Guarantor being a weighty personality who was regularly involved in big undertakings, was there anything they could not accomplish between them?

A word of explanation is due at this point: During the Tang dynasty, copper cash was the currency in common use, and a thousand copper cash coins made up one string. In transactions, silver also had to be converted to the value of copper cash. One string of copper cash, a *min*, equals one tael of silver in our day. Later, in the Song dynasty, a *min* came to be called a *guan*. Zhang the Guarantor and Bao Da spirited five thousand strings into the home of the director of the Office of Appointments. That director, a virtual keeper of eunuch Tian Lingzi's money vault, never failed to grant whatever was requested. As they say, no coincidence, no story. It just so happened that at this point, a Guo Han, prefect of Hengzhou in Western Yue, died of illness right after his promotion while his certificate of appointment was still at the Ministry of Personnel. Thanks to Guo Qilang's five thousand strings of copper cash, the director altered the information about the dead man's place of birth and gave the certificate of appointment to Guo Qilang. (MC: *What a fine director!*) From that day onward, Guo Qilang became Guo Han.

Equipped with the certificate appointing Guo Han prefect of Hengzhou, Zhang the Guarantor and Bao Da jubilantly went to offer congratulations to Qilang. As Qilang went light in the head, weak in the knees, and numb in the body, Bao Da struck off to summon a theatrical troupe, while Zhang the Guarantor started preparations for a banquet. That very day, Guo Qilang put on the hat and waistband that came with his appointment. On learning that Qilang was now a prefect, the hangers-on flocked to his door to offer their congratulations and join in the merrymaking. Amid loud music struck up by the band, they spent the rest of the day drinking.

Let me quote another saying, "Flies are attracted to filth, ants to the smell of mutton, and pigeons to where the crowds are." With Qilang's reputation

in the capital as a big spender, any number of men offered to enter the service of the new prefect. As happens all too frequently, even if officials do not throw their weight around, their lackeys do, making travel arrangements, bullying minor officials at the courier stations, and riding roughshod over merchants and villagers.

Feeling as if he were on cloud nine, Guo Qilang was seized by a longing to return to his hometown to parade his glory and chose an auspicious day for his journey. Again, Zhang the Guarantor laid out a banquet, this time to send him off. All the hangers-on and courtesans who had consorted with him came to bid him farewell. By this time, Qilang had already assumed a high-and-mighty air. He gave each of them a tip, but in an arrogant and supercilious manner. Awed by his status as a prefect, those people fawned on him with obsequious smiles and put up with his rudeness, taking every glance out of the corner of his eye and every little remark from his worthy lips as a sign of goodwill. (MC: *Such are the ways of the world.*)

After the hustle and bustle, which lasted for a few days, Guo Qilang was all packed and ready to set out with his nice procession, and an impressive sight it was. Along the way, he thought, "I'm already rich enough. And now, as head of a large prefecture, I'll be able to enjoy wealth and power to the end of my days!" (MC: *A small man intoxicated with his success.*) In his exuberance, he unconsciously flaunted his wealth and power at every turn. The servants who had followed him to the capital kept boasting about the family's wealth to those who had just entered his service, and the new ones, delighted that they had a good master, did the best they could to inspire awe, but so much for them.

Traveling on horseback when there was no boat to be had and by water when no land routes were available, Guo Qilang and his procession arrived in Jiangling, but Qilang was appalled by what he saw. Behold:

*There are few signs of human habitation;
The alleys and wells are deserted.
The houses are in decay, the walls in ruins;
The bridges are broken, the trees withered.
The wooden beams are charred by acts of arson;
The stains on white walls are blood from acts of murder.
Crows and ants fight over unclaimed corpses;
Hawks and wolves prey on unprotected fowl and dogs.
A statue of stone would melt down in tears;
A man of iron would be torn with grief.*

What had happened was that the area where the Zhu Palace [in present-day Jingzhou, Hubei] of Jiangling used to be had been devastated during Wang Xianzhi's rebellion. Few local inhabitants remained. Were it not for his familiarity with the waterways, Qilang would not have been able to find his way there. This desolate scene set his heart pounding violently. As his boat approached his own house along the bank, he raised his eyes and gave a cry of anguish. His grand mansion had been reduced to rubble. Not one room remained. His mother, his younger brother and sister, and the servants were nowhere in sight. Horrified, he sent out search parties for them.

After three or four days of searching, he ran into an old neighbor and learned, upon detailed inquiry, that the rebel troops had wreaked havoc in the region. His younger brother had been killed and his younger sister had been kidnapped, her fate unknown. His mother and two maids, the only ones left, had found shelter in two thatched huts next to an ancient temple. All the other servants had fled, and the family fortune had vanished. His mother and the two maids had to do sewing for a living. Devoured by grief on hearing this, Qilang immediately led his servants and raced to his mother's quarters. As mother and son fell tearfully into each other's arms, the mother said, "I never expected to be hit by such a disaster after you left. I've lost both your brother and sister, and we can hardly make a living."

After he had his cry, Qilang wiped his eyes dry and said, "Things having come to this, grief doesn't get us anywhere. Luckily, your son is now an official, with riches and luxury to enjoy in the future. (MC: *Not necessarily*.) Please set your mind at ease, Mother."

"What post did you get, my son?"

"It's not a minor one: Prefect of Hengzhou."

"How did you manage to land such an important post?"

"With eunuchs in power nowadays, bribery is rampant, and official posts are to be had for the taking. I went to ask Mr. Zhang for repayment of a loan, and he paid me back both the loan and the interest. With so much money on me, I paid millions for this post. Now that I've returned home in glory to see you, I must go to my duty station soon to take up my post." Having said this, Qilang told his servants to bring him his hat and waistband. After putting them on, he offered his mother a seat and bowed four times to her. (MC: *He is getting carried away*.) Then he told all his servants, old and new, to kowtow to his mother and address her as "Your Ladyship."

Although somewhat pleased, his mother said with a sigh, "You were living high on the hog in the capital, not knowing that our servants had all

gone and not a penny was left. You could have brought some of your money home rather than spending it all on an official post.” (MC: *His mother remains a pauper at heart. She is simply not meant for great fortune.*)

“Mother, that’s woman talk! How could an official be short of money? Which official doesn’t have millions? When they retire and go back to their hometowns, they take everything with them, even the ground their houses are built on! I may not have anything at the moment, but after I take up my post, I’ll build from scratch, and in a couple of years, I’ll be on my feet again! Nothing easier! I still have two to three thousand strings of cash in my baggage, quite enough for now. Don’t you worry, Mother!”

Only then did his mother’s grief turn to joy. Breaking into a smile, she said, “Luckily, my son is a capable man with great prospects. Heaven and earth be praised! If you hadn’t returned, I would have given up the ghost. Now, when are you planning to leave?”

“I had planned on getting myself a good wife after returning home, with whom to share my wealth and distinction. But as things stand now, this will be quite impossible. I’ll think about this after I take up my post. Mother, you board the boat first and make yourself comfortable. Since there’s nothing here to tie us down, let’s change to a large boat tomorrow and take it as a lucky day for us to be on our way. The earlier I arrive at my duty station, the better, even if only by one day.”

That very evening, he put his mother up in his boat, leaving the chipped and cracked pots, stove, bowls, and jars in the huts. He then ordered a servant to engage a government boat going in the direction of faraway Western Yue. The next day, after all the luggage had been carried on board, he left his cabin, offered a prayer service to the gods, and set sail amid the sounds of wind and percussion music. At this point, both mother and son were in high spirits. It was not surprising for Qilang to be so euphoric, even though he had to restrain himself in his mother’s presence, because he had not gone through any hardships, and he was excited about traveling home. But it was strange for the old lady, after having suffered such misery, to be so carried away, as if she had grown in stature as she rose from under the ground into the sky.

After passing Changsha, they traveled down the Xiang River and stopped over at Yongzhou [in present-day southern Hunan.] On the northern bank of the river stood a Buddhist temple called the Tusita Monastery. The boatmen moored the boat in preparation for staying the night there. Seeing a tree so large that it would take several men to join hands around it, they tied the

boat's rope to it, made a tight knot, and drove a post into the ground. Qilang followed his mother into the temple to offer prayers, with servants following behind holding an official parasol. The monks, realizing that the man was an official, went out to greet him and serve him tea. When asked about his rank, Qilang's servants said, "He's the incumbent prefect of Hengzhou, Western Yue."

On hearing that he was an incumbent official, the monks displayed even greater deference and showed him and his mother around the temple. The old lady kowtowed to every image of the Buddha she saw, offering thanks for the Buddha's blessings. (MC: *She should have known that flattering Buddha would not help.*) Late in the afternoon, they all returned to their boat to rest.

At dusk, there came into their hearing the sound of the wind rustling the tree branches. In a trice, the sky darkened, and a windstorm came on. Behold:

*The gods of wind unleash their power;
Ten thousand horses gallop through the air and the trees.
The surging waves boom like war drums;
The dikes burst, with sounds like thunder.
The tigers in the mountains are roaring,
To the alarm of old dragons on the riverbed.
Boats may very well be tied to large trees,
But trees can be felled by strong winds.*

The screeches of the wind alarmed everyone. The helmsman thought, "It may be a strong wind, but, luckily, the boat is secured to a giant tree with deep roots. Nothing can go wrong."

While everyone was asleep, an earthshaking sound shook them awake. Here's what happened: The spreading roots of that ancient tree had loosened the embankment. With the raging waves of the Xiang River breaking against it day and night, the embankment gave way. Tall trees catch the wind, and that tree also had a heavily laden boat tied to it. With the wind pounding the boat and the boat straining against the tree, the wind-battered tree could not stand its ground any longer. Its roots lost their grip on the rocks, and, with a crash, the tree fell onto the boat and smashed it into pieces. The boat being lighter than the tree, there was no way it could bear such weight. As water poured in, the boat sank, leaving only pieces of it

floating on the surface of the water. All the maidservants drowned in their sleep. It all happened in less time than it takes to relate.

In consternation, the helmsman shouted for help. Guo Qilang awoke from his dream with a start. Being something of a sailor from childhood (MC: *This goes to show that money is not as reliable as practical skills.*), he helped the helmsman hold the rope with all his strength and managed to run the boat aground. Losing no time, he rescued his mother from her waterlogged cabin and helped her ashore. All the others, the luggage, and miscellaneous items on board had been swept away by the furious waves, along with the entire bottom of the boat. In the darkness of the night, the temple gate was tightly closed. With no one responding to their calls for help, the three of them smote their chests, stomped their feet, and bemoaned their bitter fate.

When dawn finally came and the gate was opened, they rushed into the temple and asked to see the abbot they had met the day before. The abbot came out and, alarmed by their sorry condition, asked, "Did you run into bandits?"

After Qilang told him about the fallen tree and the sinking of the boat, the monks went out to see for themselves and were appalled by the sight of the giant tree lying across what remained of the boat. Without a moment's delay, the monks had the custodians of the temple help the helmsman salvage whatever they could from what remained of the cabins, but everything had gone with the waves, including Prefect Zhang's certificate of appointment. The monks invited Qilang's mother into a quiet room in order to make her comfortable and consulted Qilang about stating his case to the magistrate of Lingling County. If the file copy of his certificate of appointment could be found, he would still be able to assume his post. Having come to this decision, Qilang asked the monks to make the trip. Being on good terms with officials of Lingling County, the monks indeed sent a messenger there, little knowing that

Bitter frost descends on grass already rootless;

Disaster hits those already luckless.

Qilang's mother had been shocked out of her senses when she witnessed her younger son killed and her daughter kidnapped in the chaos of war. She had recovered, only to suffer another setback that night. With her maidservants dead and her money all gone, she was stricken with crippling grief.

Her face the color of wax, she refused food and beverage and lay confined to her bed, weeping bitterly. All the more alarmed, Qilang tried to cheer her up, saying, "As the proverb goes, 'As long as the green mountains are there, there won't be a shortage of firewood.' Although we've been hit by this dreadful disaster, I still hold a government post. Everything will be all right once I arrive at my duty station."

Tearfully, the old lady said, "My son! My heart is torn to shreds, and it will soon be all over with me, so what's the good of saying such words of comfort? Even if you do get to be an official, I won't be there to see it."

Qilang continued to cherish the illusion that he would be able to have some kind of a document drawn up locally after his mother recovered so that he could still go to Hengzhou to assume his post and turn their lives around. As it turned out, however, the shock his mother had gone through was too much for her. She failed to recover. A few days later, she breathed her last.

Qilang burst into wails of grief, but there was nothing he could do. After consulting the monks, he decided to go personally to Lingling County and plead with the magistrate for help.

Having read the report about the accident a few days earlier, the magistrate knew that Qilang was speaking the truth. Since officials are supposed to look out for one another after all and Qilang outranked him, albeit in a different province, the magistrate could not bring himself to reject Qilang. (MC: *The magistrate is kind enough.*) So he made arrangements for the burial of Qilang's mother, gave Qilang a generous amount of money for his travel expenses, and saw Qilang off with due ceremony. Qilang was delighted that the magistrate had taken care of the burial, but since he had to observe the obligatory three-year mourning period, assumption of his post was out of the question. Now that he had no one to fall back on, the monks began to give him the cold shoulder and refused to let him stay on. (MC: *Showing the true colors of monks.*) There being no home for him to return to, he had no alternative but to stay in Yongzhou with a shipping broker whose acquaintance he had made on business trips with his father. With nothing but the travel money he had received from the magistrate of Lingling, he found his means quickly exhausted with each passing day.

Now, what do brokers know about loyalty and friendship? As the days wore on, Qilang's host began to grow sick of him. As was only to be expected, food and beverages were served with less regularity and portions began to dwindle. (MC: *Showing the true colors of brokers.*) Catching on to what was

happening, Qilang spoke up: "I'm the number one official of a prefecture, entitled to all kinds of privileges. I'm now observing a mourning period, but I'll rise again. How can you show me such disrespect?"

His host countered, "Even if the emperor loses power, he also has to deal with hunger and eat some coarse food, not to speak of a prefect, and a prefect who hasn't taken up his post, too! And even if you were a prefect, we're not residents of Hengzhou. Why should we provide for you? We who live from hand to mouth can't afford to feed an extra mouth."

Thus rebuked, Qilang was at a loss for words. With tears in his eyes, he swallowed the humiliation. A couple of days later, his host picked a quarrel with him on one excuse or another, making an even uglier scene. Qilang said, "I'm in a strange land with no relatives or friends to turn to for help. I know I shouldn't be imposing on you like this, but what else can I do? Maybe you can teach me ways of making a living for myself?"

"Look at you! You don't fit anywhere! If you want to support yourself, forget about your rank (MC: *Valid point.*) and find a job as a laborer, just as everybody else does! Only then will you be able to earn a living. But you're not ready to do that, are you?"

On being told to hire himself out as a laborer, Qilang retorted angrily, "I'm a high-ranking official. How can I stoop that low?"

Recalling the kindness of the magistrate of Lingling, Qilang thought of telling his tale of woe to the magistrate again, believing that the magistrate would be able to come up with an idea. (IC: *He doesn't know when to stop asking for favors.*) He could not very well let a prefect starve to death in a place under his jurisdiction, could he? So Qilang drew up a visiting card and, not having a servant, stuck the card in his own sleeve and went, crestfallen, to the yamen.

The gatekeeper, judging him by his woebegone appearance, thought he was a shameless swindler, there to hit the magistrate up for money, and refused to even take his visiting card. (MC: *Showing the true colors of gatekeepers.*) Only after Qilang pleaded over and over again, telling the gatekeeper everything that had happened—including the magistrate's generosity in taking care of the funeral, giving him travel funds, and sending him off with all due ceremony—did the gatekeeper relent, because the last-mentioned facts were known to employees of the yamen. So his card was presented to the magistrate. On reading the name on the card, the magistrate grew irritated. (MC: *Showing the true colors of officials when dealing with casual acquaintances.*)

He said, "This man doesn't know what's good for him. I went out of my way to help him out of sympathy for his loss, which happened in my territory, and out of regard for his dignity as my superior. But why is he still here, pestering me like this? Maybe what he said happened didn't happen and was all a lie that the villain made up, to hit people up for money. Even if it wasn't a lie, he's still a shameless man who doesn't know when to stop. I acted out of the best intentions, and yet I ended up bringing trouble on myself. But I'm not going to penalize him. I'll just ignore him." He instructed the gatekeeper to return the visiting card to Qilang and tell him that the magistrate was receiving no visitors.

Having suffered the indignity of this rejection and unable to return to his lodgings, Qilang waited by the gate for the magistrate to come out. When he did come out, Qilang began to cry at the top of his voice right there on the street. The magistrate asked from his sedan-chair, "Who is the man shouting so loudly?"

"It's Guo Han, Prefect of Hengzhou," yelled Qilang.

"How do you prove your identity?" asked the magistrate.

"I did have a certificate of appointment with me, but it fell into the river when the windstorm capsized my boat."

"Without a document of identification, how can anyone tell if you're an impostor or not? Even if you can prove that you are who you claim to be, I've already helped you. Why keep pestering me here? You must be a ruffian. I'll spare you a beating, but begone this instant!"

With their boss in such a fit of rage, the lictors raised their cudgels against Qilang. Qilang had no choice but to dodge the blows. Wordlessly and in low spirits, he returned to his lodgings and sat around in dejection.

His host, having already found out what had come of his visit to the yamen, asked deliberately, "So, how did His Honor the magistrate treat you?"

With shame written all over his face, Qilang gave a sigh without venturing a word.

The host continued, "Didn't I tell you to forget that you're an official? You didn't listen to me and chose to court humiliation. The way things are now, even a prime minister without proper identification is worth nothing. Physical labor is what gives you a living. (MC: *Only physical labor gives one a sustainable livelihood. An empty title does not fill the stomach. This is an indisputable truth.*) So stop dreaming!"

"What do you advise me to do for a living?"

“Ask yourself: What skills do you have?”

“I don’t have other skills. But in my childhood, I used to travel with my father on the rivers and lakes, and I’m quite a good hand when it comes to managing a boat.”

In delight, his host said, “Good! There’s a shortage of boatmen for the many boats coming and going around here. I’ll recommend you. You’ll at least be able to make a few strings of cash after a while so that you can have enough food to hold body and soul together.”

Seeing no other way, Qilang agreed. Henceforth, he eked out a living by hiring himself out as a boatman. After he made a few strings of cash, he returned to his host’s place. When residents of Yongzhou came to know him, those who had heard about his past gave him the nickname Helmsman-Official Guo and directed people in need of a boatman to search out Official Guo. (MC: *Why didn’t they put up an advertisement board?*) A ditty about him came into circulation in Yongzhou:

*Official Guo, let me ask you,
Why didn’t you get to Hengzhou?
Because Heaven blocked your way
And took your pretenses away.
Your family fortune gone with the wind,
The helm becomes your official’s tablet, the tow rope your official’s belt.
Although wanting in glamour,
A boatman’s job puts food on the table.
(To the tune of “Hanging Branch”)*

Although his mourning period expired after he drifted along for two years on various boats, Qilang still could not assume his post without a certificate of appointment. If he was going to bribe his way up in the capital again, where was he to lay his hands on thousands of strings of cash, as he had done before? All too obviously, it was a hopeless case. Qilang abandoned the idea and reconciled himself to working as a hired boatman. As they say, “One’s place of residence and style of life change one’s manners and appearance.” When appointed a prefect, Qilang took on the dignified look of an official, but after working for many years as a boatman, his manners and appearance came to be no different from those of the next boatman. How laughable that a prefect came to such an end! Clearly, riches and honor in

this life of ours are by no means immutable. Mark this, mortals of this world:
Do not be high-and-mighty snobs! Listen to this quatrain:

The rich, be not proud;

The poor, be not bitter.

Look ahead to where you will end up;

What's before your eyes does not count.

The Older Sister's Soul Leaves Her Body to Fulfill a Wish

The Younger Sister Recovers from Illness to Renew a Bond

I N the words of a quatrain,

*Siblings share the same breath of life;
The beans and the beanstalks come from the same root.¹
Sisters are bound in life and in death;
How laughable—brothers who are locked in strife!*

The story goes that during the Yuanhe period [806–20] under the reign of Emperor Xianzong of the Tang dynasty, there was a Censor Li Xingxiu, known as “Censor Li the Eleventh.” His wife Wang-shi, daughter of Wang Zhongshu, surveillance commissioner of Jiangxi, was a woman of exemplary virtue and conduct. Xingxiu held her in great esteem. Lady Wang had a little sister who was as pretty as she was bright. Lady Wang loved her dearly and often kept the little girl at her side. Xingxiu also loved the girl as if she were his own flesh and blood.

One day, Xingxiu went to attend a clansman's wedding and stayed the night at the clansman's house. That night, he had a dream in which he married a new wife. By the lamplight he saw that the bride was none other than Lady Wang's little sister. He woke up with a start and felt sick at heart. When the long-awaited day finally broke, he rushed home with all the haste he

could muster. When he arrived, his wife, having risen at the first light of dawn, was sitting in gloomy silence and wiping away her tears. He asked what was bothering her, but she said nothing, so he turned to the servants and asked, "Why is the mistress in such a state?"

The servants replied, "The old cook said this morning that he had a dream last night in which he saw you, Master, marrying young Miss Wang. When Mistress heard about it, she worried that something might happen to her and has been weeping all morning."

Xingxiu's hair stood on end as he heard this. Breaking into a cold sweat, he thought, "That's exactly the same dream I had!" As they were a deeply loving couple, Xingxiu was very distraught, but he forced himself to cheer his wife up, saying, "That old man is a muddle-headed fool. How can his dream mean anything?" While mouthing these words, he was still full of misgivings over the coincidence.

Not many days later, Lady Wang fell ill. She failed to respond to treatments and died after two months. Xingxiu cried until he fainted. After he came to, he wrote a letter to his father-in-law, Mr. Wang, notifying him of the bereavement. The letter plunged the entire Wang family into grief. Mr. Wang could not find it in his heart to sever the tie of kinship with Xingxiu, so in his return letter, he expressed the wish to marry his younger daughter to Xingxiu. This was at a moment when Xingxiu was consumed with the most gut-wrenching grief. It pained him to talk about remarrying, and so he firmly rejected his father-in-law's offer.

There was a certain Wei Sui, Palace Librarian, who made a point of making the acquaintance of eccentric personalities. Noticing how Li Xingxiu missed his wife, Librarian Wei suddenly said to him, "You do miss your wife sorely, Inspector. Would you like to see her?"

"She and I are in separate worlds now. How would I see her?"

"But if you do want to see her, Inspector, why don't you go ask the Venerable Old Mr. Wang of Chousang [in Hunan]?"

"Who's the Venerable Old Mr. Wang?"

"Let's not get into that. Just be sure to remember the words 'Venerable Old Mr. Wang.' As long as you do, you'll be able to meet him."

Intrigued, Xingxiu committed the words to memory. (MC: *Things happen when you put your mind to it.*)

After a few years, Miss Wang came of age. Cherishing the memory of his deceased older daughter, Mr. Wang repeatedly dispatched matchmakers to

Xingxiu to talk him into remarrying, but Xingxiu did not have the heart to betray his deceased wife and turned a deaf ear.

Later, he was appointed censor of the Eastern Capital [Luoyang] and, by imperial decree, went through the Tong Pass. He stopped at the Chousang government courier station. Because another imperial inspector had checked into the courier station before him, he was put up at an inn, called "Chousang Inn," also at government expense. The word "Chousang" piqued his curiosity. He thought, "Could that Venerable Old Wang or whatever be living here?" Before he could make inquiries, his ears caught a commotion on the street. He walked to the door and saw a crowd gathered around an old man, asking him all sorts of questions and tugging and pulling at him. Witnessing this scene of confusion, Xingxiu asked the innkeeper, "What are they doing?"

The innkeeper replied, "This is Old Man Wang, a very remarkable man and quite a fortune-teller. The local people venerate him as a god. Wherever he's seen walking by, people will stop him and ask him endless questions about the future."

Recalling Librarian Wei's words, Xingxiu said, "So this man does exist!" Whereupon he asked the innkeeper to invite the old man into the inn to see him.

Impressed by Xingxiu's status as an imperial censor on a mission, the innkeeper dared not drag his feet. Losing no time, he parted the crowd and seized the old man, saying, "A Censor Li the Eleventh invites you to my inn." On hearing that a government official was requesting the old man's presence, the crowd cleared a path for him and quickly dispersed. When he was led to Xingxiu, Xingxiu stopped him from bowing on account of his advanced age. After telling the old man about his longing for his deceased wife and Librarian Wei's recommendation, he continued, "I wonder if you, Venerable Elder, could work some magic and let me see my wife's departed soul?"

"If Master the Eleventh wishes to see his deceased honorable wife," the old man said, "that can happen this very evening. (MC: *Easy enough!*)

The old man asked Xingxiu to dismiss all the servants and led him to an earthen mound. After they climbed up a slope tens of feet high, they could faintly see a thicket. The old man stopped in his tracks and said to Xingxiu, "Sir, if you'd now go to that thicket and call out 'Miaozhi' [Wonderful One] (MC: *A wonderful name.*), someone will answer to that name. Then you say,

‘Please relay this message to Lady Nine: I’ll borrow Miaozi tonight, to see my deceased wife.’”

Following the old man’s instructions, Xingxiu went to the thicket and called out that name. Sure enough, someone answered to that name, after which Xingxiu repeated what the old man had told him to say.

Soon, a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl emerged from the trees and said, “Lady Nine sent me to go with you, sir.” Having said that, she broke off two bamboo branches, one for herself to ride on and the other for Xingxiu’s use. The bamboo branches proved to be as fast as horses. After thus traveling for about thirty to forty *li*, they came to a city gate with magnificent watchtowers. They pressed ahead, and after coming upon a large gated palace, the girl said, “Head north along the western corridor, and you’ll find your wife in her residence in the second hall from the south.”

Following these instructions, Xingxiu went to the designated hall, and, sure enough, a maid who had died more than ten years earlier came out to greet him. After Xingxiu sat down at the maid’s request, Lady Wang emerged from inside and greeted him tearfully. Xingxiu gathered her in his arms and poured out his grief over the separation to her. He asked for intimacy, but Lady Wang would not hear of it. She said, “You and I are in different worlds. I shouldn’t do this and leave a source of trouble. If you still cherish the memory of our love, you may marry my little sister so as to continue the two families’ marriage alliance. That way, my wish will be fulfilled. Since you requested this meeting, this is what I ask of you.”

At this point, the girl called out in a harsh voice from the other side of the door, urging Xingxiu to be on his way. “Li the Eleventh, it’s time to go!”

Not daring to stay any longer, Xingxiu departed, fighting back his tears.

The girl and Xingxiu remounted their bamboo branches and returned to the thicket, where the old man was sleeping, his head pillowed on a rock. Judging from the footsteps that Xingxiu must have returned, he rose and asked, “Was your wish fulfilled?”

“Yes, I did meet her.”

“You owe it to Lady Nine for sending you a guide.”

Obligingly, Xingxiu escorted Miaozi back into the thicket and called out his thanks at the top of his voice. On returning to where the old man was, he asked, “Who’s Lady Nine?”

“She’s the one in whose honor the shrine nearby was built. The goddess is most responsive to prayers.”

The old man took Xingxiu back to the inn, where the lamps on the wall were still burning, the horses were still feeding at the trough, and the servants and porters were still fast asleep. Xingxiu wondered if he had been dreaming, but the old man was there, living proof that his recent adventure had been for real. After the old man bade him farewell and took off, Xingxiu remained standing and marveled for a while longer. Considering the sincerity of his wife's advice, he wrote a detailed report of these events to his father-in-law, Mr. Wang.

Soon thereafter, the wedding between Xingxiu and his sister-in-law took place, bearing out the dream. Indeed,

*The old son-in-law became the new one;
Brother-in-law the elder became brother-in-law the younger.*

At the dawn of time, King Yao's daughters Ehuang and Nüying both married King Shun, and there has been no lack of instances in which a younger sister succeeded a deceased older sister as wife of the same man so as not to sever the marriage alliance between the two families.² But there had never been a case in which a deceased wife acted from the netherworld as a match-maker for her younger sister.

This extraordinary story is one of a kind. It illustrates the point that the spirit does not die with the body. Although she had lost her grip on life, Lady Wang still cherished her husband's love as well as her affection for her little sister. It was her emotional attachment to these two that prompted her to do this for them from the netherworld in fulfillment of her wish. Such loyalty on her part is in fact not all that surprising because she and her husband had been a loving couple of many years, after all.

Now I propose to tell a story in which an unmarried woman, in honor of a previous commitment, fulfilled her own marriage destiny in the netherworld and brought about her sister's marriage. It is an enjoyable story with details that sometimes are credible and sometimes beyond the realm of plausibility. There is a poem in testimony:

*The dead returning to life is nothing new,
And dead souls do often borrow other bodies.
But who has ever heard of a case of
One grabbing another's body to fulfill a wish?*

This story takes place in the Dade reign period [1297–1308] of the Yuan dynasty. There lived in Yangzhou a rich man named Mr. Wu. Because he had once served as a defense commissioner, he was called by all and sundry “Commissioner Wu.” He lived next to Spring Breeze Tower. He had two daughters, Xingniang and Qingniang, who were two years apart. Both were still in swaddling clothes. Among the neighbors, there was a Squire Cui, who spent a great deal of time in Mr. Wu’s company. Squire Cui had a son called Xingge, born in the same year as Xingniang. Squire Cui asked Commissioner Wu if his son could be betrothed to Xingniang. Commissioner Wu gladly accepted the proposal, and Mr. Cui offered a phoenix-shaped gold hairpin as the betrothal gift. After the engagement, Cui took his entire family to a faraway place to assume a new post. Fifteen years went by without a word from him. By this time, Xingniang, the older daughter, was nineteen. Considering her age, her mother said to the commissioner, “Nothing has been heard from Xingge of the Cui family for fifteen years now. Our Xingniang has come of age. We shouldn’t hold on to the betrothal and jeopardize our daughter’s future.”

Commissioner Wu replied, “But as they say, once you’ve given your word, a thousand taels of silver can’t change it. I’ve already engaged our daughter to an old friend’s son. How can I go back on my word simply because there’s no news from them?”

Being but a woman with little sense, Mrs. Wu was displeased that her daughter remained single at this marriageable age. Day after day, she nagged at her husband, trying to talk him into seeking another match. As for Xingniang, however, she had no other thought than looking forward to Mr. Cui Junior’s return. To her relief, her father lived by his principles, but whenever her mother began to set her tongue to work, she would shed furtive tears in resentment. Afraid that her father might yield to her mother’s insistence and change his mind, she knew no peace of mind and wished with all her heart for young Mr. Cui to return as soon as possible. She wore out her eyes looking for the Cui family’s return, but there was no word from the Cuis. Gradually, she lost all appetite for food and drink. She fell ill and was confined to her bed. Six months later, she died. Her parents, her sister, and members of the entire household cried themselves into a daze. Before her body was lowered into the coffin, her mother said sobbingly, holding in her hand the phoenix-shaped gold hairpin from the Cui family (MC: *How sad!*), “This is from your prospective husband’s family. Now that you’re gone, why would I want to keep it? The sight of it will only add to my grief. You take it.”

So saying, she stuck the hairpin in her daughter's hair-bun before the lid was laid on the coffin. After three days, the coffin was carried outside the city for burial. A shrine in her honor was set up at home, and members of the family wept and made offerings to it both morning and evening.

Two months after the burial, young Mr. Cui suddenly made an appearance. (MC: *How tragic!*) Commissioner Wu greeted him, ushered him in, and asked, "Where have you been all these years? Are your parents safe and sound?"

"My father became the director of judicial justice of Xuande Prefecture, but he passed away at his duty station. My mother also died, several years before he did. I've been observing my mourning period there and have just taken off my mourning clothes. Having done everything that needed to be done after my parents' deaths, I traveled all the way here in order to fulfill the betrothal."

Tears stole down Commissioner Wu's cheeks as he said, "My daughter Xingniang was born to suffer. She fell ill in her longing for you and died in deep distress two months ago. She was buried outside the city. If you'd come half a year earlier, she might not have died. But it's too late now." With that, he broke down in a fit of sobs.

Even though he had never met the girl, young Mr. Cui was also overcome with emotion.

"Although my daughter has been buried," said Commissioner Wu, "her shrine is still here at home. Please go and let her spirit know that you're here."

With tears in his eyes, he led Cui by the hand into an inner room. Cui raised his eyes and saw

*Curling paper streamers
And graceful images of a boy and a girl.³
A wisp of incense smoke curled upward;
The streamers bore passages in Sanskrit;
One child held a silver tray, the other an embroidered scarf.
Two lamps emitted a flickering light.
On the scroll,
A portrait of the beautiful dead girl.
On the white wooden tablet,
The name of the recently passed eldest daughter.*

As Cui prostrated himself at the foot of the shrine, Commissioner Wu tapped on the table and said at the top of his voice, "Xingniang, my daughter!

Your husband is here! Your soul shouldn't have gone far. Are you aware of his presence?" Having said that, he burst into loud wails of grief. With the commissioner so distraught, all the other members of the family gave way to their grief and cried themselves into a state nearer death than life. (MC: *How could they not cry?*) Even Cui shed copious tears.

After they had their cry, they burned some sacrificial paper money, and Cui was introduced to Mrs. Wu in front of the shrine. (MC: *A heartrending moment.*) Still sobbing, Mrs. Wu returned Cui's salute by bowing slightly from the waist. The commissioner said to Cui after they returned to the reception hall, "Since your parents have died and you've come such a great distance, why don't you stay with us? You may not be an in-law, but you're the son of an old friend and therefore just like my own son. Don't make strangers of us just because Xingniang is no longer with us." Immediately, he told servants to carry Mr. Cui's luggage in and straighten up a small study by the gate for Cui to sleep in. Thereafter, the commissioner went to check on him morning and evening, and they quickly warmed to each other.

About half a month later, when the Clear and Bright Festival [around April 5] rolled around, Commissioner Wu took his whole family to pay their respects at Xingniang's new grave and burn offerings of sacrificial paper money. By that time, Xingniang's sister, Qingniang, was seventeen years old. She joined her mother on the trip, each in a separate sedan-chair. Cui was the only one left behind to look after the house. Generally speaking, female members of good families rarely leave the seclusion of their homes. Upon the advent of a festival when spring is at its height, they would be only too happy to find an excuse to go outdoors in search of amusement. Although Qingniang went to her sister's grave with a heavy heart, the red peach blossoms and green willows so appealed to her and her mother that they lingered there for a whole day and did not return home until evening closed in. Cui had been waiting for them outside the gate. At the sight of two sedan-chairs for women, he went to the left side of the gate to greet them. After the first sedan-chair had passed and the second chair was going by, he heard something drop to the brick pavement with a tinkling sound. After the sedan-chair had passed, he hastened to pick it up and saw that it was a phoenix-shaped gold hairpin. Realizing that it must have belonged to one of the ladies, he rushed forward to return it, but the gate leading to the inner quarters of the house had closed. Having tired themselves out after the day's trip and still slightly under the influence of wine, the family members had closed the

inner gate and prepared for bed. Guessing as much, Cui thought it prudent not to disturb them. He could wait until the next day.

After returning to his small study, he put the hairpin in a secure place in a book box, sat down by the lamp, and plunged into thought. His marriage prospects were gone, he had no one else to turn to for help, and he was now reduced to living under another family's roof. Even though he was treated as their son-in-law, that was no solution in the long run. (MC: *This does call for some good thinking.*) Who knew what such an arrangement would lead to?

Feeling low, he heaved one sigh after another. Then he went to bed, but as he was about to lie back against his pillow, he heard a knock on his door. "Who is it?" he asked, but there was no answer. Cui thought his ears had deceived him and was about to lie down when the knocking resumed. He asked again who it was, and again, all became quiet. Bewildered, he sat on the edge of the bed and was about to put on his shoes and go to the door to listen carefully when the knocks started again, but no voice was heard. Unable to hold himself back any longer, he rose to his feet and turned up the wick of the lamp, which, luckily, had not yet burned out. Lamp in hand, he opened the door and saw, all too clearly by the bright lamplight, a beautiful seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl standing there. As soon as the door was open, she raised the cotton portiere and walked in.

Cui was so appalled that he recoiled two steps. All smiles, the girl said to him in a subdued voice, "Don't you recognize me? I'm Xingniang's sister, Qingniang. My hairpin fell from my sedan-chair when I was entering the gate, which is why I'm here to look for it before the night is out. Did you pick it up?"

Because she was his deceased fiancée's sister, Cui replied respectfully, "Yes, a hairpin did drop to the ground from your sedan-chair. I picked it up and wanted to return it to you, but as the inner gate had been closed, I didn't want to disturb you, meaning to wait until tomorrow. Now that you're here to look for it, let me give it back to you." Right away, he took it out of the book box, put it on the table, and said, "Please take it."

The girl took the hairpin with her delicate hand and, sticking it into her hair, said smilingly to him, "If I'd known that you'd picked it up, I wouldn't have had to come and look for it at this time of night. But now that I'm out of the inner quarters of the house at this late hour, I can't very well go back. I'll have to share your pillow and mat and spend the night here." (MC: *These items are surely not for her to share!*)

Aghast, Cui said, "What kind of talk is this? With your parents treating me as their own flesh and blood, how could I do such an outrageous thing and compromise your good name? Please leave. I'll never oblige!"

The girl insisted, "Everyone else is fast asleep. No one will know. Why don't we have some fun in the sweetness of the night? Why can't the two of us keep seeing each other on the quiet, adding another bond to the existing one?"

"If you don't want to be found out, you shouldn't do anything wrong in the first place," said Cui. "I thank you for your sentiments, but if anything should give us away and we're found out, how am I going to face your father? If word gets out, how am I going to hold up my head again? Won't I have ruined the good name I've built for myself so far?"

"It's such a sweet night, but at this late hour, you and I are both by our forlorn selves. It's by our predestined bond that we have the rare opportunity to be together in the same room. Why don't we enjoy the moment? Why care about being found out or not? What's more, I'll be able to cover up for you. We won't be caught. Don't hesitate, or you'll be missing out on the pleasure."

The young woman's coquettish words and her ravishing beauty began to inflame Cui's heart. But recalling Commissioner Wu's kindness to him, he still dared not make a rash move. Like a child playing with firecrackers, he was sorely tempted but also afraid. He was about to give in to her when he again thought better of it and said, shaking his head, "No, I can't do this!" Seeing no other way, he pleaded with the young woman, "Out of regard for your sister, Xingniang, please leave my good name unsoiled!" (MC: *Little does he know that her sister is the one he is dealing with. Important!*)

Mortified by his stubborn refusal, the young woman turned hostile. Flying into a rage, she said, "My father treats you as one of his own and put you up in this study, but you had the audacity to lure me here in the depths of the night. What are you up to? If I make a fuss and tell my father about it, he'll lodge a complaint against you at the yamen. (MC: *A false countercharge works best.*) Let's see you try to talk your way out of that! You won't be let off easy!"

Now that she was turning the tables on him and trying to make a scene, her voice harsh and her face dark with anger, Cui took fright. He thought, "What a holy terror she is! Now that she's in my room, I'll be hard pressed to say anything in my own defense. On the off chance that she makes a fuss about this and sticks to her story, how am I going to argue my innocence? I'd better yield to her now. We may not be found out right away, after all. (MC: *Thinking only of the moment.*) I can take my time thinking up a solution." Truly,

*Like a ram with its horns stuck in a fence,
He was caught in a dilemma.*

Resignedly he said to her, managing a cautious smile, "Please keep your voice down. Since you do me such honor, I put myself at your disposal."

Her anger turning to joy at his submission, the young woman said, "I didn't know you were so faint of heart!"

Cui closed the door and the two of them undressed and went to bed. There is a *ci* poem to the tune of "Moon on West River" in testimony:

*He a lonesome lodger under another's roof;
She a pretty girl in a secluded boudoir.
They joined in a union of delight,
Like a pair of phoenixes in conjugal bliss.*

*Seeming to be fulfilling a betrothal,
Their tryst was shrouded in mystery.
The newly acquainted wallowing in pleasure
Owed it to the love of the departed soul.*

After their amorous sport was over, they still lay deeply immersed in love and indescribable happiness. When daybreak was approaching, the young woman rose, took leave of Cui, and slipped back into the interior part of the house.

However delighted he was by this taste of the sweetness of love, Cui was troubled by his conscience and spent his days on tenterhooks, afraid that he would be found out. Luckily, the girl covered her tracks well in her comings and goings. She proved to be a feather-footed young woman, slipping into Cui's study near the gate at night and dashing back into the interior part of the house at dawn, enjoying the trysts without anyone being any the wiser.

One night, after more than a month had gone by in like manner, she said suddenly to Cui, "With me cooped up in the depths of my boudoir and you holed up in this study, we should count ourselves lucky that we haven't been caught. However, as they say, the road to happiness never runs smooth, and many an obstacle may appear to block a sweet rendezvous. If we're found out and my parents come down hard on us, I'll be locked up in my room and you'll be driven out. I don't mind being locked up, but I'll be guilty of

implicating you and sully your good name. We need to think of a long-term solution."

"That was exactly my point when I refused to oblige you in the beginning. It certainly wasn't because I was a block of wood with no feelings! But now that things have come to this, what are we going to do?"

"As I see it, it would be best for us to elope before we're found out. We can make our home elsewhere and live in seclusion. Only thus will we be able to live together for the rest of our lives. What do you say?"

"That's indeed a good idea, but I'm all alone, and I've always had few relatives and friends to turn to for help. If we elope, I'm afraid there's hardly anyplace where we can go." After a few moments of reflection, he was suddenly struck by an idea: "I remember my father used to say that a former servant of ours, called Jin Rong, is a man of honor. He lives in Lücheng of Zhenjiang [in Jiangsu] as a farmer and was doing well. Let's throw ourselves on his mercy. Out of his regard for my father, his old master, he won't turn me down. (MC: *What if he does? This is not a surefire plan.*) What's more, there's a direct water route from here to his home. What could be easier than that?"

"If so, we have no time to lose! Let's go before the night is out!"

Having thus made up their minds, they rose at dawn, the fifth watch, and packed. The study being conveniently located by the gate, they exited the house without difficulty. The wharf was just a short distance away. Cui approached the fleet of boats and engaged a small wooden rowboat. He had the boat rowed to the gate of the house, picked up the girl, and got under way. When they arrived at Guazhou [across from Zhenjiang on the other side of the Yangzi River], Cui paid the boatman and hired a larger boat for the longer journey. After they crossed the river and entered the prefecture of Runzhou, they headed for Danyang. Another forty *li* later, they arrived at Lücheng. After they moored the boat and went ashore, Cui asked a villager, "Is there a Jin Rong here?"

The villager replied, "Yes, Jin Rong is our local headman. He's rich, and he's an honest man. Who doesn't know him? (MC: *Good thing he is an honest man. If his wealth is his only commendation, he is not to be trusted.*) But why do you ask?"

"He's a distant relative of mine. I'm here to pay him a visit. Could you please tell me where he lives?"

Pointing a finger, the villager said, "Look! See that large wineshop over there? He lives next door to it."

Delighted to have gotten the information he wanted, Cui returned to the boat, told the girl about it in order to make her feel better, and went by himself to the Jin residence. On hearing voices, Headman Jin stepped out and asked, "Who might the visitor be?"

As Cui approached, with his hands clasped in greeting, the headman asked further, "Where are you from, scholar?"

"I'm the son of Mr. Cui of Yangzhou."

On hearing "Mr. Cui of Yangzhou," the headman gave a start and asked, "What government post does he occupy?"

"He was a judge of Xuande Prefecture, but he's passed away."

"Who was he to you?"

"He was my father."

"So you're the young master! Do you remember your childhood pet name?"

"Yes. Xingge."

"You're indeed my young master!"

He sat Young Master Cui down, dropped to his knees and kowtowed, and then asked, "When did my old master pass away?"

"Three years ago."

The headman immediately put a table and chair together to form an improvised shrine, wrote Mr. Cui Senior's name on a tablet, erected the tablet on the table, prostrated himself on the floor, and began to cry. (MC: *A man hard to come by.*) After he had his cry, he asked, "What brought you here today, Young Master?"

"My father had betrothed me to Xingniang, daughter of Commissioner Wu . . ."

The headman interrupted him and said, "Yes, I know that. So, are you married now?"

"As it turned out, Xingniang of the Wu family fell ill from disappointment that my family sent no word. When I arrived at the Wu residence, she had already been dead for two months. Commissioner Wu asked me to stay on at his home because of the previous engagement. To my delight, his younger daughter, Qingniang, was nice to me out of regard for her sister, and we became husband and wife on the quiet. We're afraid of being found out, so we need a place to call our own. But I have nowhere to go for help. I remember my father used to say that you're a man of honor and loyalty (MC: *He was indeed a loyal servant. But what if he happens to be a heartless man and*

rejects Cui?) and that you live in Lücheng. That's why I came here with Qingniang. Since you still remember your old master, would you please help us?"

After hearing him out, Headman Jin said, "Of course I will! This old servant is duty bound to relieve the young master's worries!" Thereupon, he went inside and brought out his wife, so that she could greet the young master. Then he told her to take her maidservants and follow Mr. Cui to the wharf to bring the young master's wife home. Mr. and Mrs. Jin personally cleaned the main room, made the bed, and hung the bed curtains, with all the respect due a master. (MC: *Such loyalty is rare.*) With clothes and food in ample supply, the young couple laid their worries to rest and felt quite at home.

When they had lived there for almost a year, the young woman said to Cui, "You and I may feel quite at home here, but it's not right for me to be separated forever from my parents, to whom I owe my life. I can't reconcile that with my conscience, and there's no future in living like this."

"Things having already come to this, what's the use of such talk? We can't very well go back to face them, can we?"

"Well, we did what we did in the heat of the moment. If we'd been caught in what we were doing, my parents would surely have come down hard on us, and we might have had to stop seeing each other. If we wanted to be together forever, elopement was the only choice. But now, one year has flashed by. I suppose all parents love their children. My disappearance must have been heart-wrenching for my parents. If I go back with you, my parents will surely be happy to see us and will forgive us. That's only to be expected. Why don't we brazen it out and go back to see them? What can be wrong with that?"

"A man should travel the length and breadth of the land. It's indeed no long-term solution to be holed up here. If such is your wish, I'll be happy to oblige you, even if my father-in-law punishes me. Since we've been husband and wife for a year and your family has always enjoyed high repute, I don't think they'll break us up and marry you to someone else. Besides, my betrothal with your sister was never fulfilled, so it's only right to renew the marriage alliance. As long as we watch our every move, I don't think we'll come to harm."

Having thus made up their minds, they asked Jin Rong to engage a boat for them. After taking leave of Jin Rong, they set out on their journey. They crossed the river, passed Guazhou, and arrived in Yangzhou. When they were approaching the Wu residence, the girl said to Cui, "Let's stop the boat here rather than right at the gate. I have something to say to you."

After telling the boatman to stop at this point, Cui asked her, "What more do you have to say to me?"

"You and I have been living away from home for a year, and everything will be all right if we're forgiven when we both show our faces there all of a sudden. But if they explode in anger, things may get out of hand. It would be better if you went first and watched their reactions. After you give them your explanation and it looks like they're ready to relent and won't change their minds, they can come and take me home. Won't that soften the blow?" (MC: *Why do it in such a roundabout way?*) And I'll be spared the humiliation. I'll wait here to hear from you."

"You do have a point. All right, I'll go first." So saying, he jumped ashore.

Before he took another step, the young woman summoned him back with a wave of her hand and added, "There's something else. It's quite a scandal for a woman to elope with a man. There's a possibility that my parents will deny that this ever happened, so as to avoid a scandal. You must be prepared." With that, she took the gold phoenix-shaped hairpin from her head (MC: *Good detail.*) and gave it to him, saying, "If they're evasive, show them this, and they won't be able to deny their way out of it."

"What a meticulous person you are!" exclaimed Cui. (MC: *He submits completely to her!*) He took the hairpin, slipped it into his sleeve, and headed for Commissioner Wu's residence.

When he was in the reception hall and a servant announced him, the commissioner was overwhelmed with joy on hearing that he was there. Before Cui had a chance to speak, Commissioner Wu burst into apologies: "I'm to blame. I failed to take good care of you and make your stay comfortable. Out of regard for your late father, please don't hold it against me!"

Cui prostrated himself on the ground, not daring to look up or speak the truth. With one kowtow after another, he confined himself to saying, "Your son-in-law deserves ten thousand deaths!"

Alarmed, the commissioner said, "What have you done to deserve death? Why do you say such a thing? Come on! Tell me what it is, so that I won't worry!"

"Father-in-law, only if you forgive me would I dare tell you the truth."

"Say whatever is on your mind! You're like one of our own. Why even hesitate?"

By now, Cui was convinced that the commissioner was pleased to see him, so he said, "Your daughter Qingniang did not find me beneath her, and we formed a secret liaison. I'm guilty of improper carnal pleasures and

sentimental ties, and of dishonesty and illicit relations. Frightened by the gravity of my offenses, I could not do otherwise than elope with her under cover of night and go into hiding in a village. In the year that has gone by, we've had no communication with you. However deep the love between husband and wife, parental love should never be forgotten. Today, your daughter and I came here in order to implore that, considering the deep love between us, you'd forgive our trespasses and permit us to fulfill our wish of living as husband and wife, so that you, my father-in-law, will still have a daughter to cherish and I'll be able to enjoy the bliss of a happy family. What great fortune that will be! Please have pity, my father-in-law!"

The commissioner was greatly taken aback. "What are you saying, young man? My younger daughter, Qingniang, has been confined to her sickbed for a year now. She hardly eats and drinks and can't move without help. She never even gets out of bed. I don't understand a word of what you said. Can you be seeing a ghost?" (MC: *He was not far off the mark.*)

On hearing this, Cui thought, "What insight Qingniang has! He's indeed afraid that we'll bring disgrace to the family and invents the story that she's ill in bed, so as to pull the wool over the eyes of outsiders." Aloud, he said to the commissioner, "How could I dream of telling a lie! Qingniang is now in the boat. Please send someone to bring her here, and you'll know."

With a scornful smile, Commissioner Wu said to a page boy, "Go to Mr. Cui's boat and take a look at the woman who's claiming to be my daughter!"

The page boy went to the boat but did not see a soul in the cabin. He asked the boatman, who was eating a meal, hunched over his bowl at the stem of the boat, "Where did the people in your boat go?"

The boatman replied, "The scholar went onshore and left a young woman behind. I just saw her also go onshore."

So the page boy returned home and reported to his master, "I didn't see anyone in the boat. I asked the boatman, and he said that a young woman went onshore, but I didn't see any sign of her."

Believing that he had caught Cui in a lie, Commissioner Wu flew into a rage. "Young man, be honest," said he. "What made you cook up such an evil lie to drag a good girl's name through the mud?"

Exasperated by this remark, Cui frantically extracted the phoenix-shaped gold hairpin from his sleeve and handed it to the commissioner, saying, "This belongs to your daughter Qingniang. Isn't this enough proof that I didn't make things up?"

The commissioner took it, examined it, and said in astonishment, "This is the hairpin that was put in my deceased daughter Xingniang's hair at her burial. It's been quite some time. How did it end up in your hands? How very strange!"

Thereupon, Cui gave him a detailed account of how he had found the hairpin under Qingniang's sedan-chair when she returned from her sister's grave the year before, how Qingniang had visited him one night when searching for the hairpin, how they had become man and wife, how, afraid of being found out, they had eloped to the home of Jin Rong, an old servant of his, and how, after staying there for one year, they had decided to come back together.

Aghast, Commissioner Wu said, "But Qingniang is in her sickbed at this very moment. If you don't believe it, go see for yourself. The way you invented all these details! But how did this hairpin come out of the grave? That's a mystery!"

Taking Cui's hand, he led the young man to see the patient and make an identification.

Now, let us turn to Qingniang. She had indeed been bedridden all this time, unable to get out of bed. That day, when her father was being assailed with doubts as he questioned Cui in the reception hall outside, Qingniang sat bolt upright, got out of bed, and ran into the reception hall. Quite stunned at the sight, the servants followed behind, along with Mrs. Wu, clamoring, "She hasn't been able to move about for so long. How did she manage to get on her feet all of a sudden?"

In front of everyone's eyes, Qingniang entered the hall and bowed to her father. All amazement, Commissioner Wu asked, "When did you get up?"

Cui believed she had entered the house from the boat, but he kept this thought to himself and waited to hear what she had to say.

Qingniang said to her father, "I'm Xingniang. I left you and mother long ago and was buried in the weed-grown outskirts of the town. But my bond with Mr. Cui didn't end. My visit here today is for no other purpose than to do Mr. Cui a favor by marrying my beloved sister, Qingniang, to him. If my proposal is accepted, my sister will immediately regain her health, but if not, my sister will die after I'm gone." (MC: *This is blackmail.*)

Everyone was appalled. Her body and face were Qingniang's, but her voice and the way she carried herself were unmistakably Xingniang's. Everyone

realized that Xingniang's soul had attached itself to her sister's body and was speaking through her mouth.

Sternly, the commissioner scolded her, "You're dead. How can you wreak such havoc in the human world and lead mortal beings astray?"

In the voice of Xingniang, as before, Qingniang said, "When I went to the netherworld after I died, the judge of the netherworld declared that I was innocent of any crime and therefore not subject to imprisonment. I was assigned to the service of the Queen of Earth, to be in charge of correspondence. Since my ties with the mortal world had not come to an end, I asked the queen for one year's leave in order to fulfill my conjugal bond with Mr. Cui. My sister has been ill because I've been using her life essence in my liaisons with Mr. Cui. Now that my allotted time has expired, I must go, but I can't leave Mr. Cui behind as a lonely man and henceforth a stranger to my family. (MC: *A woman with a heart.*) I'm here for the express purpose of asking Father and Mother for permission to marry Sister to him and continue the marriage bond. I'll then be able to put my mind at ease in the netherworld."

Moved by her plaintive entreaty, Mr. and Mrs. Wu granted her wish, saying, "Don't worry, child! We'll do as you say and marry Qingniang to him."

Xingniang broke into a delighted smile as she heard her parents' promise. With a thankful bow to her father, she said, "I'm ever so grateful to Father and Mother for granting my wish. I don't have any more worries, and I bid you farewell."

She then walked up to Cui, took his hand, and said with a sob, "After living with you for a year in conjugal love, I bid you farewell forever. My parents have granted my wish for Qingniang to marry you. Be a good husband, but don't forget me in your happy life with my sister." With that, she broke down in violent sobs.

Having learned through her explanations that he had been living with Xingniang's soul, he was consumed with grief on hearing these words of counsel. However, in the presence of so many people, he could not show his affection because the body was all too clearly Qingniang's. (MC: *He dares not offend the new one as well as the old one.*)

After finishing these parting instructions, Xingniang's soul let out a few wails of grief, and Qingniang suddenly fell to the floor. When everyone went to check on her in consternation, there was already no breath coming out of her mouth. But since her chest still was warm to the touch, they forced ginger soup down her throat. When she came to about two hours later, she had fully regained her health, and her movements were normal. When asked

about what had just happened, she professed total ignorance. When her eyes happened to rest on Cui among the crowd, she quickly covered her face and rushed inside through the middle gate. Feeling as if he had just awoken from a dream, Cui stood aghast for a considerable while before he recovered his wits.

Commissioner Wu chose an auspicious day and married Qingniang to Cui. On their wedding night, Cui, having lived with Qingniang for so long, felt quite at ease, whereas Qingniang, who found him quite a stranger, was bashful. Truly,

*She, in her sheltered life,
Had never talked with the bridegroom.
He, a family friend and a lodger in the house,
Had lived with the beauty for a year.
He found the voice beside his ear a little different,
But the face was the same.
She found everything a first-time experience
And was in the grip of fear.
In a dream of butterflies, he sought an old friend;
On the crab-apple tree, she found new red petals.*

On their wedding night, Cui found that Qingniang was still a virgin. Gently, he asked, "Your sister lived with me for one year in your body, so why were you still a virgin?"

Displeased, Qingniang said, "You were intimate with my sister's ghost, not with me. Leave me out of it!"

"But if your sister had not been a woman of such tender feelings, how would it have been possible for our marriage to take place? We must not forget the favor she did us."

"That's quite true. If she hadn't come to explain herself and bring about our marriage but continued to use my name and put me to shame, how would I have been able to hold my head up again? And you would have been convinced that I was the one who eloped with you. Wouldn't I have died from the shame of it all? But now, to her credit, she brought you and me together, which goes to show the depth of her devotion."

The next day, out of gratitude to Xingniang, Cui wanted to hold a prayer service for her, but without any money on him, he was obliged to sell the phoenix-shaped gold hairpin at the market (MC: *How could he find it in his*

heart to sell this hairpin? How sad! How painful!) and got bills worth twenty ingots of silver for it. Thus equipped, he bought a liberal amount of incense sticks, candles, and sacrificial paper money and engaged the priests of Qionghua Temple in a prayer service that lasted three days and three nights, to thank Xingniang for her kindness.

After the prayer service was over, Cui saw in a dream a woman coming toward him. He thought she was a stranger, but the woman said to him, "I'm Xingniang. You don't recognize me because I assumed my sister's form while my soul lived with you for a year. I now appear to you as myself only because you're already married to my sister." She bowed deeply in gratitude before she continued, "I thank you for this prayer service, which shows that you still have feelings for me. Though we're in different worlds, I'm profoundly grateful. My sister, Qingniang, is of a very gentle nature. Please take good care of her. I shall not return."

Cui woke with a start and found himself sobbing. Qingniang, beside the pillow, asked him what had happened. After he told her about his dream in detail, she asked, "What did she look like?" Whereupon Cui gave her a full description of her appearance. "That was indeed my sister," said Qingniang, and she also broke down in tears. Then she asked Cui about everything in Xingniang's yearlong life with him, and every one of his answers tallied with Qingniang's memory of her sister.

As they marveled at those extraordinary happenings, they found each other's company even more congenial with this additional bond between them. Henceforth, Xingniang did not make her presence felt in any way. It bears pointing out that Xingniang's doings had been motivated by her love for Cui, and she withdrew from his life once her wish had been fulfilled. From that time onward, Cui and Qingniang paid their respects at her grave every year. Later, after Cui assumed a government post, he obtained a title for Xingniang as his ex-wife, and, by his last will and testament, the remains of all three were buried in the same grave. What follows is a quatrain about this story:

*The older sister's soul,
The younger sister's body.
A perfect union it was:
All three were as one.*

The Old Demon of Yanguan County Indulges in Debauchery

The Bodhisattva on Mount Huihai Puts the Evil Spirits to Death

As a poem puts it,

*When Wang Jun's tiered ships sailed down from Yizhou,¹
The regal grandeur of Jinling began to fade.
As the long barrier-chains sank to the riverbed,
Flags of surrender arose o'er the Wall of Stone.
While we sigh at the ups and downs of life,
The hills remain pillowed on the water.
Now that the four seas are under unified rule,
Old forts lie overgrown with autumn weeds.*

The above poem was composed by Liu Yuxi [772–842] of the Tang dynasty as he meditated on the past at Swallow Rock outside Nanjing.² Swallow Rock, situated on the shore of the Yangzi River northwest of the city of Jinling [Nanjing], juts out over the river. Viewed from the river, it has the contours of a swallow, complete with head and wings, overlooking the surface of the water. Afraid that the swallow would fly away, people who were devoted to the public good in days of yore placed iron chains all over the rock and erected a gazebo on the swallow's neck in order to hold the bird in place. The

gazebo commands a panoramic view of the river, the hills, and the boats that set sail right under it.

About one *li* from this major attraction of Jinling stood a certain Hongji Monastery. To its left is a crag that soars into the air like a stone screen shielding the monastery. At the other end of the crag, the mountain circles back to the monastery. The monks in the old days built a pavilion in an open space. Half nestled against the crag and half overlooking the river (MC: *The monks had a poetic touch.*), the pavilion housed a shrine to the bodhisattva Guanyin, whose image, when reflected in the water, was so clear that every hair was distinctly visible. With such scenic splendor, especially on moonlit nights, the pavilion came to be called the “Guanyin Pavilion.” Not one day went by without tourists swarming to the place, some bringing their own wine. With so many visitors, as well as stories about the efficacy of prayers to the bodhisattva, the monastery was never short of offerings of incense. The only drawback was that what should have been a tranquil place of Buddhist worship had been reduced, regrettably, to a wineshop. In addition, among the people touring the place, pleasure seekers outnumbered donors. However, with the passage of time, the pavilion fell into disrepair due to a lack of funds for its maintenance.

One day, a merchant from Huizhou moored his boat under Swallow Rock and took a stroll to the monastery to see the sights. A monk greeted him at the gate, asked his name, and invited him to tea. After tea was over, the monk asked, “Where have you come from, sir? And where are you headed?”

“I came across the river from Yangzhou. I’ve brought some money with me for my little shop in the capital. Since it’s getting late, I moored my boat and came up here for some sightseeing.”

The monk said, “A short distance from here is the Guanyin Gate of the outer wall of the city. It’s only twenty *li* into the city proper from there. Why don’t you have your luggage carried here and stay the night in one of our smaller rooms? Tomorrow morning, you need only take your luggage and go by land to the capital. You’ll arrive there soon enough. If you take the boat, you’ll have to go through inspection at the checkpoint at Longjiang, which can be a time-consuming process. What’s more, the wind and waves are the worst at Swallow Rock. It’s no place for a boat to stay moored.”

Acknowledging the good sense in what he said, the merchant went back to the boat, paid the boatman, and sent the boat on its way. Then he had his luggage carried to a monk’s cell in the monastery and settled in for the night.

When the monk took him on a tour of the pavilion, the merchant of Anhui noticed its tumble-down condition and asked the monk, "With such scenic wonders, how could the pavilion have fallen into such sad disrepair?"

"We have no lack of visitors, but they're all here to enjoy themselves rather than donate to the monastery, and we monks are too poor to afford the repairs, which is why it's in such a state."

"But there must be people with money and power among the tourists. Are you telling me they don't donate?"

"There's no lack of rich and powerful people who tour this pavilion, but they come with courtesans, just to drink and have fun. They spend freely on those women but can't spare a penny for the bodhisattva. And then there are those heartless servants. Once their masters are gone, they polish off the leftovers while doing violence to our doors and windows. With such people messing up the place, it's no wonder that it's falling into disrepair!" (MC: *This is true everywhere, not just at this pavilion.*)

As the merchant of Huizhou sighed ruefully, the monk continued, "If you, sir, could make a donation, that would help us with the repairs."

"I went over the accounts with my assistant yesterday and found that I do have thirty taels of silver to spare. I'll donate those thirty taels to you for the repairs, partly out of deference to the bodhisattva and partly to make a name for myself here."

Immensely pleased, the monk thanked him and went down from the pavilion and into the monastery proper.

The truth of the matter is that natives of Huizhou are parsimonious but inclined to seek fame. They are also devotees of Buddhist rituals. As for our merchant, he readily promised thirty taels because of the delight it would give him if word got out that the Guanyin Pavilion with its tens of thousands of visitors had been repaired with donations from him alone.

Once back in his room, he opened his luggage, retrieved a packet of thirty taels of silver, and gave it to the monk. (MC: *One who fails to hide things well invites thieves.*) Unfortunately, the monk's greed was stirred when he took the packet as his prying eyes noticed that there was much more silver there. He ordered the acolytes to prepare a feast in honor of the merchant, and he went out of his way to flatter the merchant at the dinner table and assiduously plied him with wine until the merchant drank himself under the table. After night-fall, when all was quiet, the monk killed the merchant. On opening the dead man's luggage and finding more than five hundred taels of silver, he was overcome with joy and suggested to his disciple that they dump the corpse into the

river. The disciple said, "But the gate of the monastery is locked at this time of night. If we go to the abbot and ask for the key, he'll surely demand to know why we need it, and we won't be able to lie our way out of it. Not only will we be found guilty, but we'll also have to share the money with him."

"What are we going to do then?" asked the monk.

"There's a large vat in the wine cellar. Let's cut the body into pieces and stuff them in the vat. Tomorrow, we'll dump the vat into the river at the first opportunity. That way, no one will know."

"Good idea! Good idea!" The monk took his counsel and acted accordingly. Pity the merchant of Huizhou, who was cut into pieces! He donated money out of his good intentions but ended in such a tragic death!

After cleaning up and putting things back in order, the monk and his disciple went to sleep, their minds perfectly at ease. They thought their doings were unbeknownst to gods and ghosts, little knowing that they were to be overtaken by divine justice.

That very night, a police chief on river patrol also moored his boat under Swallow Rock to await new developments in a case he was handling. After he got up the next morning, he saw a woman with a bucket approach the boat from land to fetch water. Her beauty captured his attention. (MC: *If she were not a beauty, he would not have followed her.*) As he watched her heading, not to any ordinary house, but straight to the monastery, the police chief grew suspicious, thinking, "How can a monastery employ such a beautiful woman as a water carrier? The monks must be up to some monkey business!" He took several of his men and followed. Seeing the woman enter one of the monks' cells, the officers kept close on her heels, but the woman then headed for the wine cellar.

At the sight of the police descending on them so early in the morning, the monks, with their guilty consciences, were smitten with panic, and the color drained from their faces. But thus taken by surprise, they had no time to dodge. The police chief assembled the monks in the main hall, whereas he himself sat in the middle and ordered two of his men to search the wine cellar. The two men could see the shadow of the woman inside, but as soon as she became aware of their presence, she dived into a wine vat. After they went back and reported what they had seen to the chief, the latter said, "That vat must be involved in a case of injustice." Right away, he ordered his men to carry the vat outside. Then they opened it, only to see an unsightly mass of mangled human body parts and a split head inside.

The guilty monk and his disciple were duly trussed and taken to the River Security Bureau. Unable to withstand the pain of torture, they confessed to

the truth. They were then marched back to the monastery to produce their spoils. With ample evidence against them, both men were sentenced to death and executed immediately.

Before their execution, the two condemned men confessed that they had killed a donor to the pavilion repairs, and everyone realized that the woman was in fact a manifestation of the bodhisattva Guanyin herself. “*Namo divine and responsive Bodhisattva Guanyin,*” they exclaimed. (MC: *Once the others turn their backs, they will resume their evil ways.*) All too clearly, the Buddhist heaven is close at hand. One must not do anything against one’s conscience.

Granted that the bodhisattva Guanyin never fails to respond to prayers and manifest herself anywhere, what was witnessed at Swallow Rock is less impressive than what was seen at the three Tianzhu Peaks of Hangzhou. Of the temples at the Upper, Middle, and Lower Tianzhu Peaks, the temple to the bodhisattva at the Upper Peak is the most popular with worshippers. The Tianzhu Peaks, located to the west of the prefectural seat and south of West Lake, commands a view of the palm-shaped lake and the ribbonlike Yangzi River.³ With the deities wonderfully efficacious in this blessed part of the land, visitors fill the temples on the three peaks to bursting year after year. And now, this humble storyteller proposes to tell a story about how the bodhisattva Guanyin manifested her holy power at the Tianzhu Peaks. Lend me your ears! But first, let me cite four poems on wind, flowers, snow, and the moon before I move on to our story proper.

O the gentle breath of the wind!
O the gentle breath of the wind!
It saddens the one pine on the wintry peak;
It sways the tender grass in the spring suburbs.
It sweeps away the clouds to reveal the bright moon;
It lifts the fog to let out the light of the sky.
It wafts the fragrance of osmanthus in autumn;
It dispels heat at the height of summer.
O the gentle breaths of the wind!
The wildflowers fall, and life withers away.

—On Wind

O beautiful flowers!
O beautiful flowers!
Their enchanting blossoms seem to be rouged;

*Their delicate patterns seem to be scissor-cut.
Dewdrops enhance their color;
The wind carries their fragrance afar.
One flowering sprig may outshine all others
Among ten thousand blossoms that vie in beauty.
O beautiful flowers!
The imperial garden is the envy of all!*

—On Flowers

*O the swirling snowflakes!
O the swirling snowflakes!
Gleaming jade envelops the buds of plums;
Glittering salt weighs down the bamboo branches.
The snowflakes churn up white waves in the air;
They pile up on railings and seal off silvery bridges.
A thousand hills are coated with white powder;
Ten thousand trees are clad in white robes.
O the swirling flakes of snow!
Travelers on the road lament the distance ahead.*

—On Snow

*O the lovely moon!
O the lovely moon!
The new moon's crescent hangs high overhead;
The full moon in its roundness shines like a mirror.
When scaling the sky, it scatters flowers' shadows;
When casting its light down, it brightens the ripples.
Poets raise their cups in search of elegant lines;
Beauties open their windows and retire late.
O the lovely moon!
Its crystal light has lit the world since the dawn of time.*

—On the Moon

Gentle reader, you may well ask, who wrote these four poems? Well, during the Hongwu reign period [1368–98], there lived on Mount Huihai of Yangguan [present-day Haining], Zhejiang, a hoary old man who always wore the black robe, cotton scarf, and rope sandals of a Daoist priest. Never seen engaged in any useful line of work, he spent his days drinking and singing

on the streets. After finishing a song, he would begin to dance. Jumping from tree to tree and spinning round and round, he was as weightless as a flying fish or swallow. He was also a learned man with a poetic turn. He had a sense of humor, and his laugh rippled through the air. His hair was unbound and hung loose like a cascade. Literary gentlemen who toured the mountain liked to engage him in poetic exchanges and pleasant conversations. One day, in a state of intoxication, he asked for a writing brush and an ink slab from a wineshop and wrote the above four poems on a stone wall, to the admiration of all viewers. Then the ink darkened and the surface grew shinier with each rub of the hand. Judging from everything that was so remarkable about him, his acquaintances on the mountain nurtured a suspicion that he might be a supernatural being, but they had no way of verifying their speculations. His comings and goings on the mountain never revealed any fixed abode. Although somewhat intrigued, the mountain dwellers gradually became used to his ways and gave the matter no further thought. So they ended up addressing him as “Old Venerable Priest” whenever they ran into him as they went about their daily lives.

About one *li* from the mountain lived a wealthy man named Qiu. He and his wife, both in their forties, were much given to charity. Being without issue, they went to a great deal of expense and had a statue of the bodhisattva Guanyin carved for a shrine at their home. Every morning and evening, they offered incense, flowers, and fruit to the well-lit shrine and prayed that their wish would be granted. On the bodhisattva's birthday, the nineteenth day of the second lunar month, they piously abstained from meat and wine and respectfully went to Tianzhu Peak. They prostrated themselves on the ground every three steps on their way up the hill. In the temple, they burned incense sticks and prayed for a child, male or female, to carry on the family line. After three years went by in like fashion, Mrs. Qiu indeed achieved pregnancy. At full term, she gave birth to a girl one night. Overcome with boundless joy, husband and wife named her Night Pearl (MC: *Good name*.) because she was born at night and was as precious to them as a luminous pearl that shines in the darkness.

The years went by, and the girl came of age. She was as graceful and pretty as she was versatile in her skills, especially needlework. Her parents cherished her as they would pearls and jade. Soon she was nineteen years of age, and her parents were in their sixties, but she remained unbetrothed. Wouldn't you agree that parents who have children later in life would be eager to have the children marry as soon as possible so that they could be cared for in their

declining years? Why was a girl past sixteen years of age not yet spoken for? Well, it was because, for this beloved daughter of a distinguished family and a beautiful and clever girl at that, her parents had high expectations for her and were determined to have a son-in-law who was all perfection. After he made his mark in the world, they would expect him to take care of them for the rest of their lives. Moreover, rather than having their daughter move out, they wanted him to be a live-in son-in-law. Several of the neighboring families had approached them with betrothal offers, but they found most of them unqualified, while the few who were to their liking insisted that the daughter-in-law leave her parents and live with the man's family. A few of the young men did have the requisite looks and scholarship, but their means were a little too slender. Those who possessed the requisite wealth and lineage were lacking in intellectual endowment. (MC: *These qualities are indeed often mutually exclusive. You just can't have both.*) And so, possible candidates were either too highly placed or too lowly for her. As the matchmakers grew impatient with the picky parents, no match was made as time went by. On the contrary, word about the Qiu girl's beauty and the parents' fastidiousness in picking a son-in-law began to spread far and wide. All too unexpectedly, the gossip stirred the desire of one man.

Gentle reader, you may wonder who that man was. Could he be a man as rich as Shi Chong, wishing to buy Green Pearl?⁴ Could he be as talented a scholar as Sima Xiangru with his eye on Wenjun?⁵ Or could he be as handsome as Pan An, so much so that women admirers would throw fruit at him?⁶ Gentle reader, if so, there would have been no element of surprise. No. To give you a good laugh, it was a veritable

*Lü Wang of the Zhou dynasty
Seeking a fishing partner⁷
Or Fu Sheng of the Han dynasty
Marrying a co-lecturer.⁸*

So, who was he? He was the old man who wrote the four poems on wind, flowers, snow, and the moon cited above. From morning till night, he pestered one matchmaker after another, begging them to speak to the Qiu family. When the matchmakers asked him whom he was representing, he replied that it was none other than himself. The matchmakers took it as a joke. Who would be willing to act on his behalf? They said, giggling, "Even if the Qius pick and choose ten thousand times until their daughter rots away, he still

won't stand a chance. That horny old fool is like a toad in the sewers craving swan meat!"

Ignored by every matchmaker he approached, the old priest went in all brazenness to the Qiu residence (MC: A *sudden move*), unaccompanied. Mr. Qiu and his wife were consulting each other privately in the reception hall about their daughter's dim marriage prospects. At the sight of the old priest, Mr. Qiu rose to greet him, knowing his eccentric ways. On account of his advanced age, Mrs. Qiu did not remove herself from this male presence. After an exchange of greetings, all three sat down. Mr. Qiu asked, "To what do I owe the honor of your visit, Venerable Priest?"

"This humble old man is here to talk about your daughter's marriage."

Assuming he was there as a matchmaker, Mr. and Mrs. Qiu hastened to call for tea and asked, "Which family is the candidate from?"

"Mine."

Not knowing where the old man lived with his family, Mr. Qiu was more than a little vexed and forced himself to say, "We've been acquainted for some time now, but I never knew you had sons."

"I'm not talking about any son of mine. I know that your daughter is not to be married to an ordinary man, so I'm wooing her myself."

Displeased that the old man was getting out of line but not taking him seriously, Mr. Qiu said, "Venerable Priest, you do love a joke."

"No, this is no joke. I do wish to be your son-in-law, and the marriage will surely take place. It's no use turning me down."

Those preposterous assertions enraged Mr. and Mrs. Qiu. Mr. Qiu said hotly, "My daughter is such a fine girl that unqualified families don't even dare make a proposal. Who do you think you are, letting your tongue run away with you like that?" So saying, Mr. Qiu rose to his feet and gave the old man a push, but the latter remained where he was, quite unruffled.

Then the old man rose and said, respectfully clasping his hands in front of his chest, "My father-in-law, you've got it wrong. Picking a son-in-law matters to you only because you want to be taken good care of in your old age. Now, if you marry your daughter to me, I'll do my filial duty by you while you're alive and take care of your burial with all due ceremony after you're gone. I'm a highly dependable person when it comes to serious business. If I don't qualify as an ideal son-in-law, I wonder who would."

Mr. Qiu shouted at the top of his voice, "Don't you know that people aren't supposed to marry across social classes and age groups? Why didn't you give the matter some thought before barging in to make fun of us?"

You're either deranged or depraved! But why am I even talking to you?" With that, he told the servants to get the canes and drive him out. Mrs. Qiu confined herself to a string of angry words from the sidelines.

The old priest said with a grin as he headed for the door, "There's no need to drive me out. I'm leaving of my own accord. But should you regret it in the future, you can forget about coming to see me!"

Pointing a finger at him, Mr. Qiu continued, "You heap of old withered bones! Why would I want to see you? I know this for a certainty: The day will come when you'll be lying by the roadside, at the mercy of dogs and crows!"

Stroking his beard, the old priest gave a long, drawn-out laugh and took himself off. (MC: *An unfathomable laugh.*)

After Mr. Qiu had the servants close the gate, he and his wife continued to seethe with rage. They grumbled to each other, "We suffered such humiliation only because no betrothals are coming our girl's way." Promptly, they told the servants to spread out and bring matchmakers to them. When the matchmakers came and learned that the old priest had been there to act on his own behalf, they abandoned themselves to peals of laughter. One of them said, "How can there be such a shameless old geezer under heaven! Some days ago, he also pestered us. We all turned him down, so he had to come himself."

Mr. Qiu said, "The old man has some literary talent and loves to use it to play pranks on people. He did this to humiliate us because, on account of our strict standards in picking a son-in-law, our daughter remains unbetrothed. Now please keep an eye out for us and find us a son-in-law quickly. I'll settle for anyone who's just roughly up to the mark. I'll have hefty rewards for you!"

The matchmakers acknowledged the order and went their separate ways. So much for them.

Two days later, Night Pearl was embroidering a shoe by the window when a pair of beautiful, large, yellow butterflies with red wings, black antennae, and purple feet flew up to her. They kept circling around her, as if attracted to the sweet smell of her body. Pleasantly surprised, Night Pearl cast her silk handkerchief at them but failed to catch them. As the butterflies flew a little distance off, Night Pearl could no longer hold herself back and laughingly called out to her maid and told her to come and also bat at them. When they flew farther away, Night Pearl and her maid followed them all the way to the tree-peony bed in the back garden. There, the two butterflies gradually

grew in size until they were as large as eagles. In less time than it takes to tell, they swooped down on Night Pearl, and, looking like two large pointed bamboo hats, one on each side of the girl, they held her under her arms and lifted her into the air.

As Night Pearl screamed at the top of her voice, the appalled maid reported to Mr. Qiu. By the time Mr. and Mrs. Qiu arrived in the back garden, the two butterflies carrying Night Pearl had already flown over the garden wall. Mr. Qiu cried out in alarm, but there was no hope of rescuing her. The old couple burst into wails of grief. "Some sorcerer got her!" they lamented. Clueless as to her whereabouts, they sent out search parties everywhere, but more of them later.

Let us turn to Night Pearl at the moment when she was lifted into the air by the two butterflies, one on each side of her. Feeling as if she was riding on a cloud or a fog, she knew she was under the spell of a sorcerer, but, with her feet not touching the ground, she was in an entirely helpless state. She did, however, see clearly that she had flown over quite a few brambly paths and precipitous cliffs. Finally, she was slowly let down on a steep peak in front of a cave with a mouth no larger than a human head. No paths were seen nearby. The two butterflies disappeared, leaving in view only an old man in a Daoist priest's robe, standing with his hands respectfully clasped in front of his chest. Delighted at the sight of Night Pearl, he grabbed her hand and cried out in the direction of the cave. With a thunderous boom, the mouth of the cave suddenly opened wide, and Night Pearl found herself and the old priest inside the cave. Quickly, she turned around to look and saw that the wall of the cave had already closed in around them, making exit quite impossible. In consternation, she stole a glance at the inside of the cave and found it to be as spacious as a reception hall. More than twenty monkeys with human faces came to greet the old priest, addressing him as "Master of the Cave." The old priest said, "My bride is here. Start preparations for a banquet!"

The monkey-men acknowledged the order.

Night Pearl then noticed another room, off to one side, that was as clean and tidy as a monk's cell. On a table by the window were writing brushes, ink slabs, and books. Also there were a bamboo couch and two rows of stone benches on which sat four or five beautiful women, with six or seven maid-servants standing behind them. In front of the couch was a table laden with incense, flowers, wine, and fruit. There was no trace of meat or fish. The old priest announced, "Let my wedding ceremony begin!" As he tugged at Night

Pearl, wanting her to sit by his side, she stood rooted to the spot, resentful and afraid. Losing his temper, the old priest barked an order at the monkey-men, telling four or five of them to seize Night Pearl and force her to her seat. At this point, Night Pearl sat down in resignation. Greatly pleased now, the old priest tried to ply her with wine, but she declined the offers. The old priest drank alone, one large bowlful after another, and soon got ferociously drunk. A woman and a maidservant helped him to bed, and all three lay down to sleep. Night Pearl squatted by a stone bench, distraught with grief. Thinking of her parents, she kept weeping and passed the whole night without a single wink of sleep.

The next morning, on seeing Night Pearl's tear-stained face and swollen eyelids, the old priest caressed her back and offered her these words to assuage her grief, "Your family isn't far away, and we've just made each other's acquaintance. Why don't you try and have some fun while you're still young? Why torment yourself like this? If you yield to me, I'll take you back home to see your parents for a reunion. That can easily be done. But if you continue to resist me, you'll never be able to leave this place, not even when the rocks crumble and the oceans dry up! It's up to you which way to go!"

On hearing this, Night Pearl thought, "I'll never submit to him. Since I'll never be let out of this place, why would I want to hang on to this life? I'd be better off dead!"

As she ran toward the wall, headfirst, meaning to kill herself, the old priest quickly told the women present to stop her. They did and said gently to her, "Since you're already here, young lady, you're no longer in control. Calm down and try to make yourself at home. Don't treat life so lightly."

Night Pearl kept weeping and refused to accept food and beverage, meaning to starve herself to death. To her surprise, she was not any the worse for it after more than ten days of fasting. Since her death wish had come to nothing, she found herself at her wit's end and grew afraid that she might not be able to save herself from defilement. Inwardly, she kept praying to the bodhisattva Guanyin for help. (MC: *What else can she do?*)

The old priest sported with the other women day after day in order to arouse Night Pearl, but she remained as adamant as ever. Considering her gloominess, the old priest did not force himself on her but performed magic tricks to cheer her up so that she would yield herself to him in a good mood. Day in and day out, he showed her various tricks, partly to please her and partly to flaunt his prowess so that she would give up all hope of getting out and submit herself to him with all her heart.

You may ask, what were his tricks? It being autumn, he collected clusters of flowers from rice plants and hid them in a stone chest. Every day, he put one-tenth of a liter of rice flowers in a pot and turned them into fragrant grains of rice. (MC: *His tricks should produce enough amusement in the cave. Why would he even need sex?*) He would also put a pinch of the rice grains in a jar of water, seal the jar with a piece of paper, and hide it in a pine grove. After two or three days, he would open the seal and reveal a jarful of aromatic wine, enough for everyone in the cave. They were thus amply supplied with wine and rice without any effort. On rainy days when they all stayed inside, he would make paper cuts for fun, producing butterflies, phoenixes, dogs, swallows, foxes, apes, snakes, and mice. Then, if he ordered them to go to a certain house and bring him a certain thing, they would go and be back in an instant with the desired object. The butterflies that had brought Night Pearl to him were products of this trick. The miscellaneous household items that they brought were returned after use. As for the peaches, plums, and other fruits, they were not stolen but were plucked daily from trees on the mountain by two monkey-men, taking turns, and were complete with leaves and stems. Night Pearl marveled at his daily performances, but she remained unshaken in her resolve not to submit herself to him. The moment the old priest tried to make advances to her, she would scream and wail, threatening to kill herself, until his patience ran out and he went to find amusement with the other women. Luckily for her, the old priest would cavort only with women in a jovial mood, rather than one weighed down with grief. Therefore, Night Pearl's body remained undefiled even after she had stayed in the cave for quite some time.

One day, while the old priest was away, Night Pearl said to the other women, "You and I are all born of parents, not spirits of the mountains and forests. Why do you submit to that sorcerer and bring such humiliation on yourselves?"

With a sigh, one of the women said to Night Pearl, "Yes, we're all human beings. Why would we willingly become a sorcerer's kept women? It's just our bad luck that we fell prey to his sorcery and ended up here in captivity. We sorely miss our parents and our husbands, but there's nothing we can do. We swallow the humiliation and hang on to life only because we tell ourselves that we could have fared worse and been reincarnated as pigs, sheep, dogs, or horses in this life. Things being the way they are, what's the use of crossing him? We might as well relax and let the days go by as Heaven dictates. There may come a day when his evil doings catch up with him. Then

we'll be able to go back to the human world." At this point, every one of the women dissolved in tears. There is a *ci* poem to the tune of "A Gourd-Bottle of Vinegar in a Shang Mode" about these women:

*The beauties secretly lamented their fate;
They fell prey to an evil spirit.
Though they enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh,
His looks struck fear in their hearts.
They finished the business in a hurry;
He was no Mr. Liu of Peach Blossom Cave.⁹*

There is another poem about Night Pearl of the Qiu family:

*She was a rare pearl that glowed at night,
But she fell into mud before gaining glory.
With her purity undefiled,
The sorcerer's lust made him a figure of fun.
Once the sky cleared and the sun came out,
His gain might turn out to be a loss.*

While the women were pouring out their woes to one another, consumed with grief, a monkey-man suddenly appeared with the announcement "The Master of the Cave is back!"

Afraid that he might detect something amiss, the other women all wiped away their tears and dispersed, leaving Night Pearl behind, her face still wet with tears. When the old priest arrived, he said to her, "You've been here for quite some time now. Why are you still in tears? I was hoping that you'd gradually warm up to me so I'd win your heart and we could both enjoy our time together. I didn't want to force myself on you. That's not my way of doing things. So I didn't put pressure on you. (MC: *He's an old hand at this business.*) But now, after so many days have gone by, you remain as stubborn as ever. If you make me angry, I'll have several servants pin you down and force myself on you. Where can you go? To the sky?"

Horried, Night Pearl dared not indulge in sobs but kept praying silently to the bodhisattva Guanyin for rescue and protection. Let us leave her at her prayers and return to Mr. and Mrs. Qiu.

Ever since their daughter's disappearance, the old couple had missed her day and night. They put up posters on major thoroughfares that said, "He

who offers information about our daughter will win her as wife as well as our family fortune.” And yet no word came to them despite the passage of time. Moreover, those who had witnessed the girl rise into the air recognized the power of sorcery, which was beyond human intervention. At their wit’s end, Mr. and Mrs. Qiu could do no more than pray daily, with bitter tears, to the statue of the bodhisattva, “O Bodhisattva so responsive to prayers, you blessed us with this daughter in answer to our prayers. Now that she’s been snatched away by a sorcerer, if you don’t go to her rescue and return her to us, why didn’t you refuse to give her to us in the first place? Please manifest your divine power!” Day after day, they cried out their prayers at the top of their voices. (MC: *How sad!*) Their earnestness could have brought clay statues of deities to life.

One day, a canopied pole with an object hanging from it was suddenly seen standing atop Mount Huihai. As no such pole had ever been seen on this mountain, the sight caused quite a stir and attracted a large crowd of spectators. Failing to recognize the object hanging from it, they indulged in wild guesses.

Among the crowd was a scholar named Liu Deyuan. The scion of a distinguished family, he was steeped in learning despite of his youth and had an inquisitive mind. The unusual sight of the canopied pole triggered his scholarly impulse to get to the bottom of the matter. He had several servants make a rope ladder and bring him long-handled hooks, a steel fork, and wooden boards. “Those who want to watch, follow me!” he cried. Applying his abundant intelligence, he used the steel fork to hoist the rope ladder into big trees so that he could ascend the mountain, where there was no trail in sight; he laid the wooden boards on the ground whenever the surface was too rough and uneven; and he hung on to the long-handled hooks when the going was too dangerous. With him pressing ahead in front, more than ten people, including his servants, followed behind so they could be part of the action, and they all managed to reach the top of the mountain.

Once there, they found the ground quite level. Having thus gained a firm foothold, they saw a large open cave on a cliff halfway down the mountain. In the cave were more than ten women, some sleeping, some sitting, all apparently in an intoxicated trance. Several tens of old monkeys lay in pools of blood, their heads chopped off. From their vantage point high above, the men had a clear view of everything in the cave. On turning their eyes to the object hanging from the pole, they saw that it was the skeleton of an old rhesus monkey. Liu Deyuan was astounded. He had heard about the missing-person

posters that the Qiu family had put up and thought, "Could the Qiu girl be among these women?"

With great dispatch he went down the mountain, sent a messenger to the county yamen to report the matter, and went himself to inform Mr. Qiu. Beside himself with joy, Mr. Qiu went with him to the county yamen to await instructions for action. Losing no time, the county magistrate sent a team of police officers to go and investigate. Li Deyuan led the officers up the mountain, while Mr. Qiu, being advanced in years, would hardly be able to make it up the mountain and waited in front of the county yamen for news. With Deyuan leading the way, the officers soon arrived.

As a matter of fact, the cave was visible from above but completely cut off from its surroundings below, which was why the evil spirits could hide so many people inside. From the peak of the mountain, the police officers had a clear view of the women. Holding on to the brush and vines, they blazed a trail to the cave and brought the women out one by one. When the procession arrived at the county yamen, Mr. Qiu wondered if his daughter was in it or not. When he detected her across the distance among the group of women, her hair disheveled, he went up and stopped her. Father and daughter fell on each other's shoulders and broke down in tears.

Upon the group's arrival in the courtroom, the county magistrate called the women forward and questioned them on their backgrounds. After they told the magistrate everything, including what they had witnessed day after day, the magistrate was convinced that they were decent womenfolk who had fallen prey to sorcery. He asked further, "Who killed the evil spirit today?"

"He was going to rape Night Pearl of the Qiu family (MC: *Night Pearl puts these women to shame.*) when it turned dark all around us, and we were rendered half unconscious, but we did hear loud noises and sobs and the clanging of swords. We had no idea what could have happened. We didn't come to until the police officers came to our rescue. We saw all the monkeys dead on the ground, but the evil old sorcerer was nowhere in sight."

At this point, Liu Deyuan and the officers presented the skeleton and the canopied pole to the magistrate, saying, "This skeleton, which was hanging from the pole, must have belonged to the evil old sorcerer. He must have been slain by the gods."

The county magistrate asked, "Has this canopied pole ever been seen on the mountain before?"

"Never," answered everyone in chorus.

"How strange!" exclaimed the magistrate. "Where could it have come from?" He ordered Liu Deyuan to bring the pole to him for closer examination. There, on the pole, were inscribed several vertical lines of writing in small characters, complete with the date. The canopied pole, in fact, was part of the paraphernalia in the temple to the bodhisattva at the Upper Tianzhu Peak. Realizing that the bodhisattva had been manifesting her divine power, the magistrate was awestruck. He immediately ordered that the officers do a roll call of the women and send notices to their families so that they could come and reclaim their women.

Mr. Qiu, who was already waiting outside, was the first to make a claim. After signing the receipt, he took Night Pearl out of the yamen. Just as if he had acquired a luminous pearl in the darkness of the night, he kept calling her one term of endearment after another.

When they arrived home, mother and daughter wept as though they would never stop. Mrs. Qiu asked Night Pearl, "When you were lifted into midair by sorcery, the two of us rushed over, only to see you fly over the wall and out of the house. Where were you taken, and what happened?"

"I was lifted into midair by two giant butterflies. My mind was clear. I just couldn't get down. I heard your cries. I arrived at a place where an old man dressed like a Daoist priest greeted me and took me into a cave. Evil spirits in the cave called him 'Master of the Cave,' and he tried to force me to marry him. Those women were already in the cave. They were also victims of his sorcery. They advised me to submit, but I held my ground."

Mrs. Qiu said, "I'm so happy that we get to see you back home again! Even if you've been defiled, you're not to blame because you couldn't help it."

"Mother, it's not like that. Because I rejected him and threatened to kill myself, that old demon debauched other women instead of pestering me, so I managed to preserve my chastity. Last night, it was after he had given up all hope of my submission that he resorted to force and had several monkey-men pin me down by my hands and feet, and two or three of the women took off my underwear. When he was about to defile me, I thought that this time there was no way I could get out of it. In desperation, I cried out 'The divine and responsive Bodhisattva Guanyin!' A gust of wind sprang up, and everything went dark as the evil spirits began to wail. It was so dark that I couldn't even see my own hand in front of me, and I passed out. I didn't come around until many people entered the cave to rescue us. I saw that all the monkey-men had been killed and the old demon was gone. I have no idea what happened."

Mr. Qiu said, "Since your disappearance, your mother and I have been praying day and night to the bodhisattva Guanyin. Many people have been moved by our earnestness and asked around for information out of sympathy for us, but nothing came of their searches. Amazingly enough, it was indeed the bodhisattva Guanyin who manifested her divine power and killed the demon. When that old priest came some time ago to make an offer of marriage, we were annoyed with him because he didn't know his limits. We had no idea he was a demon. And now, he got his comeuppance in this very life. Be all that as it may, if Scholar Liu had not taken it upon himself to lead a team of people to find out what was hanging from the canopied pole, how would the secret of the cave have ever been brought to light? Plus he reported the matter to the county yamen for a rescue effort and then came to notify us. We must never forget what we owe him."

In the midst of their conversation, several women came with their relatives and friends to visit Night Pearl and her parents. All three of them went out to greet the visitors and ushered them in. They were women who had shared the cave with Night Pearl and had been released to go home. The fact was that on reuniting with their families, they learned that they owed their delivery to Mr. and Mrs. Qiu's fervent prayers and Night Pearl's firm resistance and appeals to the bodhisattva, who then acted in response. That was why they had come to the Qiu residence together to offer their thanks. Only then were Mr. and Mrs. Qiu convinced of the truth of what Night Pearl had told them. After expressing their gratitude, the women began to talk about pooling their resources in order to build a temple on top of the mountain in honor of the bodhisattva Guanyin. Everyone rejoiced.

While they were thus engaged in conversation, Scholar Liu also came to visit the Qius. With his scholar's curiosity, he was there for no other purpose than to inquire about details of life in the cave so as to complete his record of the event. He never expected to stumble upon so many people, who turned out to be victims from the cave and their families and friends. On learning that the visitor was the very Scholar Liu who had led a group of men up the mountain and reported what he had seen to the magistrate and was therefore their savior, they all saluted him and bowed their thanks.

"Why are so many of you gathered here?" asked the scholar.

The assembled women told him that they were there partly to thank Mr. and Mrs. Qiu for their fervent prayers and Night Pearl for her rejection of the demon and her appeals to the bodhisattva, who then delivered them from their misery, and partly to talk about pooling their resources to build a

temple. "It's such a rare opportunity that we should run into you, Scholar," said one of the women. "Now that we've become acquainted, could you please write a petition for us? We'll bring the matter to the attention of the county yamen tomorrow and act together." (MC: *Exactly the kind of thing a scholar should be involved in.*)

Scholar Liu said, "Yes, just leave it to me! I'll go to the county yamen tomorrow and make an appeal to the magistrate—first, about building a temple and, second, about praising Miss Qiu. It was, after all, her chastity and strength of character that brought the response from the bodhisattva."

While he was mouthing the words "We wouldn't presume," Mr. Qiu, impressed by Scholar Liu's articulateness and expansive spirit, began to have ideas.

"Scholar, who might your father-in-law be?" he asked.

"I've frittered away my youth. I'm not yet betrothed."

"This old man has made a vow: Anyone who brings me information about my daughter will have my family fortune and my daughter as wife. This is known to everybody. Now you went up the mountain, found my daughter, and reported to me. I can't go back on my word. In the presence of so many witnesses, I propose that we form a marriage alliance. How does the idea strike you?"

The visitors all broke into cheers. "Wonderful! Wonderful! A brilliant scholar and a beautiful maiden—this is a perfect match!"

But Scholar Liu would have none of it. "Please don't say this, sir. It was just out of curiosity and for the fun of it that I took the risks and went on the search. It was by chance that I found the truth. It had been some time since you put up the missing-person posters on the streets, so in the excitement of the moment, I came to report the good news to you, but I didn't have the reward in mind. If that's the way you see it, you're taking me for less than I am, as if I acted out of selfish motives. With all due respect, I can't oblige you."

As the visitors all took Mr. Qiu's part, Scholar Liu felt hurt. Unable to come up with an appropriate reply, he took leave of them, though he agreed to meet the women the next day at the county yamen.

After he left, everyone praised him for being such a scholarly and honorable gentleman, saying that a good man like him was a rare find. Mr. Qiu said, "Tomorrow, I'll ask a matchmaker to bring off this match for my daughter."

An older and wiser person walked up to him and said, "We'll be going to the county yamen to present our petition anyway. While we're at it, why

don't you speak to the magistrate and ask him to intervene? Wouldn't that be nice?" (MC: *Yes, very nice.*)

Everyone said in unison, "Good idea!"

After the visitors left, Mr. Qiu talked with his wife and his daughter about Scholar Liu's many virtues, and they were all filled with admiration.

The next day, after the county magistrate opened his court session, Scholar Liu was the first one to step forward. He gave a report on how the bodhisattva had manifested her divine power, how the victims wanted to pool their resources and build a temple, and how Miss Qiu had protected her own chastity and moved the goddess to wipe out the evil spirits. Only then did the women present their signed petition. The magistrate approved construction of the temple and pledged ten taels of silver from the county treasury. He drew up a document to that effect, affixed the county seal to it, and gave it to the oldest and most respected member of the assembled company. The petitioners thanked him and told him about Mr. Qiu's wish to have Scholar Liu as a son-in-law out of gratitude to the latter.

Turning to Mr. Qiu, the magistrate said, "Tell me more about this."

"However grateful we are to the bodhisattva for manifesting her divine power and slaying the evil spirits who kidnapped my daughter, my daughter also would have died in the cave if Scholar Liu had not made the effort to go up the mountain. In our joy over the family reunion, I sincerely wish to marry my daughter to him. To my surprise, Scholar Liu refused, which is why we're petitioning Your Honor together, hoping that you'll support me."

The magistrate told Scholar Liu to approach the bench and said to him, "There's a chorus in favor of your marriage with Miss Qiu. This is a good thing. Why don't you agree?"

"I did this out of curiosity about something out of the ordinary. I had no marital intentions. If I accept this marriage offer, uninformed outsiders will take me to be a greedy man with ulterior motives. What a loss of face that will be for me! Moreover, I was just telling Your Honor about Miss Qiu's fortitude in protecting her chastity. If she were to become my wife, those words of mine can be construed as selfishly motivated. With what little learning I have, I value honor, integrity, and self-respect above all else. Therefore, I won't venture to oblige you." (MC: *Scholar Liu deserves respect.*)

The county magistrate stomped a foot and exclaimed, "Such a man is hard to come by! Miss Qiu's fortitude in protecting her chastity, Mr. Liu's sense of honor, and Mr. Qiu's eagerness to repay a kindness—these are all highly worthy qualities. Being privileged to witness such an event, I'm duty

bound to bring about your happiness. I'll officiate at the wedding. My worthy friend, you can't refuse!"

Without a moment's delay, he ordered that ten taels of silver be taken out of the county treasury to help with the betrothal gift and that a band of percussion musicians escort the party out of the county yamen to the Qiu residence for a betrothal ceremony. (MC: *Good magistrate!*) Then, on a chosen auspicious day, Scholar Liu moved into the Qiu residence and became the old couple's live-in son-in-law.

One month later, the newly wedded couple made their way to the Upper Tianzhu Peak to make an incense offering to the bodhisattva Guanyin and to return the canopied pole. Before long, the new temple on the peak was completed, thanks to concerted efforts from all, and it goes without saying that the young couple went there to offer incense and light candles. Later, Scholar Liu passed the civil service examinations and brought glory and high status to himself and to his wife. Mr. Qiu and his wife lived to a ripe old age and passed away on the same day while intoning the sutras, but this happened later.

Let us return to the stone wall on Mount Huihai. After the evil spirits were exterminated, the four poems—on wind, flowers, snow, and the moon—vanished as if washed away. It was by then evident to everyone that the old priest was an old demon rather than a decent man. There is a poem in testimony:

*The old ageless demon on the mountain
Found secluded shelter in the stone cave.
To slay him, the bodhisattva was suddenly called upon;
Remember that Buddhist restraint conquers evil.*

Revenue Manager Zhao Leaves Word for His Love a Thousand *Li* Away

Su Xiaojuan Achieves Happiness with a Single Poem

As the poem says,

*Calligraphy fairies may grace a brothel with their presence,
Lending one-night stands a touch of romance.
Many a courtesan has turned her life around;
Lotus flowers do emerge unsullied from mud.*

You may wonder about the source of the term “calligraphy fairies” in the first line of the poem. Please lend your ears to this humble storyteller.

In the Tang dynasty, there lived in Chang’an a courtesan named Cao Wenji. She took a liking to literary pursuits when she was only four or five years of age. At fifteen, she was a marvel to the eyes, looking more like a fairy than a mortal being. When her family tried to teach her to play musical instruments, she said with a smile, “That’s a lowly pursuit quite beneath me. I’ll be content to grow old among ink slabs and discarded writing brushes.” She spoke as elegantly as a master of literature writes on paper and composed poems in a fresh and graceful style. Even those with the most brilliant talent held her in high regard. And her calligraphy rivaled that of Zhong Yao [of the Three Kingdoms period] and Wang Xizhi [303–361] of old and Yan Zhenqin [709–784] and Liu Gongquan [778–865] of the same dynasty. Indeed, she

was a veritable reincarnation of Lady Wei [famous calligrapher of the Jin dynasty]. Those who acquired a small sheet of her calligraphy valued it as they would an outsize ritual jade disk. For a time, she was called a “calligraphy fairy” (MC: *Two nice words.*), and she would not give specimens of her calligraphy to just anyone.

All over Chang’an, any number of wealthy and powerful men sought her hand in marriage, offering load upon load of gold and silk (MC: *Most of them overrate themselves.*), but she announced, “How can I possibly marry any such man? Those who propose marriage to me must first send me their poems. (IC: *A tall order!*) Then I’ll make my choice.” When these words got around, not only did poets with established literary fame vie with one another, each putting his best foot forward and believing himself to be the winner; even inferior verse-mongers were caught up in the excitement. And then there were those who brazenly tried to pass themselves off as men of culture and were prone to producing a few rhymed lines that hardly qualified as poetry. Lost to all sense of shame, they presented her with their concoctions, only to make fools of themselves. And so no suitor was chosen. The rejected candidates proposed another poetry contest. To this proposal, which threw the young men of Chang’an into another fit of excitement, Wenji reacted with nothing more than a scornful smile.

Finally, a Mr. Ren of Minjiang, then a temporary resident of Chang’an, heard about the event. In delight, he said, “I’ve got myself a wife now!” (MC: *The impertinence!*) When asked what made him say that, he replied, “A phoenix’s rightful place is in the *wutong* tree. A fish’s rightful place is in a deep pond. There’s a rightful place for everyone. This is no wishful thinking.” Having said that, he wrote a poem:

*The calligraphy fairy at the Jade Emperor’s court,
Not yet free of mortal desires, was banished from heaven.
Be not surprised at her sweet fragrance:
Smoke from the divine incense burner clings to her gown.*

Wen Ji was immensely pleased on reading the poem. “This one is meant to be my husband!” she said. “Otherwise, how did he know where I came from? I’ll gladly marry him.” With this poem as the token of betrothal, they became man and wife. Henceforth, on spring mornings and autumn evenings, they took turns intoning poems over cups of wine, matching each other’s poems. (MC: *Living the life of fairies.*) Indeed, they were as close as a pair

of lovebirds or two flower blossoms on the same stem, and their love for each other knew no bounds.

Five years went by in like manner. One day, at the end of the third lunar month when the ninety-day spring season was on its way out, the husband and wife set out wine and waxed poetic over the departure of spring. As they toasted each other, Wenji took up her writing implements and wrote down the following poem:

*Seasons of the year mean nothing to fairies
In their breezy, sunlit towers.
With that smooth road leading back to the azure sky,
Shall we ride the five-cloud dragon together?*

She showed the poem to him, but its meaning eluded him. As he was mulling it over, Wenji said smilingly, “You knew where I came from when you wrote your first poem to me, so why are you bewildered now? I was a calligraphy fairy in heaven, and because of a momentary failure to withstand temptation, I was demoted to live the life of an earthling for twenty-four years. Now that my term has expired, I’ll be on my way back to heaven. You may join me. Life in heaven is much more enjoyable than it is on earth.”

At this point, a strain of celestial music filled the air, and an exotic fragrance permeated the room. Agape with astonishment, the servants saw a vermilion-robed official coming into view. Holding a jade tablet bearing vermilion characters in the seal style, he addressed Wenji with a bow: “Li He has just completed his new poem on White Jade Tower, and the Lord on High wants you to inscribe his poem on a stone tablet.”¹

After bowing in acknowledgment of the order, Wenji took Mr. Ren by his hand and rose from the ground into the air amid glittering rosy clouds and circling phoenixes and cranes. Spectators numbered in the tens of thousands, and her abode came to be called “The Calligraphy Fairy’s Lane.” This story is the source of the term “calligraphy fairy,” and it is a story that presents the best image of courtesans.

Gentle reader, you may ask, when did the profession of prostitution begin? Well, it began in the Spring and Autumn period [770–476 BCE]. Guan Zhong [d. 645 BCE], prime minister of the state of Qi, allowed seven hundred women to live in the palace and purchased military supplies with the tax revenues generated from their nocturnal services. This practice was passed on to later times and gained great popularity, but the services, in the

beginning, were limited to playing drinking companion, supplying entertainment, providing outlets for feelings, and relieving boredom and loneliness. Such services are, in fact, quite indispensable, but, alas, they came to do men more harm than good. Regrettably, as they say, “Wine does not intoxicate; men themselves yield to its effect. Beauty does not captivate; men themselves are ready prey.” Pleasures of the flesh hold some men under a spell, and men under such spells easily fall prey to tricks and scams. Prostitutes, like flying willow catkins, do not have steady partners, and patrons lose their heads and live as if there is no tomorrow. They are no match for the blood-sucking and teeth-gnashing procurers whose doings flout the will of Heaven and who heartlessly think up evil schemes in the twinkling of an eye. As a consequence, there is no lack of patrons who end up financially ruined, disgraced, and even dead. (MC: *How true!*) The conventional wisdom is that a brothel is a bottomless trap. Most of the frivolous and dissipated young patrons lack minds of their own, and most establishments that engage in this business set traps for them.

As for the girls, they just thoughtlessly go with the current, caring nothing for their own futures. Out of a hundred girls, very few are concerned about their reputations or want to get out of the business and marry. Even if they do marry, infidelity on their part or on the men’s part eventually ruins the marriage. Be that as it may, humans are not unfeeling wood or stone, after all. Let us leave aside the procurers, whose job, by definition, is to make a profit and wheedle money out of the patrons but consider the case of the prostitutes. Born of parents, as is everyone else, they are also sentient beings. When they offer their smiles during the day and their services on the pillow at night, do they stay unruffled and unstirred and willingly help the procurers set traps for their patrons? No, that is not true. There are indeed girls who fall in love and remain faithful to their men, and girls who are determined to extricate themselves from such a life and never banish this wish from their thoughts. There has been more than one such case since antiquity. This humble storyteller now proposes to tell of a prostitute who died of lovesickness for the man of her heart and helped bring about the marriage of her beloved younger sister. This goes to show that there are prostitutes of good character, as evidenced by this poem:

*The loving couple died of lovesickness,
But both made plans for their loved ones.
Few in this world have such tender feelings;*

*Listen as I sing of her and a man of Tianshui.²
Tianshui abounds in talented men,
One of whom claimed a soft spot in Miss Su's heart.
His job separated them for three long years;
Though far apart, they died on the same day.
On his deathbed, he left word for his cousin,
To honor a pledge about his lover's sister.
Together, the departed souls made the match,
Continuing their blissful bond of love.*

As the story goes, in the Song dynasty, there lived in Qiantang [the present-day city of Hangzhou] the celebrated courtesan Su Pannu. She and her younger sister, Su Xiaojuan, were equally famous for their beauty as well as for their literary talent. Young men from rich families went to visit them when touring Lin'an [Hangzhou] Prefecture. Indeed, there was a never-ending stream of horse-carriages to and from their door. The two sisters had no procuress. (MC: *Isn't that wonderful?*) Pannu was the head of the household, but all decisions were made by both of them. Deeming themselves to be of better-than-average moral character, they refused to flow with the current. Although they lived in the lap of luxury, they remained discontented, and each longed to find a soul mate to marry, feeling that only then would they know peace of mind. As they shared the same views, they got along perfectly with each other.

Pannu had her eye on a certain Zhao Bumin. A member of the royal clan, he was a student at the Imperial Academy. In the Song dynasty, members of the royal clan enjoyed salaried titles, but those who took the civil service examinations were required to give up such entitlements. Zhao Bumin had a cousin, Zhao Buqi, who took advantage of his entitlement and became an assistant director of a government office, but Zhao Bumin, confident of his own talent, was determined to succeed in the civil service examinations, and so he enrolled at the Imperial Academy. He possessed abundant intelligence and a dashing figure, as well as some degree of sincerity and earnestness (MC: *Important qualities.*), which was why Pannu was attracted to him. In his absence, she lost her appetite. Being a bookish scholar, Zhao Bumin was not much of an expert in money matters, and his means began to dwindle. Instead of turning her nose up at him because of his poverty, Pannu supplied him with enough money to buy lamp oil, wine, and food (MC: *Another Qianguo Lady.*),³ so that he would not terminate his studies for want of money. She

often said to him, “You’re by no means a petty mediocrity, and I’m not reconciled to my life as a courtesan. I only hope you can pass the exams and get me out of this place, so that I can be with you the rest of my life, however humble that may turn out to be. So you must concentrate on your studies and not slack off or be distracted by other matters. Leave everything that has to do with clothes and food to me. I’ll make sure that you’re adequately provided for.”

Inspired by her older sister’s tender feelings for Student Zhao, Xiaojuan also wanted to find a good husband, but no good candidate had come her way. Well aware of Xiaojuan’s wish, Pannu kept her eyes and ears open for her. She said to Student Zhao, “My sister has a wonderful disposition. She’ll eventually marry and get out of this business. Should you make a name for yourself one of these days and marry me, please also find a good husband for her, for the sake of our sisterhood.” (MC: *Little does she know that her own marriage will not materialize but her sister’s will, thanks to her.*) Student Zhao had a tender affection for Xiaojuan as well, so he stamped these words firmly on his memory.

Student Zhao not only did not spend one penny on Pannu but was able to devote himself to his studies while receiving subsidies from her. Out of gratitude for her kindness, he labored at his studies with unflinching diligence and, sure enough, passed the civil service examinations at the national level. Pannu was beside herself with joy. Truly,

*By the silvery lamp, she took off her earrings
As she murmured the name of her lover.
Henceforth, she cared not for pricey orchids and musk
But favored the scent of cassia at night.⁴*

After the list of successful candidates was publicized, Student Zhao continued to stay with Pannu because he was not assigned a post. (MC: *How delightful!*) Even more tenderly attached to each other, they wanted to be married, but there was one barrier: It was very difficult for a celebrated courtesan to have her name struck from the government registry. Nine officials out of ten would not approve because they would lose a useful entertainer, and their superiors, when stopping in their town, might think the worse of them for that and make things hard for them. Therefore, replies to delisting applications often ran along these lines: “The applicant’s wish to settle down to a married life is laudable, but her departure will leave a void

that will be difficult to fill. The request is therefore denied." This was almost routine. Granting such a request would be possible only if it was done as an enormous personal favor or if the official involved happened to be willing to go out of his way to lend others a helping hand. Now, Su Pannu, with her fame as a poet-courtesan, was too good an entertainer to be let off lightly. (MC: *This is the way most benighted men think.*) However close she was to Student Zhao, the latter had no money or influence he could use to get her name removed from the registry. He had now passed the examinations, but Pannu remained a registered courtesan and therefore unavailable for marriage.

They were talking about what to do when a messenger arrived, bringing news that he had been appointed revenue manager of Xiangyang. However, it would be a loss of face for a newly appointed official to speak up on behalf of a courtesan. And to make matters worse, this was a courtesan whom he wanted for himself, something that would surely set gossiping tongues wagging. (MC: *There has to be a good time for everything.*) He thought of looking for other ways, but he was not allowed much time before he was supposed to proceed to his post, and no opportunity was likely to come their way on such short notice. In resignation, the two of them agreed that he would go to Xiangyang first and then send someone to take care of the matter on his behalf. At this point, the revenue manager and Pannu fell on each other's shoulders and dissolved in tears. Xiaojuan, off to one side, also shed copious tears. After bidding him farewell, Pannu returned to her room, covering her teary eyes with her hand, and there we shall leave her for now.

On his way to Xiangyang to assume his post, the revenue manager found every chirp from the birds and every fallen flower a painful reminder of Pannu. He meant to send a capable subordinate to the capital to redeem Pannu as soon as he arrived at his duty station. As it turned out, however, he became so swamped with work that he was unable to find a capable confidant for the job in the time that flashed by. He did write a couple of letters and dispatch a messenger or two, but little was accomplished. He also wrote to his friends in the capital, asking them to help have Pannu's name removed from the list of courtesans and then make arrangements for her journey to his duty station. However, given the inconvenience of doing this by correspondence across such a great distance and the fact that the beneficiary of the favor was merely a courtesan, no one went out of his way to do this in good faith. The most his friends accomplished was writing some kind of letter that was transmitted from one office to another, each taking more than half a year to reach the revenue manager. Every time he received such a

letter, he could do no more than shed bitter tears, because it was not something that would get him anywhere.

Three years went by in like manner. His wish unfulfilled, the revenue manager fell prey to lovesickness. As the ancients put it so well, "Afflictions of the mind can be cured only by the mind." How could medicine work while Pannu remained so far away? Gradually, he became ill and bedridden.

One day, the gatekeeper announced, "A man who claims to be an Assistant Director Zhao and a cousin of yours is outside, wishing to see you, sir."

The revenue manager hastened to cry out, "Ask him in!" After greeting the visitor, he said, "Brother, if you'd come earlier, I wouldn't have ended up in such a state."

"But why are you so gravely ill, my brother? What could I have done if I'd come earlier?"

"When I was in the capital, I was great friends with a registered courtesan named Su Pannu. It was thanks to her financial support that I was able to concentrate on my studies, make a name for myself, and get as far as I have. But in my haste, I wasn't able to help her remove her name from the registry for courtesans, so she didn't come here with me. Our agreement was for me to send someone to the capital right after I arrived at my duty station. As it turned out, everyone I sent has proved to be incompetent. I had such high hopes, but each reply that I've received from the messengers was evasive. For three years now, I've been on fire, while the prospects for success have been as cold as ice. This is driving me insane! My brother, if you'd come earlier and undertaken this job for me, Pannu would be here, and I wouldn't be on the brink of death. But it's too late now." (MC: *Poor thing!*) With that, he burst into a flood of tears.

The assistant director said, "Don't worry, my brother. Your health is worth a thousand pieces of gold. You need to build it up again. You'll surely recover. Such a trifle is not worth dying for."

"My brother, you're a man of fine sensibilities. How can you say the kind of meaningless words that are on the lips of everyone else? Matters of the heart are highly personal. Lives could be at stake. How can you dismiss them as trifles?" In his agitation, he fainted again.

A couple of days later, he thought he saw Pannu appearing before him, and his condition took a turn for the worse. Knowing that he stood no chance of recovery, he called his cousin to his bed and gave him these words of instruction: "The feelings that Pannu and I have for each other are quite out of the ordinary. We're bound in life and in death. I'm now dying for her,

and I won't forget her after my death. Please take what I've saved from my salary over the past three years, divide it into two equal portions, keep one half for yourself, and send the other half to Pannu for me. (MC: *Good thing the cousin is a man of fine sensibilities. Otherwise, who is to say he wouldn't appropriate the other half?*) She'll surely observe widowhood for me after she learns of my death, but she has a younger sister, Xiaojuan, who's a beauty and a good poet. Pannu once asked me to find a husband for her. Now you, with your dashing looks and your poetic talent, are a good candidate for Xiaojuan. When you arrive in the capital, give my message to them. They'll surely agree. It will be a perfect match. Don't miss out on the chance, if only partly to fulfill my wish and partly to continue my bond with her sister. (MC: *This is where his sincerity and earnestness come in.*) Remember this dying wish of mine!" As the assistant director tearfully acknowledged the order, the revenue manager breathed his last.

After the funeral was over, the assistant director made preparations for escorting the coffin back to Lin'an for burial. He packed and set out in the direction of Qiantang. More of him later.

Let us now turn to Su Pannu. After Revenue Manager Zhao's departure, she did not take so much as one step out of her house. Turning away all visitors, she single-mindedly waited for word from Xiangyang. To her disappointment, although she did receive a couple of letters, very little was accomplished. Being but a woman, she could get nothing done, however frantic she became. She spent her days in dejection, waiting in vain for good news.

One day, a merchant from Yuqian [in the vicinity of Hangzhou] came to Qiantang with several trunks of silk procured by the government. Having heard of Pannu's fame, he insisted on seeing her. She declined his annoying repeated requests, pleading illness, and later she did indeed fall gravely ill. Believing that she was feigning illness to fob him off, the merchant grew resentful. Xiaojuan received him a few times but, finding him a benighted boor, looked askance at him. (MC: *That's what makes Xiaojuan who she is.*) Several times, he brazenly demanded to stay the night at her place, but Xiaojuan declined, saying, "With my sister so gravely ill, I need to keep her company and give her medicine. I can't let any patron spend the night here." Failing to latch onto Xiaojuan, the merchant spent his nights at other brothels.

Later, when her lovesickness was at its worst, Pannu fell into a prolonged trance. One day, she suddenly said to Xiaojuan, "Sister, take good care of yourself. I'm going to join Mr. Zhao."

Thinking that she meant she was about to venture outside, Xiaojuan said, "You're in no condition to undertake such a long journey. Aren't you talking nonsense?"

"No, this is no nonsense. I'll be seeing him soon enough." As she said this, her voice began to trail off. After calling out Zhao's name time and again, she ceased to be.

Xiaojuan burst into a flood of tears. She bought a coffin, had her sister's body placed inside it, and erected a memorial tablet in her honor. As she was thinking of sending a message to the Zhaos by way of someone who happened to be going in the direction of Xiangyang, two yamen runners swaggered into the house and told her that she and her sister were wanted at the yamen because they were implicated in a case involving some kind of government procurement of silk. (MC: *Misfortunes never come singly.*) Knowing nothing about the case, Xiaojuan said to the runners, "My older sister has just passed away. Her coffin and her memorial tablet are right here. But I'll follow you to the yamen."

As was only to be expected in such situations, Xiaojuan offered the two runners wine, food, and money. After telling her maid to look after the house, she locked the door and went to the yamen with the runners. Only upon arrival at the yamen did she learn that the patron from Yuqian had been brought to court on charges, leveled by an accomplice, of paying prostitutes with silk that was government property, and, nursing a grudge against the two sisters, the merchant of Yuqian had dragged them into the case. (MC: *How abominable! This is the greatest fear of courtesans.*), Xiaojuan felt grievously wronged and looked forward to arguing her case in court, but when she was brought into the yamen, the assistant prefect happened to be away at a business dinner and had no time to take up the case. Knowing it to be a case involving money, the assistant prefect had left orders that Xiaojuan be put in jail for the time being. Poor thing!

*A beauty among beauties,
She now found herself in jail.
A green dragon and a white tiger
Bring either joy or woe when together.⁵*

Let us leave Xiaojuan in her misery in jail for now and turn our attention to Assistant Director Zhao, who arrived in Qiantang with his brother's coffin and made arrangements for the funeral. Carrying his brother's last will

with him, he went on a search for the Su residence, but then he thought, "I don't know either of the two sisters. If I go to see them out of the blue, how will I be able to find out their real thoughts? My brother died for Pannu's sake, but who knows what she thinks and what she's been doing these days? (IC: *Good questions.*) I can't very well break the news to her so abruptly." Then an idea struck him: "The assistant prefect here is a member of my clan. Why don't I ask him to summon the two sisters and question them in court? All the facts will be known then."

So he headed straight for the Lin'an prefectural yamen and saw the assistant prefect. After an exchange of amenities, he told the assistant prefect about his cousin Zhao Bumin's passing and Bumin's dying wish regarding Pannu and Xiaojuan and asked the assistant prefect to summon the two sisters to court.

"Those two are indeed courtesans of good character," said the assistant prefect. "I'll have them brought here. You can talk directly to them and get all the facts you need." Right away, he gave an order slip to a yamen runner and told him to bring the sisters to court. The runner acknowledged the order and went off.

Before long, he returned to say, "I just came from the Su residence. Su Pannu died about a month ago, and Su Xiaojuan is in the prefectural jail."

The assistant director and the assistant prefect were both astounded. "Why is she in jail?" they asked.

"According to her servants, a merchant from Yuqian falsely accused her of taking government silk."

The assistant prefect said with a nod, "Yes, I'm the one handling that case."

"For the sake of my deceased cousin," said the assistant director, "please take good care of her." (MC: *Now he's talking!*)

"Please join me in my court. After we question her and get all the facts, I'll decide what to do."

"My deceased cousin wrote a letter to Pannu, but she's gone. My cousin also told me to take care of Xiaojuan and to take her for my wife. But I've never even seen her, and I have no idea how she'll react. So let me write a letter to her, to appeal to her, by way of making a marriage proposal. Please do me a favor and deliver it to her, please."

The assistant prefect said with a smile, "Of course. In the future, don't forget the service I rendered as the matchmaker."

With an outburst of merriment, they went into the courtroom, where the assistant director was offered a seat.

After the court session was declared open, the assistant prefect had Xiaojuan brought from the jail to the courtroom and began his interrogation by saying, "The merchant of Yuqian owes the government a hundred bolts of silk. According to his confession, he gave the silk to you and your sister as payment. How are you going to pay back the money?"

"When my sister Pannu was still alive, there was indeed a patron from Yuqian. He came twice, but I turned him away because Pannu was ill. We never received any silk from him. It's because my sister has passed away and the dead cannot bear witness that he thinks he can make false charges without consequences. If Your Honor could be lenient in your ruling, not only will I be ever so grateful, but Pannu in the netherworld will also feel much beholden to you."

Impressed by her graceful speech, the assistant prefect began to take a liking to her. "Do you know Revenue Manager Zhao of Xiangyang?" he asked.

"Yes. Before he passed the exams, he was close to my sister Pannu and was betrothed to her. That's how I came to know him. After he passed the exams and went away to assume his government post, he did send many a letter, but the marriage pledge remained unfulfilled. Pannu fell ill with love-sickness and died more than a month ago."

"How sad!" said the assistant prefect. "You may not know this, but Revenue Manager Zhao has also passed away."

As the news triggered memories of her sister, Xiaojuan said, involuntarily shedding bitter tears, "May I venture to ask how you received this news?"

The assistant prefect replied, "The revenue manager still had Pannu in mind when he was on his deathbed, and he entrusted someone with a letter and some gifts for her. In addition, his cousin Assistant Director Zhao also has a letter addressed to you. You may open it and read it for yourself."

"I don't know any assistant director. Why would he have a letter for me?"

"Just open it and you'll know soon enough."

Xiaojuan took the letter, tore it open, and read it aloud right there in the courtroom. It turned out to contain nothing but a quatrain, which read:

*Of unsurpassed fame in the Eastern Wu region,
She of days of yore favored books over gold. (MC: One can well imagine the
stuff of which she is made.)
Let me ask you, Su Xiaoxiao of Qiantang,⁶
How do you compare with Su Pannu in grace and style?*

After reading the poem, Su Xiaojuan thought, "This poem is clearly an expression of his admiration for me. With his help, this court case may be easily disposed of. But I wonder what kind of person this assistant director is. His poem is graceful enough, and being Revenue Manager Zhao's cousin, he's most likely also handsome and romantically inclined."

As she was lost in thought, the assistant prefect spoke up. "Why don't you write a poem in reply, using the same rhyme scheme?" (MC: *The assistant prefect is also a man of taste.*)

"But I'm no poet and never have been."

"What kind of talk is this? The Su sisters are renowned poets. Why deny it? If you don't come up with a poem in reply, I'll make you pay for the missing silk."

Modestly, Xiaojuan said, "Then I have no choice but to make a fool of myself. May I have a writing brush and a piece of paper, please?"

Thereupon, the assistant prefect ordered that the four treasures of the scholar's study be brought to her.⁷ Xiaojuan thought, "What better chance than this to ask for his help with the matter of the silk?" She picked up the writing brush and wrote her poem without pausing once for reflection. With both hands, she presented it to the assistant director, who then read it aloud:

*You live in Xiangjiang and I in the Wu region;
Though aloof, you write lines that stir the soul.
If you had paid us a visit then,
Would you have brought Yuqian silk for our plight?*

The assistant prefect commented, "It's graceful with a touch of humor and slyness. How could such a woman stay mired in the pleasure quarters?"

Forthwith, he handed her everything that the revenue manager had left her sister and approved her request to have her name removed from the courtesans' registry. The merchant of Yuqian was ordered to pay back the silk (MC: *Wonderful!*), whereas Xiaojuan was acquitted and released. Having successfully argued her innocence in the case of the silk, received a few gift items, and had her name removed from the courtesans' registry, Xiaojuan was overwhelmed with gratitude, and she marveled that what her sister had sought so hard, but in vain, had happened to her so easily. Tearfully, she bowed her thanks and took herself off.

On returning to his living quarters in the yamen, the assistant prefect gave Assistant Director Zhao a full account of what had occurred and repeated

the reply poem to him, adding, "Such a woman is a rare find. Accommodating your wishes, I not only exempted her from payment for the silk but also struck her name off the courtesans' registry."

Immensely delighted, the assistant director thanked him profusely, took respectful leave of him, and went to Xiaojuan's residence.

Xiaojuan had returned home only a little earlier. Overcome with emotion at the sight of her sister's memorial tablet, she laid out on the shrine everything the revenue manager had sent and examined each item one by one. After shedding many a tear, she put them away. Hearing knocks on the gate at this point, she told her maid to ask who it was before opening the gate.

(IC: *Lest it be another merchant or man of that ilk.*)

"Who is it?" asked the maid.

"Assistant Director Zhao, the one who sent the mistress a letter."

At the words "Assistant Director Zhao," Xiaojuan ran out at double speed and had the maid promptly throw open the gate to greet the visitor. Once inside, the assistant director looked at Xiaojuan and saw

*Cheeks that were like lotus flowers
And eyebrows that were shaped like willow leaves.
If she were to ride a cloud in a dream,
King Xiang of Chu would have thought her a goddess.⁸*

*Her charm added to her dazzling beauty;
Her frown enhanced her tenderness.
Even the blasé would feel overwhelmed,
Let alone this dashing and handsome youth!*

Xiaojuan's beauty dazzled the assistant director and set his heart racing. He said to himself, "So it was no overstatement when my brother said he had found a beautiful companion for me." After Xiaojuan ushered him into the reception hall and exchanged greetings with him, he said pleasantly, "Your reply poem is nice."

"If it hadn't been for your intervention, how would I have been exonerated in the case and, making the most of the opportunity, gotten my name removed from the registry? I'll never be able to repay you, even with my life, for a kindness of such magnitude."

"It was your own poem that moved the assistant prefect to such leniency. Plus my cousin's wishes also played a role. It wasn't just me."

Tearfully, Xiaojuan said, “It’s too bad that my sister and a good man like your cousin, so deeply in love with each other, left us for another world.”

“When did your sister pass away?”

“On the _th day of last month.”

In surprise, the assistant director said, “The very same day my cousin died! Clearly, the lovers were loath to part with each other and went to heaven on the same day. How remarkable!”

“No wonder my sister kept saying on her deathbed that she’d be seeing your brother soon. They must be together now.” (MC: *Lovers in life and in death.*)

“My cousin did repeatedly send messengers to the capital. Why couldn’t she be delisted? Then they wouldn’t have ended up in another world.”

“Before your cousin passed the exams, he and my sister were already as loving as husband and wife, and their days went by so quickly that they never gave that matter a thought. After he passed the exams, there just wasn’t enough time. Even though he did send messengers here time and again, the officials in charge refused to let my sister go because she was too well known. The messengers gave up all too easily once they ran into difficulties. They couldn’t have cared less whether people lived or died. And so they needlessly took two lives. (MC: *Those men must have been their nemeses in a previous incarnation.*) Little did I expect to be delisted so easily today, thanks to your help! If your cousin were still alive and you had arrived here a year or half a year earlier, my sister would also have been delisted.”

“My cousin said the same thing. Regrettably, it was already too late when I went to his duty station after completing my travels as a minor official, so there was no time to take care of this business. But such was their fate. There’s no need to bring it up again. My cousin said the other day that your sister had asked him to find a match for you. Is that true?”

“Like my sister, I’m determined to quit and not ‘take on the new and dismiss the old,’ as they say in the profession. So it’s true that my sister asked your cousin for that favor.”

“My cousin told me about this on his deathbed. He spoke of your many good qualities in glowing terms and urged me to meet you and your sister so as to bring off the match. That’s why I undertook the long journey to come here to make inquiries. As it turned out, your sister had died and you were being falsely charged. Luckily, you were acquitted and delisted, which would have made my cousin and your sister very happy. But with regard to what my cousin said about your marriage prospects, I wonder if yours truly is good enough? I put myself at your disposal.” (MC: *The temerity—serving as his*

own matchmaker like that! But at least he is not asking for a reward that he does not deserve.)

"You're a member of the upper class and my benefactor. I'm afraid that with my humble status, I shouldn't aspire to claim connections with you. But thanks to the bond between your cousin and my sister, we'll be able to add another bond to the existing one. I'm aware of the sentiments expressed in your fine poem. Since you don't scorn my lowliness, I find myself in no position to say no."

Pleased at the way their conversation was going, the assistant director had all his baggage carried to Xiaojuan's residence, and he stayed the night with her. Assistant Director Zhao being the romantic sort, both quickly warmed up to each other, one remembering his cousin, the other her sister. Their only regret was that they had not met each other earlier. Since Xiaojuan was no longer a courtesan, she was free to marry, and her heart was set on the dashing assistant director. However, her sister's coffin was not yet interred, and she told him this was weighing on her mind. He said, "Having escorted my cousin's coffin here, I also need to take care of his burial. Let's pick a day on which to bury your sister's coffin next to my brother's in my family's graveyard (MC: *The revenue manager appointed the right person for the job.*) so as to fulfill their wishes. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yes, that will give pleasure to the two departed souls."

So the assistant director chose a day for the burial, and, as planned, after the burial, he had the assistant prefect officiate at the wedding and took Xiaojuan to his home as his wife.

That night, Xiaojuan dreamed she saw the revenue manager and Pannu seated together, as usual. They said to Xiaojuan, "Now that you have a husband to take care of you for the rest of your life, the two of us can rest easy in death. We're also deeply grateful to you and your husband for burying us next to each other in the same grave. From the netherworld, we'll bless and protect you and your offspring, to repay you for your kindness." At this point, Xiaojuan woke with a start and told the assistant director about her dream.

The next day, the couple prepared sacrificial offerings and went to pay their respects at the graves. Out of gratitude to the departed for the death-bed instructions that had brought them together, the newlyweds gave way to their emotions and had a good cry before they returned home. Thereafter, the assistant director and Xiaojuan spent their time enjoying the flowers and the moon. With one writing poems and the other coming up with poems in

reply, they became prolific published poets. Later, they had two sons who both inherited their parents' poetic talent. Xiaojuan and the assistant director lived together to a ripe old age.

Gentle reader, mark this: We need hardly belabor the point that it was out of love that Su Pannu helped Revenue Manager Zhao make a name for himself and that she died for his sake. In addition, out of her concern for her sister's marriage prospects, she made it possible for her sister to be released from a courtesan's life with the help of the right person and also brought about her marriage. As for Xiaojuan, out of gratitude to Assistant Director Zhao for having rescued her, she remained faithful to him to the end. Weren't both sisters courtesans of good character? Men of our day who are no judges of character and have no mind of their own burst into the first brothel they see and fall into the traps set by the prostitutes they are enamored of. Do not unjustly accuse the good who stand apart from the usual evil lot who are no better than snakes and scorpions. There is a collection of stories titled *Lotus Blossoms out of Filthy Mud*.⁹ Each story is devoted to a prostitute with a good heart. To those who are interested, please read them. There is a poem in testimony:

*All warm bodies harbor tender feelings.
Why should prostitutes be any different?
Those of staunch fidelity in life and in death
Put to shame all who lack good faith in making friends.*

In a Competition for Sexual Favor, a Village Woman Is Murdered

In Claiming Celestial Authority, a Judge Solves a Case

I N the words of a poem,

*Murder may lurk behind a pretty face
When a monk covets the conjugal life.
Vile debauchers, no better than rakshasas,
Reduce live beings to bloody wandering ghosts.*

The story relates that there lived in Lin'an [present-day Hangzhou] a scholar Zheng who had passed the imperial civil-service examinations at the provincial level. He pursued his studies in a room called "Clear Cloud Cell" in the northwestern corner of the local Qingfu monastery. The abbot, Guangming, was a dashing and romantically inclined man who took delight in associating with officials and scholars. As the monastery was well provided for and his own purse was also abundantly supplied, literary gentlemen found his company enjoyable. Scholar Zheng, whose bond with the monastery was of longer duration than anyone else's, shared his views and interests and was his best friend. Guangming had shown the scholar every exquisite room and secluded corner throughout the monastery except one, a small room at the end of a long, winding path. Access to the room was by key only and limited to Guangming himself, but he rarely entered it. The

door always remained closed, and no one else had ever been able to gain admittance. Even a friend like Scholar Zheng, who was no stranger to all the other rooms, had never seen the inside of that room. Believing it to be the monks' treasury, Scholar Zheng tactfully refrained from prying into the secret, as did everyone else.

One day, the bell in the main hall was struck to announce the arrival of some potentate or another. Guangming was in that very small room at the time. He rushed out in great haste to greet the visitor, just as Scholar Zheng happened to stroll leisurely past the room. Seeing the door open, he thought, "This room is always under lock and key. I've never seen the inside of it. (MC: *Since he has never seen the inside of this room, he should take care to hold himself above suspicion if he were more prudent.*) Why isn't it locked today?"

As he was thinking these thoughts, his legs took him into the room. Impressed by the nicely laid wooden floor, he cast a look around and found that, other than its elegant furniture, the room did not boast anything out of the ordinary and not fit to be seen. Scholar Zheng said to himself, "Those who have renounced the world are a strange lot, after all. What's so secret about this room that justifies lock and key?" At this point, his eyes happened to rest on a small bed in the room. Dangling from the hook of the bed curtain was a small and exquisitely crafted sandalwood fish with a mallet attached to it.¹ With his love of fun, Scholar Zheng took the fish and mallet down from the hook, toyed with them, and playfully hit the fish twice with the mallet. All of a sudden, a bronze bell rang out from under the bed, a small panel of the floor was pushed up, and a beautiful girl's head emerged. Startled at the sight of Scholar Zheng, the girl quickly withdrew her head. Scholar Zheng, no less surprised, took a close look and recognized the girl to be a cousin of his.

As a matter of fact, that particular panel of the floor was ingeniously crafted. It served as a door when pushed up and, once pushed back down, looked no different than the next floor panel, but it could be pushed upward only from below and could not be opened from above. The girl had struck the bell and emerged only because she had heard the signal being struck on the wooden fish. Unbeknownst even to the gods, underneath the floor was a cellar with a window and a secret tunnel leading to the kitchen with its supplies of food. Scholar Zheng said to himself, "No wonder that mean baldy keeps this door locked. Now I know why. But I shouldn't have stumbled upon this secret of his. I may get myself in trouble." In consternation, he put the

wooden fish and mallet back on the hook and rushed out of the room, only to run smack into Guangming.

Guangming was already alarmed after seeing the door open. Then he noticed Scholar Zheng's disconcerted air and flushed face. The sight of the small wooden fish swinging to and fro from the curtain hook confirmed his fear that his secret was out. "What did you see just now?" he asked Scholar Zheng.

"Nothing."

"Shall we go in and sit for a while?" So saying, Guangming took Scholar Zheng's arm and led him in. Once both were inside, Guangming bolted the door and drew a knife from the head of the bed. (MC: *How ruthless!*) "This poor monk may be friends with you," said he, "but what just happened puts us at odds. It's either you or me. I don't want to die if I'm found out. You have your own bad luck to blame. You never should have set foot in this room. Kill yourself, now! And don't put the blame on me."

Bursting into tears, the scholar said, "Yes, my bad luck landed me in this mess. I know you won't let me go. I'm a dead man. But could you please allow me to get drunk first? After I pass out from drinking, I won't feel the pain when you cut off my head. I've been a longtime friend of yours. Don't you have any pity for me?"

Recalling his friendship with Scholar Zheng, Guangming granted his piteous plea. He locked the scholar in the room and, knife in hand, went to the kitchen, where he picked up a large tin flask of wine. After he returned to the room, filled a large bowl with the wine, and offered it to Scholar Zheng, the scholar said, "I can hardly swallow the wine without some pickles to help it go down. Please do me this favor!" Again, Guangming obliged him and went to the kitchen to get pickles. In the meantime, Scholar Zheng thought, "Since I won't be able to make it out of this place, let me find something to hit him with when he's not on his guard." The room was furnished with only light and exquisite items, with no bricks, rocks, or cudgels to be had, but the large wine flask gave him an idea. (MC: *Desperation feeds inspiration.*) He tore off a strip of fabric from his robe and hurriedly stuffed it tightly into the mouth of the flask, which, heavy with wine, weighed about five or six catties. Holding it in one hand, he positioned himself behind the door.

When Guangming pushed the door open with his body, Scholar Zheng aimed the flask at the spot where he thought the monk's shaved head should be and struck down with all his might. Guangming was hit right on the

head. His head spinning and his vision turning blurry, Guangming quickly raised a hand to feel his head, only to be hit two or three more times on the head. With a thud, Guangming fell unconscious to the floor. Taking advantage of the situation, Scholar Zheng whacked the monk's head dozens of times as if he were washing clothes by pounding them with a wooden club. Guangming's brain matter splattered out, and death overtook him.

Scholar Zheng locked the corpse in the room (MC: *A man of action.*) and walked out of the monastery, unobserved. In all haste, he went to report the matter to the county yamen. The magistrate forthwith dispatched runners plus a team of officers to the monastery. Upon arrival, some of the men stood guard outside the room, while the others burst in. All they saw was a monk, his head battered, lying dead in a pool of blood in that small room, but there was no woman to be found.

At this point, Scholar Zheng said with a grin, "I know how to bring her out." So saying, he took the wooden fish down from the bed curtain hook. He struck it twice, and, sure enough, a bell rang, a panel of the floor was pushed up, and a woman emerged. The officers gave a shout and held the panel before it went down again. As the woman shrank back, the officers followed her down and found themselves in a tiled cellar with bars on all sides and a window facing a courtyard enclosed by a stone wall. It was a place that outsiders had never visited.

The five or six women in the cellar were led out one by one. Queries as to their backgrounds revealed that they were all village women who had been abducted and brought to this place. Scholar Zheng's cousin had been offering incense and praying for a son when the monks got her sedan-chair carriers drunk and spirited her inside. Her family had filed a complaint with the yamen, and the two sedan-chair carriers remained in jail. Guangming had not been charged because of his connections and the lack of evidence against him, but was the one who had held her all this time. The county magistrate ordered that all the monks involved be executed.

Gentle reader, wouldn't you agree that monks, well fed and clad and sleeping under fine quilts in clean rooms—all thanks to donations from everywhere—have nothing else to occupy their minds than that business? Although they do find release with a young page boy or two, as the proverb puts it, "Steamed buns are poor substitutes for rice." And to make matters worse, our women choose to visit monasteries to offer incense and pay homage to the Buddha. (MC: *Womenfolk, mark these words!*) With the women parading themselves in front of the monks, how would the latter not long

for the prettier ones in the still of the night? So they try every conceivable means of indulging in debauchery, a crime that by itself is serious enough to justify the death sentence. And then, as they say, “No shave, no knave. No knave, no shave. The cleaner the shave, the bigger the knave. The bigger the knave, the cleaner the shave.” Acts of debauchery all too often lead to fierce fights, murder, and arson. Let’s take, for example, that monk of Lin’an in the story above. Given his friendship with Scholar Zheng, he needed only to beg the scholar or pay him not to let on to anyone about the secret. Surely it was not something for which one would go so far as to kill, and it all ended in his own death. This serves to show that divine justice does catch up with those monks who can be so diabolical even when unprovoked.

I now propose to tell of an even more diabolical monk. Please lend me your ears! There is a poem in testimony:

*Murder follows on the heels of adultery;
What adds fuel to the fire is jealousy.
Had the crime not come to light through a young man,
With what shall we warn against lust and evil?*

The story tells that in Wenchuan County of Chengdu Prefecture, Sichuan, there lived a farmer named Jin Qing. His wife, Du-shi, who had some claim to beauty, yearned for romance. She did not get along well with her husband, whom she found too rough-hewn and uncultured. Day after day, she kept making grievances out of nothing. (MC: *Digging her own grave.*) One day, after an altercation, she went in a huff to her parents’ house, where she stayed for about ten days. After a great deal of coaxing on her parents’ part, her anger subsided, and she decided to go back to her husband. The two residences were only a little more than three *li* apart, and Du-shi often walked back and forth by herself. But something was destined to happen that day. She was on her way when she was caught in a downpour. She had no rain gear with her, and, being in the middle of nowhere, she could find no shelter. At this point, the ringing of bells came to her ears from afar. She noticed a small trail leading to a monastery. She was thus obliged to make a detour in the rain and go to the monastery for shelter, intending to resume her walk home after the rain stopped.

That monastery, called “Peace Monastery,” was located in a deserted place. There were about ten monks residing in the monastery. Occupying the cells by the gate were an old monk Dajue, who made all the decisions, and his two

young disciples—fresh-faced and winsome—Zhiyuan, his darling, and Hui-guan, a novice only eleven or twelve years old. At age fifty-seven or fifty-eight, Dajue's carnal desires remained as unbridled as those of a young man. Every night, he slept with Zhiyuan in his arms. Whenever the two of them brought up the subject of feminine charms, they would be aroused and amuse themselves with the other's male member. Their depravity defies description.

That day, the two of them were standing idly at the gate when suddenly they saw a beautiful woman enter to take shelter from the rain. Like a mouse delivering itself to a cat's mouth, she ignited a flame in their hearts. The old monk darted a meaningful look at Zhiyuan and said, "The bodhisattva Guanyin is here. Give her a proper greeting."

Zhiyuan walked up to Du-shi and asked ingratiatingly, "Young lady, might you be here to wait out the rain?"

"Yes. I was on the road and got caught in the rain. I'd like to stay here for shelter for a while."

Grinning from ear to ear, Zhiyuan said, "The rain isn't likely to stop any time soon. There are no chairs here, and we can't let you remain standing. Please take a seat in a room inside and enjoy a cup of tea before you resume your journey when the rain stops."

If she had been a woman of moral rectitude, she would have ignored the suggestion and remained standing outside until the rain stopped and she could resume her walk. A monk's cell is not a place for just anyone. Unfortunately, Du-shi was a sensual woman and had taken a fancy to the good-looking, fair-complexioned, and articulate young monk. She thought, "Why stand here with nothing to do while waiting out the downpour? There can be no harm in taking him up on his offer and sitting inside." Step by step, she followed the young monk into the monastery.

Now that the woman was on her way in, the old monk rushed inside to get ahead of her, so as to open the bedroom door and lie in wait. (MC: *The old monk is burning with impatience.*) The young monk kept exchanging glances with Du-shi as he led her in. After Du-shi sat down inside, the novice served tea on a tray. Zhiyuan picked a fine porcelain teacup, smoothed out his sleeves, and offered her the cup with his own hands. Du-shi hastened to take it and felt even more attracted to Zhiyuan, with his graceful manners. In her distraction, as she stole glances at him, she spilled her tea all over her sleeve. Zhiyuan said, "Young lady, your sleeve got wet with tea. Please go to an inner room to dry it over the brazier."

On hearing his offer to take her to an inner room, Du-shi gained a pretty good idea of his intentions. Since an inner room was where she wanted to go anyway, she did not demur but asked which room it was. Zhiyuan took her to his master's bedroom, knowing that his master must be waiting inside. He was determined to defer to his master. Once Du-shi was in the room, he said, pointing to the brazier, "Please put your sleeve on it. A fire is going inside." With that, he withdrew from the door.

Puzzled by the young monk's withdrawal, Du-shi thought, "Maybe he doesn't dare to make a rash move." She was about to put her sleeve over the brazier when she saw an old monk jump out from behind the bed. As he took her into his arms, she screamed like a pig about to be slaughtered. The old monk said, "There's no one around to hear you. It's useless to scream. Why did you enter my room in the first place?"

Du-shi tried to dash out of the room, but the young monk had thoughtfully locked the door from the outside. The old monk seized her and rubbed his member against her through their clothes (MC: *Burning with impatience.*), and Du-shi was slightly aroused as she tried to fight him off. "Where has the young monk gone?" asked she. "Why are you replacing him?"

"So you fancy my disciple? He's my darling. After you and I are done, I'll call him in for some fun with you."

Du-shi thought, "I had my eye on that young one. Too bad this old geezer is attaching himself to me. But things having come to this, I guess there's no getting out of it. I might just as well get him off my hands first. The young one will then surely be mine." So thinking, she reluctantly allowed herself to be carried to the bed and began to cavort with the old monk.

*He was on fire, his moves hurried and brusque;
She was bored and passively went through the motions.
By destiny, he took what came to him;
By chance, she became a flower of the wrong owner.
He, all eagerness, moved like the bellows;
She, in her boredom, took him for a bag of blood.
Though he was uncouth and unromantic,
She did have fun, albeit unfulfilling.*

The old monk's energy was not equal to his lust. When he had first tried to embrace her over her objections, he had already discharged some semen,

and he ejaculated soon after intercourse began. Du-shi was displeased with him in the first place, and his poor performance added to her disappointment. As she rose and tied her skirt, she grumbled, "Why would such a useless old thing want to harass women and make a fool of himself?"

Knowing he had spoiled her fun, the old monk felt quite put out and quickly told his disciple to open the door. When the door swung open, Zhiyuan greeted his master and asked, "How was it?"

The old monk said, "She's delicious! Too bad I failed to perform and made a fool of myself."

"Let me add to the fun!" said Zhiyuan. He rushed into the room, closed the door, turned around, and gathered Du-shi into his arms, saying, "My darling, how you suffered at that old geezer's hands!"

Du-shi said, "You lured me into the room but set that old thing on me!"

"He's my master! What can I do? But do let me make it up to you!" As he tried to carry her to bed, she demurred, feeling humiliated by her experience with the old monk, and said, "The way you, master and disciple, take turns harassing a woman, don't you have any sense of shame?"

"My master was the vanguard and the first one to perish, but you and I are a perfect match in age and looks. Let's not miss out on this predestined bond!" With a plop, he fell to his knees.

Du-shi raised him to his feet and explained, "I said those words out of resentment against that old thing for going ahead of you and insulting me. In fact, I do love you!"

In the excitement of the moment, Zhiyuan held her tightly, planted a kiss on her lips, and began to sport with her in bed. This encounter was of quite a different order from the last one.

*He, in the presence of a beauty,
Was like a hungry tiger attacking a sheep.
She, in her longing for the young man,
Was like a thirsty dragon at the water's edge.
The lusty farmer's wife was hungry for sex;
The monk showed his prowess as a veteran.
One took, the other gave; neither gave in.
One came, the other went; both tried their hardest.
The old monk may have had a head start, but
The disciple was the one who carried the day.*

In the prime of his youthful prowess, Zhiyuan was a bundle of energy. Du-shi delighted in his good looks, and both had such a passion for each other that they did not stop until more than two hours later. Fully satisfied, Du-shi said, "I've long heard about monks' prowess. (MC: *That's why she so readily entered the monastery.*) That old thing is a disgrace, but I had no idea you were so delightful. I'll sleep with you tonight right here."

"I'm so glad you don't find me beneath you, but which family are you from? Would it be all right if you stay here?"

"My maiden name is Du. My husband's surname is Jing. The Jing residence is nearby. I had a spat with my husband the other day, so I went back to my parents' house and stayed there for a few days. I was on my way back to the Jing residence when I was caught in the rain and came here to stay out of the rain. That's how I met you, my sweet foe! The Jings don't know about my return, and they don't communicate with my parents. So no one will be any the wiser if I stay here secretly for a couple of days."

"I'm a lucky man!" exclaimed Zhiyuan. "Let's make a night of it! But my master will want to share the bed with us."

"I don't want that old thing!"

"But he's the one who calls the shots around here. We can't turn him away. You only need to go through the motions to get him off your hands."

"But I'll be too bashful! How can three people do it together?"

"The old one has more lust than prowess. We'll do it together by turns. If he doesn't perform, you'll be through with him. The two of us will then be able to enjoy ourselves and just let him be."

The two of them hit it off so well that they went on talking, leaving the old monk standing outside. As he listened for the longest time to the noises emanating from the bed, he regretted having finished the job too quickly without much enjoyment, and he was consumed with jealousy at the way they were having fun. His patience was wearing thin, but his disciple still failed to make an appearance. Unable to bear the suspense any longer, he opened the door and barged in, only to see the two in a tight embrace, their tongues in each other's mouths. The old monk felt his temper rising. (MC: *He doesn't know his own limits.*) He thought, "She wasn't that passionate with me!" With a twinge of jealousy, he shouted, "Now that you've had a taste of the sweetness, it's time to work out a long-term plan. How can you go on sleeping in broad daylight behind a closed door?"

At this outburst from his master, Zhiyuan said, all smiles, "For your information, Master, it's going to be a long-lasting sweetness."

“What do you mean?” asked the old monk.

“She’s staying the night.”

Putting on a smile, the old monk said, “We’re not letting go of her, anyway.”

“If we force her to stay here, we’ll have to watch out for trouble. But she volunteered the idea, so we have nothing to worry about.”

“Which family is she from?”

After Zhiyuan repeated Du-shi’s words to him, the old monk jubilantly went off, in a hurry to prepare supper. Then the three of them shared a table in that very room and ate their supper. Not much of a drinker, Du-shi declined the old monk’s offers of wine but drained the cup that Zhiyuan handed her. While seated at the table, she and Zhiyuan kept exchanging sickeningly amorous glances. The old monk awkwardly made passes at her, but all his lewd remarks fell flat. (MC: *Du-shi, the farmer’s wife, is too straightforward and does not know how to feign cordiality. She is to suffer the consequences.*) Her iciness toward him was not lost on the old monk, but like a dog trying to lick a plate of hot food, he just would not let go. After the table was cleared, he unabashedly went to share the bed with the other two.

Once in bed, Du-shi and the young monk fell into a tight embrace and paid no attention to the old one. Having ejaculated earlier in the day, the old monk was not able to get that member of his up again. He meant to wait until their shenanigans aroused him. Sure enough, the noises those two made so excited him that he planted a kiss here and there and inserted an arm left and right. He masturbated with one hand and caressed their crotches with the other. When he felt his lust stirring, he tried to push the young man aside and spring into action himself. However, Zhiyuan, carried away in his enjoyment, would have none of it. And with Du-shi enfolding the young man in her arms, the old monk failed to dislodge him. The young monk cried, “Master, I can’t stop now! If you’re enjoying the moment, why don’t you amuse yourself with me?”

“No!” said the old monk. “Why should I forage in my own kitchen when there’s wild game to be had?”

As the old man kept applying his mouth and his hands (MC: *Really disgusting!*), the young monk saw no choice but to dismount Du-shi and yield to him. Greatly displeased, Du-shi vented her ill humor on the old man and dodged resentfully each time he thrust. The old monk had been in a frenzy of desire, and now, unable to hold himself in any longer, he ejaculated while

gasping for breath and went limp. Du-shi said with a scornful smile, "Why even bother?"

Smarting from the humiliation, the old monk dared not utter a word. Gloomily, he turned to face the wall so as to yield the rest of the bed to those two for another round of heated battle. In their youth, they went on and on, stopping only for a little nap before resuming. The old monk could do nothing more than swallow his own drool and continue to make disgusting moves.

Du-shi rose at daybreak and, after she had done her hair and washed, said to Zhiyuan, "I'm going home today."

Zhiyuan objected, "Didn't you say yesterday that you could stay for a couple of days? What's more, this is an out-of-the-way place. No one will know. You and I are at the height of our enjoyment of each other. How can you have the heart to go? What a thing to say!"

In a subdued voice, Du-shi said, "It's not that I want to leave you. It's just that I can't stand that old geezer. If you want to keep me, let's take up the whole bed, just the two of us, without him!"

"He won't hear of it."

"In that case, I'll have to go."

Left without a choice, Zhiyuan went to his master and said, "Madam Du wants to leave. What's to be done?"

The old monk said, "I thought she was quite attached to you. Why would she want to go?"

"Being from a good family, she's a little too shy for a threesome. That's why she wants to leave. As I see it, it may be better if I set up a bed in the opposite room and spend a night or two with her there, to trick her into staying longer. You, Master, can make your move when the timing is right. After she gets more used to us, we can take our time and make it a threesome. Otherwise, it will be in no one's interests if we ruffle her feathers and make her leave."

These words reminded the old monk of his unfulfilled desires and the nuisance he had made of himself when all three of them were sharing the same bed. That was not much fun, but he was also afraid that, with her gone, there would be even less chance for fun. He thought, "It might be better to let the two of them do their thing behind my back. Once in a while, I can go to that room and have her for myself for a whole night. That will be just as well. Why make a pest of myself?" Aloud, he said to Zhiyuan, "That's a good idea. As long as she stays, both you and I will get to have some fun. What's

more, you're my darling. Your happiness is also mine." While mouthing these words, the old monk was hiding his pangs of jealousy, but he saw no other way than to grant Zhiyuan's request. He would wait and see.

Imagine Du-shi's joy when Zhiyuan told her that the old monk had approved his request to set up a separate bed! So she stayed, looking forward to the nocturnal unions of delight.

When night fell, the old monk called Zhiyuan to him and gave him these words of instruction: "I'm going to store up my energy tonight. You two have a good time. Be sure to use sweet talk and make her stay. But give her to me tomorrow."

"Of course! If I don't stay with her and if last night's foul-up repeats itself, everyone loses, and we won't be able to keep her. Let me get to know her better so that you'll surely find her to your liking when I lead her to you."

"Now you're talking, my darling!"

And so Zhiyuan went to Du-shi's room, closed the door, and went to bed. That night, free from all restraints, they enjoyed themselves to the full.

In the meantime, the old man, who had granted the young man's request because he was afraid that the woman would leave, spent the night alone in his room in the absence, not only of the woman, but also of his disciple.

Already vexed at his loneliness, he was kept all the more wakeful by the thought of those two enjoying themselves, and he spent the whole night tossing and turning and pounding his bed. After rising the next morning, he said to Zhiyuan, "What a good time you must have had! Leaving me by my forlorn self in my room!"

"But that was the only way to keep her here."

"It's my turn to have some fun tonight!" declared the old monk.

When night came on, Zhiyuan dared not contradict his master and tried to talk Du-shi into entering the old man's room. Du-shi adamantly refused, saying, "I told you I'd only stay with *you*. Why do you want me to be with that disgusting old thing?"

"But he's my master!"

"I'm not married to your master. Why should I be afraid of him? If you press me too hard, I'll go back home before the night is out!"

Knowing her disinclination full well, Zhiyuan said to his master, "She's still a little shy and refuses to come to you, Master. Why don't you go to her room instead?"

Heeding his advice, the old monk groped his way into the room. Du-shi was already in bed, waiting for Zhiyuan to come and go into action. When

the old monk jumped into bed, she thought he was Zhiyuan. When she clasped him to her bosom and kissed him on the mouth, the old man felt as if all his bones had melted. Realizing her mistake when they began to do what he was there to do, Du-shi lashed out: "It's you again, you disgusting old thing! Why do you have to torment me like this?"

Not knowing any better, the old monk thrust with all the force he could muster, hoping to please her, but having overexerted himself, he burst into gasps. Du-shi had been slightly aroused by his mighty thrusts, but now that the battle was called off, she knew he was about to ejaculate. Bitterly disappointed, she turned on her side and savagely pushed him off the bed onto the floor. (MC: *She does have a savage streak in her.*) As a consequence, the old monk's sticky seminal fluid spilled all over the edge of the bed and his legs.

Scrambling to his feet, the old monk thought, "What a vicious woman she is!" Burning with hatred, he headed for his own room. Noticing his master's departure, Zhiyuan dived in to fill the vacuum. Vexed because her desires, stirred up by the old monk, were still unfulfilled, Du-shi was overjoyed that Zhiyuan had come to slake her thirst. Finding no time to talk, they fell into each other's arms and started afresh.

While they were thus engaged in feverish activity, the old monk thought, his anger unabated, "They're having a merry time of it while I'm here all alone. Let me go and listen to what's going on." When he walked up to the door and heard the earth-shaking noises from the bed, he said to himself, rubbing his fists in rage, "That woman is so unfair! Why can't she spare some of her sweetness for me, so that I can get a share of the delight? Oh well, I'll let them be for now, but tomorrow, woe to everyone!" Moodily, he went to sleep.

On waking up the next morning, the old monk felt that his member had started to itch and hurt. When he urinated, only a few drops trickled out. What had happened was that as a result of his fall from bed the night before, the flow of his seminal fluid was blocked and had caused inflammation. All the more enraged, he said to himself, "That evil woman ruined me!"

After Du-shi rose, the old monk cheekily made a few flirting remarks to her, but her stony silence embarrassed him. As he watched her and Zhiyuan merrily whispering to each other, malice filled his heart.

When evening closed in on them, Zhiyuan said to Du-shi, "Let me go to the old man first and tire him out, so as to spare you from his torment."

"Go quickly. I'll be waiting for you in bed," said Du-shi.

Once in the old monk's room, Zhiyuan said, assuming his usual seductive air, "I'm sorry for having abandoned you, Master, for two nights. Let me sleep with you tonight."

"Isn't there a woman here? Why should we go back to our old ways? Get her in here. I want her company tonight."

"She won't listen to me. You'll have to go ask her yourself."

The old monk said savagely, "She won't refuse me tonight!" He went straight to the kitchen and picked up a kitchen knife before he entered Du-shi's room, thinking, "If she still doesn't know what's good for her, I'll bump her off!"

Zhiyuan having been gone for quite a while, Du-shi thought he had pacified his master. When she heard footsteps approaching her bed, she thought it was Zhiyuan. "My love!" she cried out. "Close the door, quick! I'd hate to see that disgusting old thing again!"

Having heard the words all too clearly, the old monk exploded with rage. He said sharply, "The disgusting old thing insists that you sleep with him tonight!" So saying, he reached out and tried to drag her off the bed.

Alarmed by his vehemence, Du-shi said, "How can you get violent? I'm simply not going!" As the old monk strove with might and main to pull her off, she desperately clung to the bed, crying, "I'm not going even if you kill me!"

In a boiling rage, the old monk said, "If you insist, try a taste of my knife! That way, no one gets to have fun!" He pinned her neck down and struck. Being at the height of his anger, he struck hard and cut through her throat. Du-shi twitched a couple of times and died.

After the old monk left his room, Zhiyuan lay down in bed to await word from his master. Then he heard cries from the opposite room, followed by thumping sounds. Full of misgivings, he rushed out to see what was happening and ran square into the old monk on his way out of her room, knife in hand. On seeing Zhiyuan, he said, "That filthy woman was so hateful! I've made short work of her!"

Appalled, Zhiyuan said, "Master, did you really?"

"I sure did! Did you expect me to let you have all the fun for yourself?"
(MC: Zhiyuan is also in danger.)

Zhiyuan took a lamp and went into the room to see for himself. With a mournful shriek, he said, "Master! How could you have been so ruthless!"

"That filthy woman rejected me, so I did it in a rush of rage. Don't blame me. Now that things have come to this, there's no time to lose. Put the body away. I'll find a good replacement for you to enjoy soon enough."

Reduced to silence in spite of his grief, Zhiyuan put the corpse on his back, followed the old monk's instructions, dug a grave with an iron spade, and buried Du-shi. Shedding furtive tears, Zhiyuan thought, "Had I foreseen this, I would have let her go home, and she wouldn't have died!"

Afraid that Zhiyuan might be upset, the old monk went out of his way to please him, and what had happened remained a watertight secret. The little novice did wonder at the woman's disappearance, but being a mere child, he asked no questions. So no one was any the wiser, but we will not pursue this thread of the story for the moment.

Let us turn our attention now to Du-shi's parents. After their daughter had been gone for two or three days, they wondered if she had warmed up to her husband again. (MC: *She warmed up to a monk.*) So they sent a servant to the Jing residence to make inquiries. It just so happened that the Jing family had sent a servant to the Du residence to bring Du-shi home, and both went away empty-handed. The Jing family accused the Dus of having married Du-shi to someone else because the couple did not get along, and the Du family accused the Jings of having secretly done away with their daughter for the same reason. Entangled in mutual recriminations, both lodged formal complaints with the county yamen.

The post of county magistrate was vacant at the time, with only the judge of the county military commission in charge. Lin Dahe by name and a native of Fujian, the judge had been but a student at the Imperial Academy, but he had proved himself to be a competent official with a keen intellect. When he called the two families together for questioning, Jing Qing said, "My wife and I quarreled, and she returned to her parents in a huff. My father-in-law hid her instead of returning her to me. He means to play me false. Please uphold the law for us, Your Honor!"

Mr. Du said, "It's true that she returned to us after a quarrel with her husband and stayed for a few days. Then, three days ago, my wife and I managed to talk her out of her anger and sent her off to her husband. But they must have gotten into another fight, and she must have been tormented to death. And now the Jings have turned the tables on us! Please do right by us, Your Honor!" Having said that, Mr. Du broke down in a flood of tears.

Impressed by Jing Qing's look of a simple and honest farmer with none of the air of an evil man, Judge Lin asked him, "Why don't you get along with your wife?"

"It's just that that she finds me uncouth and not to her taste. That's why she always picks quarrels with me."

“What does your wife look like?”

“She’s a pretty woman.”

The judge nodded. Then he called Mr. Du forth and asked him, “Your daughter is displeased with this match and looks down on her husband. You and your wife, as her parents, are naturally willing to overlook her faults. Could it be that you’re telling a lie so that she can remarry? Such things do happen.”

Mr. Du said, “My house being so near my son-in-law’s house, how would we be able to conceal a thing like a marriage? And I don’t have the heart to hide her in order to marry her off secretly to someone in a faraway place and never see her again. One’s marriage status is something that’s known to all. How could I ever dream of doing a thing like that? Why would I hide her? The only explanation for her disappearance is that the Jing family has done her in.”

Judge Lin reflected for a while before saying, “No, that’s not it either. She must have met with some mishap on her way home when neither of you two families were in touch with her. I’ll let you out on bail and notify you upon completion of the investigations.” He issued an order for extensive investigations and sent detectives out in all directions. Much time went by with no news.

The county yamen had a gatekeeper by the name of Yu. At twenty years of age, he was a delight to the eye and possessed a shrewd brain. Fujian natives tend to be attracted to male beauty, so it goes without saying that Judge Lin was quite taken with him. As was only to be expected, the gatekeeper was made presumptuous by the favor Judge Lin showed him and engaged in some improper behavior. One day, his wrongdoing was exposed right there in the courtroom. Judge Lin did want to exonerate the young man, but he could find no reason that would be credible in the eyes of the law. (MC: *An official with a regard for the eyes of the law is a good official.*) So he thought up a plan to help him out, so that he could gain a credit to offset his offense. In secret, he summoned the gatekeeper to his office and said, “You should be fired because of your offense. There will be a lot of gossip in the yamen if I go easy on you, so I have to dismiss you from the yamen and post the notification on the wall to stop tongues from wagging.”

On hearing that he was to lose his job, the gatekeeper began to kowtow nonstop, saying he was willing to accept the punishment. The judge said, “It’s not what you think. I mean to help you. There has to be an explanation for the disappearance of that Du woman. Now, I want you to run away from the

yamen, ostensibly because you offended me. But in fact, I want you to investigate on the quiet. Search for clues at every place along the road between the two houses, be it a village, a marketplace, a temple, or a monastery. You'll surely find something. If you offer me information, I'll not only reinstate you but also give you a hefty reward. When that happens, I'll be above reproach."

Seeing no other way, the gatekeeper acknowledged the order and went off. Indeed, he made inquiries everywhere. Being but a boy, he did not come under suspicion when he chatted with people and watched their expressions. But he found out nothing.

One day, seeing a group of good-for-nothing loafers gathered together gossiping, the gatekeeper drew near them to listen to what they were saying. One of the men saw him and commented surreptitiously to the others, "What a good-looking young man!"

Another man said, "A young monk of nearby Peace Monastery is even prettier. (MC: *Two threads of the story are nicely joined together.*) Too bad his master the old monk is lecherous and jealous. A real scoundrel."

The gatekeeper feigned a lack of interest on hearing this and nonchalantly walked away while saying to himself, "What kind of young monk is he to be worthy of such praise? Why don't I go seek him out?"

The gatekeeper was an expert in matters concerning sexual relations, and that mention of the young monk's good looks piqued his interest. So he asked the way to Peace Monastery. On entering the gate, sure enough, he saw a young monk with extraordinarily fine and delicate features sitting on the threshold. "This must be him," thought the gatekeeper.

The sight of a good-looking youth also raised a flutter in the young monk's heart. He stood up to greet Yu the gatekeeper, saying, "Brother, what brings you here?"

"I'm here just to while away some time."

The young monk eagerly invited him in and served him tea. Liking the monk for his prepossessing exterior, the gatekeeper merrily followed him in. On seeing his disciple leading a young man inside, the old monk knew that he was in for a treat. Beaming with delight, he asked the young man his name and where he lived.

The gatekeeper replied, "I used to be a gatekeeper at the yamen, but I was fired for some reason or another, and I'm wandering about because I have nowhere to go."

The old monk was ecstatic. "We do have a nice room for you," said he. "We won't mind if you stay for a few days." And so he and his disciple kept

the young man and danced attendance on him, offering him tea and wine. On the strength of two cups of wine, the old monk spirited the gatekeeper into his room, took off his trousers, and had his way with the young man. The gatekeeper was an old hand at this business and tolerated the old man, unlike that picky village woman who had not seen much of the world. The old monk was beside himself with joy.

Gentle reader, mark this: It is the poorly endowed who are partial to men. You may ask why. Well, the man at the receiving end tends to go through it grudgingly, without much enjoyment, and doesn't mind the degree of firmness of the you-know-what or how long the game lasts. He is just glad when it's over. That is why men are easier to deal with. (MC: *A thorough explanation.*) But a woman, when aroused, can be displeased if the man stops halfway there. She can grow frantic and is therefore difficult to please. With men, however, it is possible to derive fun on one's own. This time, the old monk was satisfied.

After the game was over, Zhiyuan came to say to him, "I led the little brother in, but you got to enjoy him first. He belongs to me tonight."

The old monk laughed and said, "Of course, of course."

The gatekeeper did wish to stay in the monastery, and so he slept with Zhiyuan that night, as attested by this quatrain:

Neither young man let the other off—

First one, then the other.

Zhiyuan may have been the first to go;

Courtesy demanded taking turns.

As is said in the above quatrain, the two handsome young men took turns and went to sleep in each other's arms.

The next day, the old monk came again to make advances to the gatekeeper and tried to drag him to his own room for another go. In spite of his harrowing experience last time, Zhiyuan, surprisingly, grew jealous and said, "In all fairness, this little brother should be mine. You shouldn't snatch him away from me."

"Why not?"

"You always find release in me, but I don't have any outlet, and I have a hard time suppressing my desires. The one who was here some time ago was good enough, but you made a mess of the whole thing and put a stop to it.

Now that I've brought this little brother here, it's only right that I should have some fun with him. That's not too much to ask, is it?"

The old monk was infuriated by the young man's uncompromising tone, but he felt that he was in no position to give the young man offense. Both sulked and felt low.

The gatekeeper, with an ax to grind, asked Zhiyuan at night at the height of their sport, "You said earlier today about someone good enough and something that the old one made a mess of. Tell me more!"

Quite carried away by the ecstasy of the moment, Zhiyuan blurted out, "Some time ago, we asked a woman who lived nearby to stay with us, just to have some fun, and what fun it was! But who would have thought that the old thing would get jealous because she preferred me. He made a mess of things. To this day, I still feel bad."

"Where is that woman now? Why don't you bring her here again?"

With a sigh, Zhiyuan said, "Where is she to be found?"

Detecting a clue in these words, the gatekeeper tried to probe deeper, but to his frustration, Zhiyuan clammed up.

The next day, seeing the little novice all alone, the gatekeeper asked him in a low voice, "Was there a woman in this monastery some time ago?"

"Yes," replied the novice.

"How long did she stay here?"

"Just a few days."

"Where has she gone?"

"She didn't go anywhere. She just disappeared one night."

"What did she do when she was here?"

"I don't know. I only saw the old master and the young master busying themselves for two nights, and then, after she disappeared, they had a lot to say to each other. I have no idea what happened."

Although he did not get very far with his questions, the gatekeeper felt sure that he was on to something. Feigning unconcern, he walked up to the two monks and said, "I've been here two days now. I'd like to take a walk outside. I'll be back soon."

The old man said, "Be sure to come back! Don't just go away!"

Throwing the gatekeeper a meaningful glance, Zhiyuan said with a grin, "He won't go away. He can bear to part with you but not with me."

The gatekeeper also gave a Zhiyuan a knowing look and said, "I'll be back soon enough."

After passing through the gate of the monastery, the gatekeeper went straight to Judge Lin and repeated the words of Zhiyuan and the novice to him. With a nod, Judge Lin said, "Yes, that explains it! But it looks like the woman died at the hands of those evil monks. Otherwise, if she wasn't in the monastery three days later, why wasn't she at home either? Where else could she have gone? The case has been dragging on for half a year now, but she's still nowhere to be seen." Then he admonished the gatekeeper, "Don't breathe a word of this to anyone."

Early the next morning, Judge Lin mounted his sedan-chair and went to the monastery with an entourage. At his behest, the forerunner went to the monastery first and announced, "Judge Lin had a dream and is on his way to offer incense at the monastery."

Thereupon, all the monks in the monastery assembled to greet the judge. After he stepped down from his sedan-chair, he bowed to the Buddha's image and offered incense, and the abbot served him tea. As he walked down the dais, on either side of which stood the monks, Judge Lin raised his head to look upward, as if to listen to someone talking. After a while, he suddenly bowed, as if to someone in midair, and said, "Your subject understands." Then he raised his head again and said with another bow, "Your subject now knows who he is." With brisk steps, he went up the dais again and thundered, "Yamen runners! Arrest the murderer!"

The yamen runners acknowledged the order with a roar. Judge Lin took a furtive look around the hall and saw that the monks were somewhat surprised but remained standing respectfully without looking disconcerted. There was one exception: a monk past middle age went pale, his teeth clattering as if he felt cold. Pointing a finger at him, Judge Lin ordered the runners to tie him up. "Did you see?" he addressed the assembly of monks. "The Lord on High told me, 'The murderer of Du-shi, Mrs. Jing, is that man called Dajue.' Out with the truth now!"

The unsuspecting monks were impressed. They thought, "His Honor has never been here before. How did he know Dajue's name? All too clearly, the Lord on High did indeed speak to him." Little did they know that the information had been acquired by the gatekeeper and reported to him in advance.

Caught by surprise, the old monk was not in the least prepared. Believing that the Lord on High was manifesting his power, the old monk was frightened out of his senses and could not manage to say anything in his own defense. He made one kowtow after another but was unable to get one word out. On Judge Lin's orders, the squeezers were applied to him. Sure

enough, he confessed everything about how he and Zhiyuan had fornicated with the same woman and how his jealousy had led to murder. Judge Lin then ordered that the squeezers be applied to Zhiyuan as well. Of delicate build, the young monk was even less ready for it. Before the squeezers were tightened on him, he came out with the truth. "Yes, my master murdered her. The corpse is buried in the backyard."

On Judge Lin's orders, the runners marched the two monks to the backyard and began to dig. They did unearth the bloody corpse of a woman with a broken neck. Judge Lin barked orders for the two monks to be taken back to the county yamen, where he had their confessions recorded and put on file. Dajue was sentenced to death for the crimes of fornication and murder. Zhiyuan was sentenced to three years in prison for the crimes of fornication and failure to report a murder. After completing the prison term, he was to return to secular life and work as a servant. The judge then summoned the Jings and the Dus and had them identify and claim the corpse and make arrangements for its burial. Only then were the two families' suspicions of each other dispelled.

Judge Lin gave Gatekeeper Yu a handsome reward and reinstated him. People of the entire county praised Judge Lin for his divine wisdom and condemned the monks for their depravity. Later, with the approval of higher authorities, the old monk was executed after the Autumn Assizes, to everyone's gratification. Word got around that Judge Lin, with his abundant intelligence, could communicate with the Lord on High (MC: *So gullible are the general populace.*) and had solved a baffling case. To this day, this story is still in wide circulation in Sichuan, as the following poem attests:

*The farmer's wife was too picky about men;
The sex fiend in his jealousy was too savage.
The wise Judge Lin put the gatekeeper to use
And staged a show to fool the monks.*

Gu Axiu Donates to a Nunnery with Joy

Cui Junchen Is Shown the Lotus Screen through a Clever Scheme

A poem goes thus,

*Husband and wife are birds in the same woods;
At the fated hour, they fly their separate ways.
If a lost pearl is returned to Hepu,¹
One rub will more than restore its luster.*

Our story takes place in the Song dynasty. A low-ranking official named Wang, of Bianliang [present-day Kaifeng, Henan], went with his wife to Lin-an [present-day Hangzhou] to assume his new post. He rented a house from a local resident, but after a few days, he began to find the house small and the location inconvenient. So he went to a main street and found a spacious and clean house very much to his liking. He rented it then and there and, on returning to the old house, said to his wife, "I rented a very nice house. I'll move everything there tomorrow and then hire a sedan-chair to take you there." The next day, after they finished packing their trunks, Mr. Wang escorted the luggage to the new place, to unpack and get the house ready. Before he set out, he said to his wife, "I'm off now. You wait here. The sedan-chair will be back to pick you up."

After leaving these words of instruction, he went to the new place and got everything ready before he hired a sedan-chair and told the carriers to go to his old address to pick up his wife. After waiting for the longest time

without seeing his wife approach in the sedan-chair, Mr. Wang grew anxious and returned to the old address to make inquiries. The landlord told him, "Soon after you left, a sedan-chair came to pick up your wife, and she got in. Then another sedan-chair came for her. (MC: *Could his wife have been in collusion with the abductors?*) I told the two carriers that your wife had already gone with another sedan-chair, so they went away with an empty chair. Hasn't she arrived?"

Mr. Wang was appalled. When he returned to the new place to see if she was there, he ran into the two sedan-chair carriers. Demanding payment, they said, "We went to pick up your wife, but she had already left when we arrived. Although we didn't carry her, you do need to pay the rental fee and for the labor."

"It was *your* sedan-chair I hired. Why was there another chair that went ahead of you? And now I wonder where they carried her."

"That we don't know," said the carriers.

Mr. Wang paid them several tens of copper cash and sent them away. His mind in turmoil, his temper short, he was at a loss as to what to do.

The next day, he went to the Lin'an prefectural yamen to report the case. The first landlord was summoned to the court, but his deposition was consistent with what he had told Mr. Wang the day before. Neighbors who were questioned all testified that they had seen her mount a sedan-chair. Then the two carriers of the empty chair were brought in. They said, "We carried an empty sedan-chair back and forth. Many people on the streets saw us. That's all we know."

There was little the prefectural judge could do but issue an order to bring the carriers of the first sedan-chair to court, but since none knew their names and addresses, searching would be like trying to scoop the moon from the surface of the sea. Mr. Wang's wife had all too obviously been taken somewhere, but nothing could be done about it. Mr. Wang was consumed with grief. After he lost his wife, he did not marry again.

Five years later, Mr. Wang was appointed director of education of Quzhou, which was a part of Xi'an County [present-day Qu County, Zhejiang]. The county magistrate and Director Wang had frequent mutual visits. Once, when Director Wang was in the magistrate's private quarters in the yamen for dinner, a cooked soft-shell turtle was served in the midst of their drinking. After eating two chopsticksful of the dish, Director Wang put down his chopsticks and broke down in sobs, his tears falling like strings of pearls.

In alarm, the magistrate asked what had brought him to such a state. Director Wang replied, "This dish reminds me of my deceased wife's cooking. (MC: *The turtle is to bring about his reunion with his wife.*) That's why I feel sad."

"When did your wife pass away?"

"If she had died, I would have put it down to destiny. But when I was moving from one rented house to another in Lin'an, I told her that I would send a sedan-chair to pick her up, but some evil men preempted me and tricked her into getting into their sedan-chair. She took it to be the one I had sent and got in. I reported the case to the prefectural yamen, but nothing has been heard so far."

The magistrate's face darkened. "My concubine was bought with three hundred thousand copper cash from Lin'an, although she's not a native of Lin'an. A while ago, I told her to prepare a meal for us, and so she cooked this turtle. I'm puzzled." So saying, he left the table, went into an inner room where his concubine was, and asked her, "You're not a native of Lin'an, so why were you brought here from Lin'an?"

Her eyes misting up, his concubine replied, "I was married. I was abducted and sold. I didn't tell you this because I didn't want to bring disgrace to my husband's name."

"What is your husband's name?"

"He is Wang So-and-so, a low-ranking official in Lin'an."

The magistrate was so astonished that the blood drained from his cheeks. He went out into the reception hall and said to Director Wang, "Please come inside with me. Someone would like to see you." Director Wang followed him inside.

A woman emerged as the magistrate called for her. The director recognized her to be none other than his lost wife. They fell into each other's arms and broke into heartrending sobs.

"How did you come here?" asked Director Wang.

"While we were talking that night in that jerry-built rented house, someone must have overheard what you said about sending a sedan-chair for me. Soon after you left, a sedan-chair came to pick me up. I thought it was from you, so I packed and got in. As it turned out, they carried me to an empty house—I don't know where—in which there were already two or three women. (MC: *Better than if she were alone.*) We spent the night there under lock and key. The next day, I was sold to an official in a government-owned boat. I knew it was a case of abduction, but I was afraid that if I told the truth, the scandal would put you in a bad light in your new post. So I had to swallow

the humiliation until today. (MC: *What a muddle-headed woman! That's why she is in such a mess.*) I never thought I would run into you here."

The magistrate felt so apologetic that he sent word to the yamen's sedan-chair carriers on duty outside, ordering them to carry Madam Wang to Director Wang's official residence. Director Wang wanted to return the three hundred thousand cash to the magistrate (IC: *Surely not another payment!*), but the magistrate said, "I had a colleague's wife as my concubine and never bothered to check her background carefully. I'm grateful enough that you don't blame me. How could I dream of taking the money?" (MC: *Just look on the three hundred thousand as payment for her services.*) The director returned home thankfully. In their joyful reunion, their hearts overflowed with gratitude for the magistrate.

This is what had happened: Some ruffians of Lin'an thought that a nonlocal like Mr. Wang would be fair game, and after listening in on their conversation that night, they hatched a plot to abduct and sell her to an official in a government boat. Since the official was on his way to another prefecture to take up his new post, they thought they would never be found out. Little did they know that the official's new duty station was Quzhou, where the abductee was to reunite with her husband five years later. It was, in fact, because the predestined bond between the husband and the wife was not meant to terminate at this time.

However, let me make one point clear: It is of course a good thing for a long-separated couple to reunite, like a broken mirror that is made whole again, but there is one drawback in the otherwise perfect ending: Madam Wang, albeit through no fault of her own, had allowed herself to be a concubine and had lost her chastity, after all. Nor was anything done to track down the abductors and seek justice. I have a better story, in which the protagonist, Cui Junchen, through a lotus-patterned screen, was reunited with his wife, who retained her chastity, and exacted revenge into the bargain. Gentle reader, please let me take my time and tell it to you. But first, listen to the "Song of the Screen with the Lotus Painting," which gives you an outline of the story:²

*As I write in grief on the lotus painting,
My blood and tears stain the screen.
The withered leaves and stems that pine away
Come across as broken lines on the silk.
As the fallen petals drift to the other world,*

*I wander about by my forlorn self.
 As this poor woman wanders about,
 Who will take care of my remains?
 As this soul keeps roaming by the springs of the dead,
 The lotus's beauty comes through in the painting.
 My grief, also coming through on the screen,
 Can hardly bear the autumn rain and frost.
 I would rather sail on the rivers and lakes
 And serve the abbess in the blessed land.
 The abbess is kind by nature;
 Her compassion stands out among her peers.
 The departed soul was eager to help;
 The lonely widow received a guiding hand.
 My husband, with his own hand,
 Drew the lotus in its charming colors.
 The broken roots caused the blossoms to wither;
 The damaged seedlings died from lack of water.
 The lotus seeds carry a bitter taste;
 The lotus roots harbor lasting regrets. (MC: A lot remains unsaid in
 this poem.)
 Han Yi is remembered for his mournful poem,³
 And Wen Xiao for his union with Cailuan.⁴
 The lotus is filled with tender feelings;
 The lotus is not to be abandoned.
 Luckily, the moon waxed full again;
 May lovers never be driven apart!
 Who will listen to my ode to the lotus?
 Wedded couples, never turn against each other!
 Look how pitiful the lotus is!*

This song was written by Lu Zhongyang, a distinguished scholar of Zhenzhou in the Zhizheng reign period [1341–68] of the Yuan dynasty. You may well ask, why did he write this song? It was all because of what happened to an official by the name of Cui Ying, courtesy name Junchen. A native of Zhenzhou, he came from a rich family. He showed more than average intelligence from an early age and was a calligrapher and painter par excellence. His wife, Wang-shi, a ravishing beauty in the first bloom of her youth, was not only

literate but also skilled in calligraphy and painting. This couple fit the ideal of “gifted youth and fair maiden.” They were indeed a perfect match, and they were most tenderly attached to each other.

In the year of Xinmao, the twenty-eighth year of the sixty-year calendar cycle [1351], Junchen obtained an official post, by hereditary entitlement, as marshal of Yongjia County in Wenzhou, Zhejiang. He set out with his wife on the journey to his duty station. A large boat from Suzhou, of the kind that usually has Hangzhou as its final destination, was moored by the Zhenzhou floodgate. The surname of the boat owner was Gu. After the rental formalities were over, the Cuis’ baggage was loaded onto the boat and the couple went on board with their servants and maids. They set off down the Yangzi River, to disembark at Hangzhou and transfer to another boat. On reaching Suzhou, the boat owner said to Mr. Cui, “Sir, this is my hometown. Could you please buy us some sacrificial money and other items to offer to the gods of the rivers and lakes?”

Junchen obliged him and gave him some money with which to buy whatever items he deemed necessary. After the ceremony was completed, the boat owner picked a pot of sacrificial wine and carried it into the Cuis’ cabin. Junchen had a page boy accept it and put it on the table so that he and his wife could warm the wine and enjoy some of it. Having grown up in an official’s family, Junchen knew nothing about the taboos for traveling on water. Quite carried away by the excitement of drinking, he took golden and silver wine utensils out of his trunk, to add to their enjoyment. (MC: *A childish thing to do.*) The boat owner, peeping in from the stern, saw this and felt the stirrings of greed.

It being the seventh month of the lunar year, the boat owner said to his patrons in the cabin, “Sir, madam, we need to take a rest, but it’s too hot at this bustling place. Shall we go farther down, to a cooler spot?”

Junchen remarked to his wife, “That’s a good idea. It’s so stuffy in this boat.”

Wang-shi replied, “But I wonder if it’s safe at night.” (MC: *Wang-shi is the smarter one.*)

“This is an inland waterway. We’re not out on the big river. What’s more, the boat owner is a native of these parts. He knows what will be good for us or not. What harm can there be?” And so he agreed that they travel farther down.

Suzhou is located on the border of Lake Tai, a vast lake that could rival any big river. Even government-run major waterways were not exempt from

crime, let alone narrow inlets. Being a native of a region on the northern bank of the Yangzi River, Junchen knew only that the Yangzi River was haunted by bandits and thought that it would be quite different on the small inland waterways. Well, how was he supposed to know all the ins and outs of the matter?

Late that afternoon, the boat owner moored the boat by a reedy marsh. When evening was setting in, he stormed into the room, carrying a knife, and killed one of the servants. Appalled by the violence, Junchen and his wife kowtowed to the boat owner and begged for mercy, saying, "Please take everything but spare our lives!"

The boat owner countered, "I want things as well as lives!"

As the husband and wife kept kowtowing, the boat owner pointed his knife at Wang-shi and said, "You need not panic. I won't kill you. But I'm not going to spare anyone else!"

Knowing he had no chance of survival, Junchen pleaded time and again, "Please take pity on this scholar and keep my corpse whole!"

"All right," said the boat owner. "I'll spare you from the knife. You just jump into the water! Now!"

Without waiting for Junchen to jump on his own, the boat owner picked him up around the waist and tossed him overboard with a plop. All the servants and maids were killed. Wang-shi was the only one spared.

"Do you know why you've been spared?" the boat owner asked Wang-shi. "It's because my second son isn't married yet. He's working on a boat going to Hangzhou. As soon as he's back, in a month or two, you'll marry him. Now that you're a member of my family, you just put your mind at ease. You'll be treated well. There's nothing to fear." (MC: *What if he turns out to be a lecher with designs on his daughter-in-law?*) So saying, he began to take stock of the Cuis' possessions and put them away.

Wang-shi had steeled herself for a fight to the death if he should attempt to rape her, but she felt somewhat relieved on hearing that announcement and said to herself, "I'll wait and see what can be done later."

Sure enough, from that day onward, the boat owner called her "Daughter-in-Law," and Wang-shi feigned acceptance of the address. She was all obedience to him, doing miscellaneous household chores the way a daughter-in-law running a household serves her father-in-law. There was no chore she did not do, and she did everything well. Believing he had got himself a good daughter-in-law (MC: *What does that impertinent boat owner know about women?*), the boat owner treated her well and with sincerity. As a certain familiarity gradually grew up between them, he dropped his vigilance toward her.

More than a month went by in like manner, and the Mid-Autumn Festival, the fifteenth day of the eighth month, rolled around. The boat owner called his family members and the boatmen together and had Wang-shi set out a wine feast in the cabin so that everyone could enjoy the moon. When all the men were quite drunk and slumped every which way and the boat owner had also gone to sleep, Wang-shi was alone at the stern of the boat and heard the ear-splitting snores. By the light of the moon that illuminated the boat with the brightness of day, she peered intently into the cabin and saw everyone in deep slumber. She thought, "What better time than this to go? What am I waiting for?" Luckily, the boat was moored with its stern touching the shore. By maneuvering the boat slightly, she managed to leap onto the shore. By moonlight, she walked two or three *li* without stopping until she came to a watery expanse of reeds and wild rice plants that stretched as far as the eye could see. She peered intently and saw a small path through the growth of reeds. The reeds being tall, the mud slippery, her legs thin, and her feet small, she stumbled at every step and truly had a poor time of it. Afraid that she would be pursued, she dared not stop but picked her way forward as best she could.

As it grew lighter in the east, she began to take heart. Seeing the contours of a house looming in the midst of distant woods, she thought, "Good! There must be people there!" With all the haste she could muster, she went up to the house and saw that it looked like a temple. She was about to knock at the closed gate when she thought, "I wonder if those inside are monks or nuns. If a monk comes to open the gate and he happens to be a bad man and assaults me, won't I have escaped from one misfortune only to land in another one? I shouldn't make a rash move. It's broad daylight now. Even if the boatmen catch up with me, I can call for help here. I have nothing to fear. I'll just sit by the gate and wait until it opens."

Soon she heard the bolt on the gate click. The gate opened, and out came a girl with a water bucket. Wang-shi said to herself in delight, "So this is a nunnery!" She went straight in.

The abbess came out to greet the visitor and said to her, "Where are you from, madam? What brought you to this nunnery so early in the morning?"

Unwilling to tell the truth to a stranger about whom she knew nothing, Wang-shi lapsed into falsehood, saying, "I'm a native of Zhenzhou, concubine of Marshall Cui of Yongjia County. His chief wife is a fearsome shrew and often beats me and yells at me. The other day, the master was on his way home from his duty station when his boat stopped nearby. It was the

Mid-Autumn Festival yesterday, and they were viewing the moon when I was told to take out golden wine cups. My hands slipped, and the cups fell into the river. The chief wife got angry and vowed to do me to death. Since my life was at stake, I escaped while they were asleep." (MC: *She makes no mention of the crime out of fear that the nuns might know the criminals. Meticulous.*)

"So you mean you can't return to the boat. Your native town is so far away, and if you want another match, none is to be had on short notice. Now, what are you going to do all by yourself?" As Wang-shi kept weeping, the abbess, impressed by her graceful manner, took pity on her in her misery and wanted to keep her at the nunnery. She said, "I have a word of advice. Tell me what you think of it."

"I'm in such a mess, Your Reverence. Whatever advice you have, I'll follow it."

"This little nunnery is at an out-of-the-way place with few visitors. We count the wild-rice plants as our neighbors and the gulls and the egrets as our friends. It's a really secluded place. Luckily, I have a couple of companions here. We're all more than fifty years old. (IC: *Important.*) The several attendants we have are all honest and prudent. This old woman feels very much at home here, living the life of a nun. Now, you're hounded by bad luck in spite of all your youth and beauty. Why don't you renounce all desires, take the tonsure, and become a nun right here? Living in a nun's cell with its crude bed and lamp, making do with simple food, and taking life as it comes will be better than serving a man as a concubine, suffering misery in this life and sowing the seeds of ill will in the next one."

Having heard her out, Wang-shi bowed in gratitude and said, "Your Reverence's acceptance of me as a disciple is the best outcome for me. What more would I want? Please let me take the tonsure. There's no need to hesitate." (MC: *Her eagerness to take the tonsure stems from her wish to stay out of harm's way.*) Indeed, the abbess prepared the incense, sounded the chime, bowed to the Buddha's image, and gave Wang the tonsure.

How sad that the county marshal's wife

Ends up a novice serving the Buddha.

After she took the tonsure, the abbess gave her the Buddhist name Huiyuan. She bowed to the Three Precious Ones [Buddha, Dharma (the Law), and Sangha (the Ecclesia or Order)] and acknowledged the abbess as her tutor. After she was introduced to the other nuns, she settled down in the nunnery.

With her intellectual endowment as the daughter of a distinguished family, Wang-shi learned quickly. Within a month, she had gone through all the sutras and understood everything. The abbess began to hold her in great esteem. Recognizing her good sense, the abbess gave her a free hand in dealing with all matters of the nunnery, large and small, and never did anything without first consulting her. Because of all this, plus her forgiving nature and her softness and gentleness, everyone in the nunnery was favorably disposed toward her. Every morning, whether in bitter cold or in sweltering heat, she bowed to the image of the bodhisattva Guanyin a hundred times and silently stated what weighed on her mind. After her prayers were over, she spent her time confined to her cell. Aware of her own beauty, she did not want to cause trouble, so she refrained from showing herself in public without good reason. Outsiders hardly ever got to see her. (MC: *What a remarkable woman!*) More than one year elapsed in this way.

One day, two men came to the nunnery for a visit. Since they were donors who lived nearby and were known to the abbess, they stayed for a vegetarian meal. They had been taking a leisurely stroll and were passing the nunnery when they dropped by, so they did not bring anything with them to offer as a token of their gratitude. The next day, they came again and gave the nunnery a scroll of a painting of lotus blossoms by way of thanking the abbess for the meal. (MC: *The villains are so stingy that they fob her off with a looted lotus painting. But this is an act of Providence.*) The abbess accepted it and mounted it on a white screen.

On seeing the painting, Wang-shi examined it closely before asking the abbess, "Where does this painting come from?"

"It's a gift from the donors who were just here."

"What are the donors' names? And where do they live?"

"They are Gu Axiu and his brother. They live right here in our county." (MC: *Now we realize her ingeniousness in withholding the truth from the abbess, in case the villains were in contact with the nunnery.*)

"What do they do for a living?"

"They're both boatmen working the rivers and lakes. They suddenly became rich recently. Some say their wealth comes from robbing their customers, but I have no idea if that's true."

"Do they come here often?"

"Only now and then. Not often."

Having obtained all the answers to her questions and memorized the name Gu Axiu, Wang-shi picked up a writing brush and wrote the following *ci* poem on the screen:

*In calligraphy, there is Zhang Chang of old;⁵
In painting, there is Huang Quan of more recent times.⁶
Of all drawn flowers, the lotus is most charming.
Who would have thought that its lovely colors
Would bring it such unjust ill fortune!*

*Its ethereal beauty gone, it lives a wretched life.
With no home of its own, it finds no sympathy.
In meditation by the white screen,
With our bond of this lifetime gone,
I long for a renewed bond in the life to come.
(To the tune of "Fairy by the River")*

The other nuns could read the sutras but were in fact not very accomplished in polite letters. On reading the poem, they took it as an attempt by Wang-shi to while away an idle moment by showing off her poetic talent. They had no clue as to the real reason behind her composition. As it turned out, this painting had been done by County Marshal Cui himself. It was one of the items looted from the boat.

Looking at the painting whose painter was dead and gone, Wang-shi was consumed with silent grief. Although she had learned something about the murderers' identities, there was nothing she could do as a woman, and a nun at that. She kept the knowledge to herself and bided her time. As a matter of fact, because the wrongs she had suffered were to be redressed and her marriage bond had not been severed, something was going to happen.

In the city of Suzhou, there lived a man called Guo Qingchun. With his deep pockets, he was keen on cultivating the friendship of officials and literary gentlemen and had a soft spot for objets d'art. One day, he went on a tour of the nunnery and was impressed by the lotus painting as well as the poem that had been added to it in elegant calligraphy. Taking a great liking to the screen, he asked the abbess if he could buy it. When the abbess consulted Wang-shi, Wang-shi thought, "It's my late husband's work. I shouldn't part with it, but my poem conveys a sense of the injustice done to us. If someone with a discerning mind feels intrigued by the innuendo and probes into the

matter, the truth may be uncovered. (MC: *Wang-shi herself possesses a discerning mind.*) What good does the painting do if it stays in the nunnery? Let me advise Her Reverence to sell it to him!”

And so Qingchun bought the screen and took himself off in high glee.

At the time, there was a retired imperial inspector, named Gao Nalin, living in Suzhou. He was an avid collector of calligraphy and paintings. It was to please him that Guo Qingchun had bought the screen. When Qingchun offered it to Inspector Gao, the latter found it exquisite and accepted the gift. But in the rush of the moment, he did not stop to read the poem or the colophon but gave it to his page boy and told him to display it in the inner study. When he saw Qingchun off at the gate, he noticed a man carrying four scrolls of calligraphy in the cursive style with sales tags attached to them. Being a lover of calligraphy, he was not going to let this opportunity pass him by. So he called the seller to him for a good look at the scrolls. The man presented the scrolls to him with both hands. Mr. Gao took them, and what he saw is best described by this quatrain:

*The style follows that of Huaisu,⁷
Fresh, forceful, and free of vulgarity.
If included in calligraphy master sheets,
It is worthy of the great “Jinshi lu.”⁸*

Mr. Gao commented, “Good calligraphy! Who wrote it?”

“I did, in imitation of the master’s style.”

Mr. Gao raised his head and, surprised by the man’s distinguished bearing, asked, “What’s your name? And where are you from?”

The man replied, tears springing to his eyes, “I’m Cui Ying, courtesy name Junchen, a native of Zhenzhou, where my clan has been residing for generations. I was appointed county marshal of Yongjia County as a hereditary entitlement, and I was on my way, with my wife, to my duty station when my own indiscretion led to the boat owner’s violence. He dumped me into the river, and I have no idea what happened to my wife and the family possessions. Luckily, having grown up by the river, I learned to swim at an early age. I stayed underwater for a long time until I thought he must be a good distance away. Then I rose to the surface and got to the shore. I went to a house and asked for help. I was drenched and penniless, but my host was all kindness. He gave me a change of clothing, served me wine and food, and let me stay the night. The next day, he gave me some travel money and said,

‘Since you’re a victim of robbery, you should report it to the authorities. But I’m afraid of being involved in the case, so I’m not going to keep you here.’ (MC: *Yes, it is right to report a case of robbery to the authorities, but if, as a temporary host, he is afraid of being implicated, isn’t he in fact giving encouragement to the bandits?*) So I asked the way into the city and filed a report at the Pingjiang Circuit [in present-day Suzhou] yamen. However, since I have no money, the officers didn’t make much of an effort. (IC: *Clearly, there are robbers at work.*) It’s been a year now, and nothing has been heard from them. In desperation, I eke out a living by selling my calligraphy, not to make any claims to being a good calligrapher, but just as a last resort. It was by pure chance that my poor writing came to your attention, sir.”

Having learned that he was an official reduced to his current circumstances because of a robbery, Mr. Gao felt his heart go out to the young man. Impressed by the latter’s good calligraphy and his refined and graceful manner, he decided to take the young man under his wing. He said, “Things having come to this, there’s little you can do about it. Would you agree to be a live-in tutor to my grandchildren before moving on?”

Joyfully, Cui Junchen said, “I have nowhere else to go in my distress. What a boundless blessing it is for me that you, sir, chose to help me out!”

Jubilantly, Mr. Gao led him into the study and laid out wine in his honor.

In the midst of the drinking, Junchen suddenly raised his head, and his eyes happened to rest on the lotus screen. (MC: *Good plot element.*) The sight reduced him to tears. In alarm, Mr. Gao asked, “Why does the lotus painting make you sad?”

“I won’t hold anything back from you, sir. This painting is one of my lost possessions, and it was done by me. I wonder how it got here.” He stood up for a closer look and saw the added poem on it. After reading it, he said with a sigh, “How very strange! The poem must have been written by my wife Wang-shi.”

“How do you know?”

“I recognize her handwriting. And the meaning of the poem also tells me all too clearly that she’s the author. Since it was obviously written after misfortune befell us, I think she must still be alive, and with the criminals. (IC: *So he makes the connection.*) If you, sir, can trace it back to its source, you’ll be getting to the bottom of the case.”

With a smile, Mr. Gao said, “I know where it comes from. I’ll surely hunt down the criminals for you, but keep this a secret for now!”

After they finished drinking, Mr. Gao had his two grandsons greet their new tutor and made sleeping arrangements for Junchen in the study. Henceforth, Junchen became a member of the Gao household, and there we shall leave him for now.

The next day, Mr. Gao quietly summoned the servant on duty and told him to bring Guo Qingchun to him. When Guo arrived, Mr. Gao asked him, "About the lotus screen that you kindly offered me as a gift, where did it come from?"

"I bought it from the nunnery outside the city."

Mr. Gao took note of the location, bade Qingchun good-bye, and sent the servant on duty to the nunnery. As the servant asked probing questions as to the provenance of the screen and the author of the poem, Wang-shi had a hunch that something was afoot. Upon her advice, the abbess asked the servant, "Who wants answers to these questions? And why?"

The servant replied, "The painting is now with Inspector Gao. It was he who sent me to find out more about it."

Wang-shi thought that since the questions came from an official, she might have a chance. (MC: *She always keeps her eyes open.*) So she asked the abbess to reply, truthfully, "This painting was donated by Gu Axiu who lives in this very county, and the poem is by our novice Huiyuan."

On receiving the servant's report, Mr. Gao thought, "I only need to have Huiyuan brought here to get to the bottom of all this." He went to the inner quarters of the house and worked out a plan with his wife.

Two days later, Mr. Gao dispatched another servant as well as a sedan-chair and two carriers to the nunnery. The servant said to the abbess, "I'm Inspector Gao's butler. Mrs. Gao likes to read Buddhist sutras, but she wants a companion in that exercise. Having heard about the accomplishments of Novice Huiyuan in your honorable establishment, she'd like to respectfully acknowledge the novice as her teacher and ask her to live in the Gao residence. Please don't decline the offer."

The abbess hesitated. "She makes all the decisions in this nunnery. We can't do without her."

Wang-shi heard the Gaos' invitation. With revenge on her mind, she had a good notion to visit some official and find an opportunity, and she was already intrigued after learning the other day that the person who had asked probing questions about the lotus screen was from the Gao residence. (MC: *She has a mind that embraces the minutest details. It's a good thing that she*

meets a man of the same disposition.) So she said to the abbess, “How can we decline a kind invitation from such a distinguished family? If we decline and get ourselves in trouble, what are we going to do?”

Knowing Wang-shi to be an insightful woman, the abbess refrained from contradicting her and limited herself to saying, “All right, you may go. But when will you be coming back? What if something happens here?”

“After I’m introduced to Lady Gao, I’ll stay for a few days and look for an opportunity to come back as soon as I can. Nothing can happen in the nunnery. Even if some difficulty arises, the Gao residence in the city is not that far from here. Correspondence by letter will do.”

“In that case, you may go now.”

Thereupon, the servant summoned the sedan-chair carriers into the nunnery. Wang-shi mounted the sedan-chair and was carried all the way to the Gao residence.

Mr. Gao did not receive her (IC: *Very good.*) but instructed that she be taken to his wife. At his behest, Lady Gao kept Wang-shi in their bedroom, whereas he slept in another room. (IC: *He stands to gain.*)

Lady Gao touched on the sutras and the operations of karma in her chat with Wang-shi, and to each of her questions, Wang-shi had ten answers. Lady Gao thought the world of her. (IC: *As often happens with wives.*) Off-handedly, Lady Gao said, “Judging from your accent, I don’t think you’re a native of these parts. Did you join the Buddhist order at an early age? Or did you have a husband and become a nun later in life?”

These questions brought copious tears to Wang-shi’s eyes. “Your Ladyship,” said she, “I’m indeed not a native of these parts. I’m from Zhenzhou. My husband is Cui Ying, marshal of Yongjia County. I’ve never dared to tell anyone the truth, but I believe there’s no harm in telling you what really happened.” (MC: *There is a time for falsehoods and a time for truths. Wang-shi can be a military strategist.*) She thereupon launched into an account of how she had joined her husband on a journey to assume his post, how the boat owner had taken their possessions and murdered her husband when their journey had taken them to a spot nearby, how she had been spared her life, how she had escaped, and how, fortunately for her, the abbess had kept her and tonsured her.

As she blubbered out her story from start to finish, Lady Gao felt so sorry for her that she said savagely, “How hateful those scoundrels—bringing such suffering upon you! Divine justice never misses the mark, but why haven’t they gotten their comeuppance yet?”

Wang-shi continued, "In my seclusion in the nunnery, I heard no news from outside for about a year. Then suddenly, some days ago, a lotus painting was presented to the nunnery as a donation. I recognized it as my husband's. It was one of the items looted from the boat. So I asked the abbess for the name of the donor, and learned that the donors were Gu Axiu and his brother, who live right here in this county. As far as I remember, the boat my husband rented was owned by a man with the surname Gu. Now that one of the looted items has surfaced, who can the criminal be if not Gu Axiu? Right away, I composed a *ci* poem to hint at the fact that my husband and I lost each other that day and wrote it on the painting. Thereafter, someone bought the screen. The other day, a messenger from your honorable establishment went to the nunnery to inquire about the origin of the poem on the painting. It was written by me, in order to make the injustice known." With a bow to Lady Gao, she continued, "The criminals live nearby. Please ask Inspector Gao to look into the case for me. If the criminals are brought to justice, the wrongs inflicted on us will be redressed, my late husband will be vindicated, and you and Inspector Gao will have done a kindness as vast as heaven and earth."

"With these clues, the investigations shouldn't be too difficult. Don't worry! I'll talk to my husband."

Lady Gao did indeed repeat Wang-shi's words in detail to her husband, adding, "She's too well educated and gentle to be from a lowly family."

"What she said tallies with County Marshal Cui's words," said Mr. Gao. "Since Marshal Cui recognized her handwriting on the lotus screen, I have no doubt that she's his wife. You must take good care of her, but don't give anything away yet."

When Mr. Gao went out to see Cui Junchen, the latter urged him over and over, to find out more about the screen. Mr. Gao hemmed and hawed, saying he had too little information to go on, and made no mention of the nun Huiyuan. (IC: *Wonderful detail*.) He then secretly dispatched servants to find out where the Gu brothers lived and the places they frequented. What they found out convinced him that the brothers were indeed bandits. (MC: *Mr. Gao is also a detail-oriented person*.) However, since he was living in retirement, he thought it would be presumptuous of him to rush into action. Privately, he said to his wife, "Marshal Cui's case has been seven or eight parts solved. Soon I'll bring about his reunion with his wife. But Huiyuan is still a tonsured nun. After they're reunited, she can't very well show herself in public as an official's wife if her head remains shaved. You need to gently talk her into letting her hair grow and putting on lay clothes."

"Right you are!" said his wife. "But she doesn't know that her husband is alive. How could she agree to let her hair grow and change into lay clothes?"

"You just go ahead and talk to her. If she listens to you, well and good. If not, I'll give you other ideas."

Thus advised, Lady Gao went to Wang-shi and said to her, "I've repeated all your words to my husband. He said that he'd take care of the case and bring the criminals to justice. He'll surely find redress for you."

Wang-shi raised one hand in a Buddhist salute and voiced her thanks.

Lady Gao continued, "There's one thing, though. My husband said that being from a distinguished family and the wife of an official, you mustn't end up in a nunnery. He wants me to talk you into growing your hair and changing into lay clothes. If you agree, he'll do all he can to hunt down the criminals for you."

"Why would a widow like me bother to grow long hair and change my looks? (MC: *It's for your own good.*) I pleaded for your husband's help because I wanted to seek revenge, but after the criminals are wiped out, I'll be content to live out my life here in this nunnery. What other ending would I want?"

"But your nun's outfit is out of place in my home. A better option would be for you to let your hair grow and acknowledge me and my husband as your adoptive parents. A widowed daughter can very well live with her parents for as long as it takes." (MC: *The old lady is also full of ideas.*)

"You and your husband favor me with such kindness! Human beings are not unfeeling wood or stone. How can I feel no gratitude? But a widow is in no mood to arrange her hair and put on powder and rouge. What's more, I'm deeply indebted to the abbess for saving my life. It would be unkind to abandon her. (MC: *Her heart is in the right place.*) With all due respect, I can't oblige you."

Since Wang-shi was so unyielding, Lady Gao gave up and reported as much to her husband. In admiration, Mr. Gao said, "A woman of such moral rectitude is hard to come by!" (IC: *Indeed.*)

At his behest, Lady Gao approached Wang-shi again and said, "My husband isn't being unreasonable in insisting that you let your hair grow. Let me explain: The other day, when he was talking with an official of the Ping-jiang Circuit about this case, he learned that someone claiming to be the marshal of Yongjia County filed a report at the yamen last year. So your husband may still be alive. If you don't let your hair grow, once the criminals are caught and Mr. Cui surfaces, you won't be able to reunite with him due to your religious status. Regret will be too late then. (MC: *She has to let her hair*

grow.) Why don't you let your hair grow for a time? When the case is solved, even if Mr. Cui is still nowhere to be found, you can take the tonsure again and return to the nunnery. There will be no harm done!"

On learning that someone had filed a report claiming to be Cui, Wang-shi began to have second thoughts: "My husband learned to swim in early childhood, and that night I saw him being dumped into the water. Perhaps Heaven spared his life." She complied and let her hair grow, although she still refused to dress differently and looked more like a Daoist nun.

Half a year later, the imperial court sent a *jinsshi*, a Mr. Xue Puhua, to Pingjiang Circuit as an imperial inspector.⁹ A highly competent and resourceful official, he happened to be a former subordinate of Mr. Gao's. Upon arrival at his duty station, he lost no time in paying Mr. Gao a visit, and Mr. Gao confided the secret to him, sparing no details, and told him Gu Axiu's name, address, and the places he frequented. Inspector Xue took note of the information and went away to do what needed to be done, but that is no part of our story.

Now, let us turn to the Gu brothers and retrace our steps to the fifteenth night of the eighth month of that year. When they woke up at daybreak after sleeping straight through the night, they realized that Wang-shi was missing. Knowing that she must have gotten away, they dared not pursue her, afraid that they would only give themselves away. They did ask around a couple of times, but to no avail. Since this was not something they could go public with, they had no alternative but to bite their tongues and do nothing. The following year, they committed about ten more robberies. Although the loot came to less than what they had taken from the Cuis, their luck held, and their crimes remained undetected.

Savoring their success, they were cheering and drinking at home when a team of officers and runners led by the police chief of Pingjiang Circuit surrounded the house. They produced the wanted list given to them by the imperial inspector, and Gu Axiu's name was seen to be at the top of the list. As the officers went down the list, every one of the bandits was apprehended. Then the police searched the house for the looted items on the list provided by Marshal Cui and confiscated the trunks and cases, as well as the boat that was moored in the inlet outside. All the items were transported under guard to the imperial inspector's yamen.

After Inspector Xue began his court session, the accused tried to deny everything at first, but when the looted items were presented in the courtroom, the letter of appointment for the marshal of Yongjia County was

found lying in a trunk, and the other items were also checked against the list one by one. Only when Inspector Xue read out loud the report Marshal Cui had previously filed did the accused men lower their heads, speechless.

"Where's the county marshal's wife, Wang-shi?" asked Inspector Xue.

Gu Axiu and the others looked at one another without a word. When the inspector barked the order that they be put under torture, Gu Axiu confessed: "I meant to marry her to my younger son, which is why I didn't kill her. She readily gave her consent, so I dropped my guard. (MC: *Wonderful*.) To my surprise, she escaped while we were all asleep on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival that year and went no one knows where. This is the truth."

The imperial inspector recorded his deposition and had his fingerprint pressed on it. Every man on the boat that fateful night, whether ringleader or accomplice, was sentenced to death, to be executed as soon as possible. All the looted items on the list were to be returned to their rightful owner.

The imperial inspector sent a messenger to report to Mr. Gao and had the looted items carried to Mr. Gao's residence so that they could be turned over to County Marshal Cui. Only when Cui Junchen went out to accept the items did he learn that his appointment letter was still there, as well as his family possessions. But his wife was still nowhere to be found, and even the bandits had no idea as to her whereabouts. He thought it was a hopeless case. Overcome with emotion at the new developments and memories of the past, he broke into sobs of grief, as attested by the following quatrain:

*How laughable that brainy Cui Junchen
For a moment let his sorrows cloud his wits!
If the painting helped track down the bandits,
It could help find the one who wrote on it.*

Well, this is what happened: Mr. Gao had purposely told Cui Junchen only that the painting was a donation by Gu Axiu to the nunnery without revealing the fact that the one who had written the poem on it was right there in the nunnery serving the Buddha. Therefore, although Cui knew it was the painting that had brought the crimes to light, he did not make the connection between the painting and establishing his wife's whereabouts. (MC: *By slyly concealing the other use for the painting, Mr. Gao means to deepen Cui's gratitude*.) It never entered his head that the painting could help him track her down.

After he had his cry, Cui thought, "Since I still have my appointment letter, I should be able to take up my post. If I drag my feet, there might be

a replacement, and I'll lose my chance. Since there's no trace of my wife, my staying here will serve no purpose." Whereupon he asked Mr. Gao to come out.

After he thanked Mr. Gao and informed the latter of his wish to go and assume his post, Mr. Gao said, "To leave on a journey to take up an official post is always a happy event. But you can't go as a young bachelor. My wife and I would like to find a wife for you. You can set out on your journey in her company, and you'll still make good time." (MC: *Deliberately misrepresenting the situation. Wonderful.*)

His eyes growing moist, Junchen said, "My wife shared my hard lot for many years. After that calamity, she must have gotten stranded somewhere, and I have no idea whether she's dead or alive. However, judging from her poem on the lotus screen, I should think she's still somewhere around these parts. If I stay here and start a search, there's too little likelihood of success, and it may take months or years, and my post will surely be unavailable by then. My idea is to go to my duty station alone. I'll then have missing-person posters put up everywhere. My humble wife, being quite literate, will be able to see them and come out on her own, unless the tribulations and shocks she went through have already claimed her life. On the off chance that she's still alive, by the grace of heaven and earth, I'll get to be reunited with her. I'll never forget your kindness to me, sir, but I won't accept your offer of matchmaking."

The sadness in his tone convinced Mr. Gao of his utter devotion to his wife. (MC: *Mr. Gao went to such lengths only because he was afraid that Mr. Cui might reject his wife out of suspicion that she had been defiled by the bandits.*) Mr. Gao said sympathetically, "Heaven will surely bless you, a man of such loyalty, and bring about a reunion with your wife. I wouldn't dream of imposing anything on you. Please give me some time so that I can lay out a farewell banquet before you set off on the journey."

The next day, a banquet was laid out. Among the guests invited to send off County Marshal Cui were Mr. Gao's students, former colleagues, incumbent officials, and other eminent personalities from across the county. (IC: *This is done to spread Mr. Gao's fame.*) After several rounds of toasts, Mr. Gao raised his cup again and announced, "Today, this old man will be completing Mr. Cui's bond of this lifetime." No one understood what he meant, not even Cui Junchen himself.

Before everyone's eyes, Mr. Gao ordered a servant to go to the inner quarters of the house and tell his wife that it was time for Huiyuan's appearance. On hearing this, Junchen froze with astonishment, somewhat upset

that Mr. Gao had laid out the banquet and said those words so that he could force a woman on him. Not even in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that his wife was now going by the name Huiyuan.

Lady Gao, well informed about her husband's plan, told Wang-shi that County Marshal Cui had stayed in the Gao residence for some time now, the bandits had been arrested and convicted of their crimes, and Mr. Cui's appointment letter had been found and that she was to go to the hall where the send-off banquet was taking place to be reunited with her husband.

As if waking from a dream, Wang-shi was overwhelmed with gratitude. She voiced her thanks to Lady Gao before entering the banquet hall. By this time, her hair had grown to about shoulder length, and she had changed into regular clothes. At the sight of his wife, Marshal Cui became as confused as if he was in a wine-induced trance or a dream.

Jubilantly, Mr. Gao said, "Didn't this old man offer to make a match for you? (MC: *He does know how to play a prank.*) Do you approve of this one?"

Marshal Cui and Wang-shi fell on each other's shoulders and cried with abandon, each saying, "I thought you had died. I never thought I'd see you again, and in this place, too!"

Knowing nothing of what had led to this, the guests asked Mr. Gao for enlightenment, whereupon Mr. Gao had a page boy bring the lotus screen out from his study. Addressing the assembly of guests, he announced, "If you want to know more, please look at this screen."

The guests vied with one another for a better view of the screen. Some examined the painting, some read the poem out loud, but none was able to make anything of them.

Mr. Gao said, "Let me tell you: This painting represents the marriage bond between Marshal Cui and his wife. The painting was done by Marshal Cui and the poem by Mrs. Cui. They were passing here on their way to Marshal Cui's duty station when they were robbed by their boatmen. Mrs. Cui fled to the nunnery to join the Buddhist order. When a donor offered this painting to the nunnery, she recognized it as one of the items looted by the boatmen. So she wrote a poem on the painting. Later, this painting came into this old man's hands, and on joining this household, Marshal Cui recognized his wife's handwriting. I had some secret investigations done and found out that Mrs. Cui was living in the nunnery. So I asked my wife to invite her to stay in our house. After more secret investigations, the bandits were tracked down. I asked Imperial Inspector Xue to handle the case. He got to the bottom of it, and the criminals all pleaded guilty. Marshal Cui and his

wife have both been staying in this house for half a year now, both believing that they had lost the other. Little did they know that they had indeed been together for quite some time. I've held myself back from revealing the truth to them because, with Mrs. Cui's hair short and Marshal Cui's appointment letter missing, I thought it imprudent to let the secret out. Plus I had no idea how things would turn out and what they would think. Now that the criminals have all been brought to justice and I've tested both husband and wife and found them to be utterly devoted to each other (IC: *To show how wise and discreet he is.*), the purpose of this feast is to bring about their reunion, which was why I said I would be completing Marshal Cui's 'bond of this lifetime,' a phrase taken from Mrs. Cui's poem. The name Huiyuan that I announced is Mrs. Cui's Buddhist name. I intentionally confused Mr. Cui and every one of you, in order to produce a laugh at the banquet table." (MC: *He is indeed wise and discreet, but also playful.*)

Having heard him out, Cui Junchen and Wang-shi tearfully kowtowed to him. There was not a dry eye throughout the hall. Everyone praised Mr. Gao for his unprecedented act of kindness. As Wang-shi went to the inner quarters to thank Lady Gao, Mr. Gao sat down at the table again to enjoy the feast with the guests. They did not part company until they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves. That night, another suite of rooms was straightened up for Marshal Cui and his wife, and two women servants were put at their disposal. (IC: *To add to the joy of the occasion.*)

The next day, Mr. Gao gave Cui Junchen a liberal amount of travel money, as well as a bond servant and a maid, since he had no servants of his own. (MC: *A great benefactor indeed.*) That very day, Marshal Cui and his wife set out on their journey. Out of gratitude for the great kindness done to them, they could hardly tear themselves away from the Gaos and did not depart without a violent fit of sobbing. Then they proceeded to the nunnery. Since Wang-shi had been away for quite some time now, the abbess and all the others in the nunnery were astounded when they saw her in lay clothes. Only after Wang-shi told them everything and thanked the abbess for having kindly taken care of her did the abbess come to realize that Gu Axiu was a criminal (MC: *Picking up an earlier thread.*) and that Wang-shi's story about being bullied by the chief wife was a little fiction invented on the spur of the moment. Everyone in the nunnery was friends with her and hated to see her go, but since there was nothing they could do about it, they tearfully bade her farewell. Husband and wife then set out for Yongjia County.

After Marshall Cui's term of office in Yongjia expired, they returned to Zhenzhou and, when passing Suzhou, sent a messenger to give their greetings to Mr. Gao and ask for a visit. As it turned out, both Mr. and Mrs. Gao were dead and buried. Cui Junchen and Wang-shi gave way to their grief, as if they had lost their own parents. They asked the way to the graveyard, paid their respects, and went to the nunnery to ask the nuns to perform a three-day-and-three-night "land and water" mass for the departed souls, to repay them for their great kindness. (MC: *That's the way it should be.*) Wang-shi still remembered the texts of the sutras and joined the nuns in their prayers. (MC: *Good detail.*)

After the mass was over, Mr. and Mrs. Cui went back to the nunnery with the nuns, and Junchen gave the abbess a hefty donation out of his savings from his salary. Recalling how she had prayed day and night to the bodhisattva Guanyin for protection and for reunion with her husband, Wang-shi offered the abbess ten taels of silver with which to buy incense and candles. In order not to forget about the nunnery, Wang-shi decided to keep to a vegetarian diet and worship the bodhisattva Guanyin for the rest of her life. At this point, they took leave of the nuns and returned to their home in Zhenzhou. Later, they set out for the capital to await another official appointment, but that happened later and is not part of our story.

In this story, Mr. Gao's kindness, Marshal Cui's devotion, and Wang-shi's integrity are all quite exceptional. Every one of them was full of goodwill, which is why they all won blessings from heaven. When good people meet, all wrongs done to them will be put to rights, and long-lost wedded couples will be brought together again. This can serve as an admonition for the general populace.

As the poem says,

*Wang-shi had a long-term plan in her seclusion;
Rough was the road to her reunion with her husband.
The boatman hoped in vain to gain a kinswoman;
For one month only, he called her "daughter-in-law."* (MC: How laughable—
that boat owner!)

Another poem goes:

*The lotus, with the charms of a pretty woman,
Was blown to the roadside, but why?*

*The painting and the poem merged together
To lend the scent of the ink to the reunion.*

There is another poem in praise of Imperial Inspector Gao:

*Mr. Gao's kindness reached the high heavens;
He completed the couple's bond of this lifetime.
From the start, he never gave a detail away;
In the end, he brought about the reunion.
The painted lotus had two flowers on one stalk;
Duckweeds gathered around to add to the charm.
With his stature as a tall white poplar,
Shed no sad tears for him to the Nine Springs down below.¹⁰*

The Master of Golden Light Cave Recalls the Past

The Venerable Elder of Jade Void Cave Is Enlightened about His Previous Life

As one poem goes,

*Someone who just came back from the sea
Saw a temple on a hill amid the water.
A celestial boy opened one of the doors
And said that the room awaited Letian.¹*

Another poem says,

*I seek the path to nirvana, not to the Dao;
Your report, I fear, is far off the mark.
That hill on the sea is not where I belong;
When my time comes, to Tusita Heaven I go.²*

The above two quatrains were written by Assistant Secretary Bai Juyi, also known as Hermit of Fragrant Hill, of the Tang dynasty, in response to Mr. Li Shiji, Surveillance Commissioner of the Eastern Circuit of Zhejiang. Bai Juyi devoted his whole life to exhaustive studies of the Buddhist classics. In his assiduous application of the teachings of Mahayana, he set his heart on transcending the wheel of life and death and making it to the Pure Land.

Now, during one of Commissioner Li Shiji's inspection tours of the Eastern Circuit of Zhejiang, a traveling merchant of Mingzhou, which was under Mr. Li's jurisdiction, went to sea with a group of seafarers. Set adrift by strong winds, their boat went none knew whither. More than a month later, they found themselves at the foot of a tall mountain topped by auspicious clouds and covered with exotic flowers and trees with white cranes roaming among them. It was a sight never seen in the mortal world.

A man emerged from a bend in the mountain path and, walking up to the boat to greet the travelers, asked, "Who might you be, pray?"

The merchant and his fellow passengers all replied that they had been blown there by the wind. The man said, "Now that you're already here, you may moor your boat and come ashore to see the Heavenly Preceptor."

All the passengers except the merchant were so timid that they shrank back, not knowing what would happen if they went ashore. The merchant was the only one who followed the man ashore. (MC: *Unlike him, the others lack a bond with Buddhism.*) The man took him to a place that looked no different from a grand temple. Our merchant followed the man in and saw a Daoist priest with white eyebrows and a white beard sitting in the main hall and flanked by tens of attendants on either side.

The priest addressed the merchant in these words, "You came here from the Middle Kingdom because you have a predestined bond with this place, which is none other than what you mortals call "Penglai Island."³ Since you're already here, would you like to tour the place?"

When the merchant said yes, the priest told his attendants to guide him on a tour of the temple. The jade terraces and emerald-green trees dazzled the eye in their splendor. There were tens of compounds, each with its own name. One of the compounds, unlike the others, was tightly bolted. Peeking through the chink between the double panels of the gate, the merchant saw that the entire courtyard was covered with exotic flowers. In the main hall stood an unoccupied couch with a cushion on it. From the foot of the dais arose wisps of incense whose fragrance assailed the nostrils.

"What kind of place is this?" asked the merchant. "Why lock up an unoccupied compound?"

The man replied, "This was the home of Bai Letian in his previous existence. He's now in the Middle Kingdom, which is why this compound is under lock and key."

Knowing that "Letian" was the courtesy name of Secretary Bai, the merchant made a mental note of everything he saw in the temple. After bidding

the man farewell, he went back to his boat. With a favorable wind, the boat set sail and, before ten days had passed, arrived at the shore of the Eastern Circuit of Zhejiang.

The merchant presented a detailed report about what he had witnessed to Commissioner Li, who recorded his words and wrote a letter to Mr. Bai, providing him with the information. (MC: *How do we know that Commissioner Li did not fabricate the details in order to cultivate Secretary Bai's favor?*) After reading the letter through, Mr. Bai said with a laugh, "This longtime Buddhist has only the western heavens of Amitabha in mind. Far be it from me to go to some hill in the middle of a sea to live the life of an immortal!" So he wrote the two quatrains quoted above as a reply to Mr. Li, to make it clear that, as a Mahayana Buddhist, he longed to go to Tusita Heaven and did not care for Penglai Island.

In later times, it was said that Mr. Bai, by freeing himself from the conventions of this mundane world and abandoning his high office, showed himself to be nothing short of an immortal banished from the exalted realm and that the report about his place on the sea was no fabrication. Be that as it may, he did, in his lifetime, apply himself diligently to his studies and his spiritual development until he rose above the teachings of Daoism and reached the heights of the world of Buddhism. That these achievements surpassed those he had attained in his previous existence is an irrefutable fact. You see, all eminent personalities and potentates throughout history had, without exception, karmic dispositions from their previous lives. They have been either immortals banished to the mundane world or reincarnations of venerable Buddhist priests, which is why, in their wisdom and moral integrity, they were able to accomplish countless good deeds.

For example, Dongfang Shuo was the embodiment of a heavenly star;⁴ Ma Zhou had been an immortal official at the Suling Palace on Mount Hua;⁵ Wang Fangping had been a monk at the Langya Monastery;⁶ Zhen Dexiu, sobriquet West Hill [Xishan], had been Monk of the Thatched Hut;⁷ and Su Shi had been Abbot Wujie.⁸ After their deaths, they either returned to their places of origin or became immortals. For example, Bu Zixia was made the god of the civil arts,⁹ Guo Pu became the god of water,¹⁰ Tao Hongjing became the celestial director of the waterways,¹¹ and Li He was summoned by the Lord on High to compose an ode to the White Jade Tower.¹² These and numerous similar, verifiable cases are all recorded in the annals of history.

As for evil ministers and rebels, they certainly do not come from good roots but are invariably reincarnations of *rakshas*, *rakshasas*, and Asura demon

kings. As stories have it, when Li Linfu met a Daoist priest and Lu Qi encountered a fairy maiden, both men were told that they had the makings of immortals and had therefore been selected for redemption, but both preferred to be prime ministers rather than immortals and thus fell into disgrace.¹³ However, this is a fiction invented by their disciples, former colleagues, and members of their cliques in order to cover up their evil deeds. (MC: *Good argument. Enough to prove the fallacy of these stories.*) According to their logic, those two would still have been immortals, but with a delay of five hundred or six hundred years. If so, why is there the saying “Li Linfu was condemned to ten lifetimes as an ox and nine lifetimes as an entertainer”? Even if he had paid fully for all his crimes and regained his true self, nothing should have been heard about him after five or six hundred years. And yet, in the Wanli reign period of this dynasty [Ming], when a prostitute was killed by a thunderbolt in a certain county in Henan, these five characters appeared on her back: “Li Linfu of Tang.” Why? That happened six hundred years after his death. Clearly, claims that such villains were reincarnations of immortals are absurd and are not worthy of belief.

The reason this humble storyteller brings up Bai Juyi is to make the point that people with good roots should not be so enamored of the mortal world, with all its pitfalls of desire and greed, that they forget their true selves. (MC: *Well-meaning advice.*) I now propose to tell a story about a minister of the Song dynasty who, in this mortal world, managed to see his own true self. Lend me your ears! As the poem says,

*He used to be a palace official;
He is now in the Pure Land of the West.
Sitting by the water's edge, willow twig in hand,
He muses on past events and his previous life.*

The story tells that among the several caves by the Double Maha Ponds of the West were Golden Light Cave and Jade Void Cave. Now, each cave had a venerable elder serving as the cave master. Living in the land of ultimate bliss, they cultivated their spirits in order to attain the Bodhi state of enlightenment. One day, the master of Jade Void Cave went to see the master of Golden Light Cave and said to him, “The guiding principle of Buddhism is the delivery of all living creatures from worldly suffering. By quietly cultivating our spirits in the caves, we do reap the fruits of enlightenment, but that’s only the self-centered Hinayana approach. I’d like to go to the Middle Kingdom

and stay for about seventy to eighty years—the duration of a lifetime. After I do things that help the people and benefit the world, I'll come back here. Isn't that a good idea?"

The master of Golden Light Cave replied, "What's so good about getting involved in the defilements of the mortal world? Yes, you may be able to help the people and benefit the world, but I'd hate to see you get carried away by desires. If there's no one to guide you back, you may forget your true nature and become subject to the wheel of transmigration. If so, who knows how many kalpas it will take before you reattain enlightenment? And you talked about coming back here as if it's the easiest thing in the world!" On hearing these words, the master of Jade Void Cave was struck with remorse.

The master of Golden Light Cave continued, "But since this idea did cross your mind, Skanda, protector of the Buddha dharma, should already have reported it to the Buddha. You can't retract it now. You might as well go ahead with your trip, to enjoy the wealth and glamour that the mortal world has to offer and, in the meantime, accomplish some good deeds. But be sure not to lose your true nature. In the event it gets washed away in the mortal world and you fail to call it to mind, I'll come in about fifty years to give you a pointer or two and wait for your complete awakening."

Then and there, the master of Jade Void Cave bade farewell to the master of Golden Light Cave, returned to his own cave, and told his disciple, "Keep a good watch over the cave and remember to burn incense and intone the sutras every morning and evening, as before. (MC: *The acolyte does do his bidding, as will be revealed later.*) I'm off to the mortal world on a little trip."

On the strength of his innate wisdom, he went to pick the destination of his reincarnation and settled on a couple who were devout Buddhist believers. They were of virtuous conduct and were also richly blessed by fate.

Let us now turn to a gentleman named Feng Shi in Jiangxia of Ezhou [present-day Wuchang, Hubei] of the Song dynasty. A palace guard by profession, he was much given to charitable works. One day, his pregnant wife saw in her dream a golden arhat from heaven and soon thereafter gave birth to a son amid an extraordinary fragrance that filled the room. The boy had a lofty forehead, a square jaw, and large earlobes—all quite uncommon physiognomic features in a baby. Showing extraordinary intellectual prowess at two or three years of age, he was able to read the characters in the sutras, as if he had learned them before, and never forgot them once he had seen them. Upon enrollment in school, he was given the name Feng Jing, courtesy name Dangshi. When reading, he was able to recall the lines after a

single glance, and he could dash off ten-thousand-word essays as fast as his writing brush could go. In addition to reading Confucian books, he also had a passion for the Buddhist classics and great respect for the teachings of Buddhism. Every so often, he sat in meditation with eyes closed, in the manner of adult Buddhists. Before he was twenty years old, he won first place at all three levels of the imperial civil-service examinations.

Storyteller! You've got it wrong! According to the play *First Honors on All Three Levels of the Exams*, his father, Feng Shang, was a traveling merchant, but you made him out to be an official and changed his name.¹⁴

Well, gentle reader, mark this: Playscripts are nothing but fiction. How can you give full credence to them? (MC: *This is an opportunity to dwell on the lack of truth in works of drama.*) For example, of all plays in both the northern and southern traditions, the best ones, by general acknowledgment, are *The Story of the Lute* and *The West Chamber*.¹⁵

As for the first story, the facts are as follows: The real Cai Yong [133–192] of the Han dynasty lost his parents before he became an official. He stayed in a hut by their graves when observing the mourning period, and the local government, in recognition of his filial devotion and personal integrity, recommended him to the court for an official post. But the play falsely claims that he held on to his official post in the capital while his parents died of starvation. What's more, there were no *zhuangyuan*-degree holders in the Han dynasty, and with Dong Zhuo [d. 192] monopolizing power at the time, there was no Grand Councilor Niu.

As for the second story, Zheng Heng was a high-ranking official of the Tang dynasty. His wife, Cui-shi [Cui Yingying], was also a titled lady. When did she ever lose her chastity to Student Zhang? In later times, it became known to some that Yuan Zhen had written the original tale in order to sully Madam Cui because his attempts to seduce her had failed. In the play, however, Cui Yingying and Student Zhang become husband and wife, and Zheng Heng, little more than a playboy whose father is a high-ranking official, dashes his head against a flight of steps and dies. Didn't the playwright turn the truth on its head? And without any justification, too!

When even these two admirable plays lapse into such preposterous falsehood, can you give any credit to other pieces of drama? (MC: *I'm afraid fiction should not be given credit either. It is better not to read at all than to believe all one reads.*) This is why, when I come to the story about Feng Jing, I must first state his father's name according to official history, so that the reader will not always rely on what is in plays and perpetuate mistakes.

Let me digress no more but resume our story. After winning first place at all three levels of the civil service examinations, Mr. Feng was assigned one important post after another and rose through the ranks. Everywhere he went, he initiated good practices and eliminated harmful ones, practiced good governance, and fostered Buddhism, and the list can go on and on. Later, he was promoted to a metropolitan post and became prime minister.

One day, he felt ill disposed and took leave from his official duties to rest at home in peace and quiet and regain his health. At the time, he was very much in Emperor Yingzong's good graces, and so the emperor dispatched to his house a never-ending stream of eunuchs to inquire after his condition as well as a team of renowned physicians from the imperial academy to give him treatments. The emperor's instructions for them were to do their best in dispensing the right medicine and to effect a cure without fail. After taking the prescribed medicine for about ten days, Prime Minister Feng recovered, but he had lost much weight and could not walk without a cane. Having just recovered from a protracted illness, he remained frail and was easily startled. Fancy clothes did not interest him, and music got on his nerves. (MC: *Evidence of his karmic disposition.*) Wishing only to sit quietly in meditation, he slowly walked to his backyard, cane in hand. There, in the depths of the flowers and trees, stood a thatched cottage called "Knee-Room Hut." The name was inspired by a line from Tao Yuanming's prose poem "The Return," meaning the cottage had just enough room to accommodate two knees.¹⁶ His good humor returning, he dismissed the women attendants, lit some ambergris incense in a mountain-shaped incense burner, sat down cross-legged on the prayer cushion of the meditation couch, and closed his eyes.

After sitting in silent meditation for some time, he felt refreshed, and his limbs began to regain strength. Slowly, he opened his eyes, only to see a black-robed little boy with unearthly refined looks and a graceful manner standing respectfully to the right of the couch.

"I've dismissed all my servants," said Prime Minister Feng to the boy. "Who are you? Why are you standing here all alone?"

"Having just recovered from a long illness, you, sir, may want to go on a little tour in the lightness of your heart. I'm here to serve as your attendant, and I don't dare leave you without orders to do so."

Having been bedridden for quite some time, Mr. Feng was indeed thinking of taking a little tour now that he had recovered from his illness. Delighted by the little boy's words, he rose from his couch in the excitement of the moment and felt as brisk as he had been before his illness.

Once outside the cottage, the little boy said, "The roads are a little rough. Please be careful. And now, please mount my goat-carriage for a tour around the gardens."

Pleased by the little boy's quickness, Mr. Feng said affably, "All right, all right."

In a trice, the little boy brought a goat-carriage to him. It had

*A speckled bamboo curtain,
Wheels with sandalwood spokes,
Silk ribbons tied in knots,
Coiling rails with carved jade,
A cushion and a brocade mattress,
And blue felt covering the top.*

Without asking where the carriage had come from, Prime Minister Feng readily mounted it. Wielding a whip, the little boy drove the carriage ahead as it went with the speed of the wind. Mr. Feng wondered to himself, "How can goats go so fast?" Bending forward, he saw that, in fact, the animals pulling the carriage bore no resemblance to goats, nor were they oxen or horses. He leaned against the handrail for a better view and found that he could barely distinguish the animals' backs from their tails, but he was dazzled by the multicolored light emanating from their heads, tails, and feet. Marveling at the way the animals were galloping so fast yet still kept the carriage as steady as if it were resting on a huge rock, he wanted to ask the little boy about it, but before he could do so, they had already passed through the northern gate of the capital and were rising gradually into the azure sky. Soon they were in the midst of clouds, high above the mortal world. They passed quite a few towns, and after about as long as it would take to eat a meal, the carriage came to a stop on solid ground. The little boy stepped up to him and said, "Sir, please come down and see the scenic splendors of this place."

Mr. Feng dismounted, only to realize that the little boy and the goat-carriage had vanished. Raising his head and looking all around, he saw that he was in the midst of mountains. (MC: *What a joy!*) Behold:

*The hills and the rivers are delightful;
The foliage on the hills is enchanting.
The mist over the valleys comes and goes;*

*The flowers and trees on the peaks flourish.
In the sweet stillness, brooks babble over the rocks;
Chasing one another, the clouds circle the peaks.
The grass is richly green by the deep streams;
The ancient rocks are dotted with green moss.*

Being an official at the imperial court occupied with affairs of the mundane world, Prime Minister Feng was as delighted by these sights as a traveler on the road at the height of summer when he comes upon a hundred clear streamlets. (MC: *Poor thing! Take warning!*) Feeling cleansed of all ailments, he rubbed his belly and said to himself ruefully, “How I wish I could put on a farmer’s cape and conical hat, pick up a hoe, walk an ox, till a few *mu* of land, and live out the rest of my life here. After each autumn harvest, when the farmwork is done, I’ll cook a chicken and brew some wine, serve them in a clay pot and a porcelain jar, share them with a neighboring old man, and make conversation about the weather. (MC: *A nice description of an idyllic scene.*) The joys of such a life may sound trivial, but I think they’re superior to what the jade and golden seals of office can offer. My only regret is that, not having done my duty by the emperor, I can hardly ask for retirement. But someday, I’ll fulfill my wish.”

He was about to take a stroll and feast his eyes on the scenery when the crisp note of a chime came to his ears from the depths of the woods. He raised his eyes and saw faintly visible upturned eaves, green tiles, rafters, and windows in the shadows of the distant pine trees and bamboo groves. He thought, “The sound of a chime that I just heard must have come from there. It must be the residence of a hermit. Why don’t I go pay him a visit?”

Parting the clouds, he picked his way through the rocks, braving the perils along the path. As he went along, he heard the gurgling of water and the sighing of the pines under his feet. Gradually, the woods parted before him, and the ridges and peaks merged. He came to a spot where leisurely clouds hovered over a deep stream with wind-caressed ripples, and thousands of gates stood along the water’s edge. There was

*An imposing palace embowered in
Coiling pine branches, green tiles, and vermilion gates,
A winding veranda with phoenix bamboos
And carved jade railings.*

The towers that pierced the sky were so exquisite that they could not have been the work of human hands. By the open gate that led to a cave hung a white jade placard that bore the inscription, in gold, "First Golden Light Cave." Surmising that this was no residence for humans, Mr. Feng dared not enter the cave rashly. Exhausted after the long walk, he sat down on the stone threshold for a rest.

Before he had made himself comfortable, there arose from within the cave a blast of sound loud enough to shake the sky and the earth and topple mountains. As soon as the deafening sound subsided, a strong wind sprang up, bending the pine trees and bamboo and sending bricks and stones flying through the air. But then the blustering wind stopped almost as suddenly as it had arisen. Aghast, Mr. Feng quickly looked back and saw a huge beast charging out through the gate of the cave. What did it look like?

*With glowing eyes and multicolored fur,
It whipped up a wind through the vales with its tail,
And grass cowered as it crossed the garden.
Whenever it gave a roar in the hills,
A hundred beasts hid themselves in fear.
Whenever it prowled alone in the woods,
It inspired shivers of awe in all furry beings.
Its teeth were a row of swords and halberds;
Its four hooves and claws were as sharp as knives.*

As it ran toward him with the speed of the wind, Prime Minister Feng panicked, but there was no time to dodge. (MC: *This shock is quite necessary. Otherwise, if everything went well, there wouldn't have been any ups and downs to the story.*) All of a sudden, with an earthshaking metal sound, the ferocious beast stopped and crouched down as if it had been called to a halt. Holding back its feet and closing its eyes, it looked as if it was bracing itself for a dressing-down. Before Prime Minister Feng had recovered his wits, a foreign monk emerged from the cave. How did he look? He had

*Long eyebrows as white as snow,
Green eyes as sparkling as water,
A fiery red silk robe with seven folds,
A demon-subduing golden staff with nine rings.*

*He must have the halo of nirvana
From Mount Lanka, home of the Buddha.*

At the gate of the cave, he put down his staff and addressed Mr. Feng with a Buddhist salute, "The little beast that knows nothing must have given you quite a shock, Prime Minister."

Returning the salute, Feng said, "Where have you come from, Your Reverence? Thank you for saving this old man!"

The foreign monk said, "This poor monk is the master of this cave—Golden Light Cave. I hope you've been well since we last met. I've set out some low-grade tea for you in my cell. Let's go there and chat for a while."

On hearing the words "I hope you've been well since we last met," Prime Minister Feng peered intently at the foreign monk's face and thought that he did look familiar, but in the rush of the moment, he could not place him. So he followed the monk to his cell.

After tea was over, Feng was about to ask detailed questions when the master of Golden Light Cave stood up and said to him, "This is a bleak and desolate cave with nothing to see. If you, sir, would like to view the mist and clouds and the waters, let me take you outside to visit another cave." Whereupon Prime Minister Feng followed the monk out of the cave.

The clear sky, the scenic views, the warm sun, and the gentle breezes provided an altogether different experience from what rivers and mountains in the mortal world could offer. In a trice, they reached a place where a ten-thousand-foot cascade fell into a clear creek spanned by a white stone bridge. A path lined with speckled bamboo led to a cave beneath a peak. On the gate of the cave was a glass board, on which were inscribed in gold the characters "Cave of the Venerable Elder of the Jade Void."

"There must be extraordinary things in this cave," said Feng to the master of Golden Light Cave. "If I could tour this cave, I wouldn't ask for more!"

"It is precisely for that purpose that I invited you to come all the way here!" So saying, the master of Golden Light Cave pushed open the gate and led him in.

Contrary to Prime Minister Feng's expectations, all that met his eyes was a scene of desolation, with dust covering the ground and no sign of human life anywhere in sight. Behold:

*No flame remains in the golden stove;
The jade chime makes not a sound.*

*The red candles have long been extinguished;
The cave gate is closed throughout the day.
Cobwebs spread all over the empty rooms;
Bejeweled hooks hold the heavy canopies.
Ribbed curtains hang sadly over the walls;
Worm-eaten are the gilded sutras on the shelves.
The empty courtyard is overgrown with weeds;
The forlorn railings are covered with moss.
None but cranes stand in the shadow of the pine trees;
No man has returned to enjoy the mountain view. (MC: These last two lines
can serve as a couplet for a mountain dwelling.)*

Haltingly, Prime Minister Feng made his way to the backyard, where he saw an acolyte chanting sutras at a table. Feng asked, “Why isn’t there a monk in this cave?”

On hearing the question, the acolyte closed his book, rose from his seat, and said with a bow, “The Venerable Elder of the Jade Void has been on a trip to the human world for fifty-six years now. He’ll be back in this cave in another thirty years. No one went out to greet you, honorable guest, because the master is away.”

At this point, the master of Golden Light Cave said to Feng, “There’s no need for questions, sir. You’ll understand soon enough. In this cave, there’s a Deserted Tower that rises above all the other peaks and commands a panoramic view. I’ll take you up the tower. We’ll rest there for a while before returning.” And so they ascended the tower.

In the tower, Feng found the floor paved with green tiles and the doors guarded by golden animal statues. The eaves were inlaid with jewels, and the rafters were wrapped in jade dragons. Piled up on the shelves were scrolls of celestial writings with rollers made of rhinoceros horns. Mr. Feng was about to take a scroll for a look (MC: *Out of habit.*) when the master of Golden Light Cave pointed to a cloud-hooded peak and remarked, “You get a wonderful view from here. Why don’t you come to the railing and enjoy it?”

And so Mr. Feng turned from the scrolls and went to the railing to enjoy the view. There, far in the distance, was a compound that was

*Partially concealed by blue wisps of smoke
And enshrouded in a red mist.
Intertwining tree branches cast a cool shade;*

*By the jade tower with its exquisite blue tiles
Stood jasper trees with swaying branches.
With sparkling water lapping at the shore
And silvery waves reflecting the sky,
The verdant grandeur and cold light dazzled the eye.*

In the glaring sunlight, the compound looked as if it was covered by acres and acres of colored glaze. After gazing at the spot for the longest time, Feng asked the master of Golden Light Cave, “What kind of place is that? It’s so beautiful!”

Astounded, the master of Golden Light Cave replied, “It’s none other than the Double Maha [Sanskrit for “Great”] Pond. You used to go there often to view the hills and the waters. Don’t you remember?”

On hearing these words, Prime Minister Feng lowered his head and began to search his memory, but he still failed to recall any visit to this place from early childhood onward. And yet, he seemed to have a very dim recollection of the surroundings. In bewilderment, he said, “I’ve been so swamped with official duties that I’ve forgotten the places I visited in my younger days. I have no recollection of my last visit here. Everything about this place has faded from my mind like a dream. This is what overwork does to one—a depressing thought when faced with what should have been familiar scenery.” (MC: *Having practiced Buddhism in a previous existence, he is quick to “make the turn.”*)

The master of Golden Light Cave said, “A Confucian scholar like you should be above such sentimentality. A human being is in the Great Void only temporarily. In one lifetime, one may experience glory, exhaustion, grief, joy, gains, losses, unions, and separations, and then comes reincarnation, ending what seems like a dream. When you’re in a dream, you ask no questions. So when you wake up, why do you have depressing thoughts? You must know that, according to the Diamond Sutra, one should take everything to be a dream, a bubble, a drop of dew, or lightning. This is the right approach. Throughout history, analogies have been drawn between dreams and the fleeting lives of humans. If you, sir, awake to the truth in the middle of a dream, just turn back to the right path. Why have depressing thoughts? What I say to you is the truth. Please don’t dismiss this old monk’s words lightly.”

A feeling of reverential awe came over Prime Minister Feng as he heard those words. He was about to sit down for a good chat when he noticed that the sun was setting by the eaves and the day was yielding to evening.

Wishing to return, he took leave of the master of Golden Light Cave, saying, "Thank you for taking me on this tour. Now that I've thoroughly enjoyed myself, it's time for me to return. I wonder when we'll be able to meet again."

"What kind of talk is this? You and I will soon be fellow Buddhists spending a great deal of time together under the trees. We'll surely meet again!"

"Having just recently recovered from an illness, I'll be returning to my post. The demands on my time will be so relentless that I won't have time to relax with Your Reverence under the trees." (MC: *He has not yet awakened from his dream.*)

The master of Golden Light Cave said with a smile, "Time flies in the mortal world. Thirty years flash by in a trice. This old monk will be waiting here for you to come back in the twinkling of an eye to live in this cave again."

"However unworthy I am, I occupy a grade-one official post. If, by the emperor's grace, I can return to my village in the future and stop working for a pittance as an official, I'll live out the rest of my life as a happy farmer. What's more, thirty years from now, I'll be an old man. I can't imagine myself sitting in this cave in a monk's robe with my head shaved." (MC: *Still talking dream talk.*) As the master of Golden Light Cave smiled without saying a word, Feng continued, "Does your smile mean that I'm mistaken?"

"You've been confined to the mundane world for so long that you're convinced you have no identity other than the one you have in this lifetime." (IC: *Thus obstructing the operations of karma.*)

"How can I have identities other than this one, in the flesh?"

"Beyond the present form of your body, there's your original body. By coming here, the form of your body has also become your original body. If you didn't have another identity, how did you leave here in the first place? And how did you manage to come here today?" (MC: *A good reminder.*)

"Does Your Reverence have a way of showing me my other identity?"

"That should be easy," said the master of Golden Light Cave. With a finger, he traced a circle on the wall, blew on it, and said to Feng, "Please look at this!"

Feng walked up to the wall and saw what looked like a bright round mirror where the cave master had drawn the circle. A closer look revealed

*A veranda and a waterside pavilion,
A moonlit dock and a flowerbed,
A small bridge across a pond, and
Weeping willows by green windows and red doors.*

The pond and the pavilion seemed familiar to Prime Minister Feng, but he wondered what could have brought the garden into a wall. Suspecting trickery, he said harshly, "The Buddha delivers people by open and above-board means. Why does Your Reverence resort to magic tricks to fool people?"

Bursting into hearty laughter, the master of Golden Light Cave stood up and said, pointing to the southeastern corner of the garden, "How can that be conjured up by a magic trick? Please look closely, and you'll be able to tell if it's true or false."

Mr. Feng walked up and looked harder. There, in the middle of the garden, was a narrow, winding path flanked by a whitewashed wall on one side and a carved balustrade on the other. It led to a thatched cottage in the depths of a grove of flowering shrubs.

*Its bamboo window stood half open,
With a homespun curtain hanging low.
Late in the morning, with the sun three poles high,
One wisp of incense rose from the vessel in the yard.*

Inside the cottage, a man with his eyes closed was sitting cross-legged on a prayer cushion on the meditation couch. As Prime Minister Feng began to grow apprehensive at the sight, the master of Golden Light Cave slapped him on the back and said, "Who were you in the 'Knee-Room Hut'?" (MC: *A slap and a shout that hit home.*) Then he went on to intone a quatrain of admonition:

*Fifty-six years ago,
We each occupied one cave.
Tarry not in the "Knee-Room Hut"!
Take the invitation to Jade Void Cave!*

Having intoned the quatrain, he shouted into Prime Minister Feng's ear. With that, a flash of understanding lit up Feng's mind: He was the one who had occupied Jade Void Cave in a previous existence, and he was the one residing in "Knee-room Hut" in his present lifetime as a mortal being. Involuntarily, he cried out, "I knew nothing about my other identity. Only now do I understand the dream of dreams!" He was beside himself with joy at his attainment of enlightenment.

He wanted to ask questions about the fountain of the mind so as to verify his enlightenment, but when he turned around, the master of Golden Light

Cave had already disappeared. He cast his eyes over the entire monastery grounds and saw

*The Sakyamuni Hall under fleecy clouds,
A winding veranda in a shimmering mist.
He listened but heard no chiming of the bells;
He looked up but saw no soaring peaks.
The Jade Void Cave was part of
The immortals' abode on the ocean;
The empty towers belonged to
The land of ultimate bliss.
He could have been viewing a work by Zhang Sengzhou,¹⁷
But by now, the scroll had been rolled up again.*

In a trice, the veranda, the monastery, the cave, the river, and the hills vanished without a trace. He found himself all alone, sitting stiffly on his meditation couch in the backyard of his Knee-Room Hut. The sweet taste of his tea remained in his mouth, the sighing of the pines still came to his ears, the incense burner was still emitting wisps of smoke, and the shadow of the flowers in front of his couch had not moved. While he was in meditation, for only a brief moment, he had traveled more than ten thousand *li*. Reflecting on his recent experience, Prime Minister Feng believed that what he had seen and heard was too real to be a dream. He knew he had seen his true identity in the stillness of his meditation. In addition, he was fifty-six years old at this time, exactly the number of years the acolyte had said that the Venerable Elder had spent among mortal beings. All too clearly, he was a reincarnation of the Venerable Elder of the Jade Void, a fellow Buddhist of the master of Golden Light Cave. Henceforth, he called himself “the old monk” when conversing with guests.

One day thirty years later, he died peacefully in his sleep. As expected, he returned to Jade Void Cave. As the poem says,

*His true self in the Jade Void Cave
Had a dream that lasted eighty years.
Of all worthy figures, past and present,
Who does not have a previous life?*

They Remain Loyal to Each Other through Their Trysts

His Success Is Announced at the Jailhouse

As the poem says,

*What's the best way to succeed in this world?
Only exam success can save you from dire straits.
Consider how quickly relationships change!
Be sure to apply yourself to your books!*

Our story begins with these comments: In the Han dynasty, men of ability gained office only through recommendation, hence the titles Virtuous and Upright and Brilliant and Exceptional Talent. Those eminently qualified but choosing not to seek office were also recruited, to serve as “men with no ambition for fame and gain.” As a result, no able man was denied office, and no talented man was left unemployed. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the emphasis was on success through the civil service examinations. Although the highest echelons of officialdom were still attainable via other avenues, success on the examinations was deemed the only true glory to be had. Cases abound in which candidates would choose to take the examinations again after each failure and therefore were stranded in the capital until they died there of old age.

This dynasty [Ming] began with a three-pronged approach, and there has been no lack of prominent officials who made indelible contributions to the imperial court and achieved undying fame without ever acquiring any academic degrees. Whatever gives one the idea that only those who passed the palace examinations can serve the empire? (MC: *Good argument.*) However, in recent years, the examinations began to assume ever greater importance, to the point that all positions of power are off limits to those who have had no success on the examinations. Those in power arbitrarily assign such men to the less coveted posts and locations. As for those of humbler educational background, even if they did take the right path, they are also assigned to out-of-the-way places, and after some time, their names are struck off the list of candidates for promotion. The long and the short of it is that these men do not rank high in the estimation of the powers that be. (MC: *How pathetic!*) Therefore, however capable such men are—and there is no shortage of mighty heroes among men with no success on the exams—they are given no chance to do justice to their talents. Since they know that they are denied any hope for career advancement, they don't put their best foot forward even if at one time they did mean to acquit themselves well as officials. With such low morale, how can they be expected to render distinguished service?

As for those *jinshi* who pass the highest level of the examinations, even if they are as corrupt as Bandit Zhi of Liu and as cruel as Zhou Xing and Lai Junchen, and even if they are censured by inspectors or impeached out of consideration for public opinion, their names are not struck off the roster.¹ As the proverb says, "A millipede does not die off quickly." Such men may fare badly for a time, but they rise again soon enough, to resume their grand style of living as high officials with their ample remunerations. Their names certainly do not get struck off the roster, as is the case with men of lesser academic achievements. Since the examinations are given such importance, success on them is nothing less than a ladder to heaven.

But then, there is another laughable thing about all of this: Those who excel on the exams start out, without exception, as impoverished and pedantic students. And those who know no better find such students beneath their notice. Some well-heeled relatives of such students, never failing to play up to the rich and browbeat the poor, show them the utmost contempt. But when their names suddenly appear on the list of successful examinees, all spin around to dance attendance on them. And it just so happens that

those who have snubbed and bullied them turn out to be the first to rush forward to render service. (MC: *How true!*) Indeed, in this world of ours, this is the only means by which, in an instant, the lowly rise to eminence, the poor gain riches, irreconcilable enmities vanish into thin air, and the most rugged and perilous terrain smooths out. The spineless behavior and disgraceful episodes of the past are thus covered up as if with an embroidered quilt.

Storyteller, is it really as bad as you say?

Dear audience, if you don't believe me, listen to a story that will make you laugh at some people's snobbish ways.

In the Tang dynasty, there lived a *juren*-degree holder named Zhao Cong. Quite a few times he joined government auditors on their way to the capital. There, he took the national-level examinations, but each time he failed. Without a penny to his name, he had to depend on his father-in-law, a general, for a living. His other in-laws, enjoying the thriving prosperity of the clan, which boasted military officers among its members, all looked down on him, for he was but a miserable untitled scholar who had failed the national-level examinations again and again. As for his parents-in-law, with their kith and kin treating him with such disdain, they also were disappointed by his failure to bring them credit and make something of himself. Though he was a member of the family, they grew sicker and sicker of him until he became quite a nuisance to them. To make things worse, with such a bias against him, the more they looked at him, the more they found him too shabby and pathetic to deserve respect. There was one thing that tormented their minds: They could not very well drive him out. As for Zhao Cong and his wife, they not only had to put up with the scornful looks of other people but were also cold-shouldered at every turn by Mrs. Zhao's parents. However, unable to do anything to salvage his pride, Zhao Zong saw no option but to swallow the humiliation and put it down to his own ill fate.

One day, Zhao Cong left again for Chang'an to sit for the examinations. It happened to be a day of festivities for ushering in spring. The local garrison engaged multiple theater troupes to provide entertainment in what was called during the Tang dynasty a "spring celebrations event." All the residents of the town, male and female, turned out to join the fun. Prominent families put up tents in which they set out wine and food and invited their relatives to join them at the feast and watch the shows. All the members of the general's household gathered in the family's tent. The women were dressed in all their finery, competing to flaunt their wealth. Zhao Cong's

wife was the only one in rags. Knowing all too well that she would be conspicuous in the crowd, she nevertheless felt that she could not very well decline the invitation since everyone else was going. So she braced herself and followed the crowd into the tent. The women detested her for her shabbiness and, afraid that her presence among them would be unseemly, put a screen between her and the rest of the company (MC: *How abominable people can be!*), so that she sat all by herself rather than sharing their tables. Being used to such slights, she knew her place and, submitting to their will, sat down in silence.

The feast was in full swing when a messenger appeared before the general and said, "The surveillance commissioner requests your presence, sir."

In astonishment, the general thought, "On such an occasion, when officials are supposed to share the joy of the people and put official business aside, why would the surveillance commissioner want to summon me? Could there be anything the matter?" This thought filled him with fear. In trepidation, he went to the surveillance commissioner's office. Holding a scroll in his hand, the commissioner asked him, all smiles, "Do you have a son-in-law named Zhao Cong?"

The general replied, "Yes."

"Congratulations!" said the commissioner. "A messenger just came from the capital with the news that your son-in-law has passed the exams."

Modestly, the general said, "I'm afraid that may not be true."

The commissioner held out the scroll to him and said, "This scroll is from the capital. It's a complete list of all the successful candidates, your son-in-law among them. Please take it and see for yourself."

The general took the scroll with both hands and, with a sidelong glance, did indeed see Zhao Cong's name there, big and clear. With mixed feelings of surprise and joy, he thankfully took leave of the commissioner and hurried home. Approaching the tent where members of his family were watching the show, he held the scroll high and shouted, "Young Master Zhao has passed!"

Everyone who heard him was quite taken aback. They all turned around to look at Zhao's wife and found her still sitting gloomily by her forlorn self on the other side of the screen. (MC: *Yes, it is indeed time for them to turn around.*) But she did hear the announcement. She exclaimed to herself, "My goodness! I never expected I'd live to see this day!"

Those on the other side of the screen hastened to remove it and offer her congratulations, saying, "You're the wife of a fifth-grade official now."

With one accord, they tried to haul her over to their tables. (MC: *Such are the wonders that success on the exams works.*)

Young Mrs. Zhao said, "In these rags of mine, I wouldn't dream of inserting myself into your company and bringing you disgrace. I'll just stay where I am."

Feeling uncomfortable on hearing those barbed words, her relatives all forced ingratiating smiles onto their faces and said, "Oh, good gracious, no!" Those fawning women among them took their own changes of clothes out of their bags and offered them to her. When one took the lead, the others joined in competition. Some pulled out their hairpins; some removed their hair ornaments and earrings. In an instant, they had dressed up Mrs. Zhao. They dolled her up. Their only fear was that she might not like the effect. For the rest of the day, none of them cared anything about the shows. Everyone fussed over her and took cues from every change in her facial expression. She used to be an outcast, but the moment news came that her husband had passed the exams, she took on a new identity even though nothing else about her and her relatives had changed. So fickle are the ways of the world!

Why did I begin with such a prologue story? It's because our story proper is about a man whose trysts with his lover got him into trouble. In his darkest hour, he suddenly received news that he had passed the examinations. He was not only absolved of his trespasses but also able to salvage his marriage. This bears out what this humble storyteller has said before about glory and honor covering up past spineless behavior and disgraceful episodes. Dear audience, please listen to the testimony of the following poem:

*They shared the same birth date and the same classroom;
They became husband and wife in the end.
The road to happiness never runs smooth;
Obstacles were laid all along the way.
Their trysts were exposed, but the court ruled in their favor;
Success on the exams brought about their marriage.*

Our story takes place in the Duanping reign period [1234–36] of the Song dynasty. In the Eastern Circuit of Zhejiang, there lived a *xiucai* named Zhang Zhongfu, descendant of a distinguished family of generations of officials. Now in reduced circumstances, he made a living by hiring himself out to officials

as a secretary or family tutor at their duty stations. He had a neighbor named Luo Renqing, a self-made rags-to-riches man. Their wives gave birth on the same day. The Zhang family had a son, whom they named Youqian, and the Luo family had a daughter, whom they named Xixi. When the children reached school age, the Luos sent their daughter to the Zhang family's tutorial school. Since the two were of the same age and were also well matched in appearance, some people commented jestingly, "Those born on the same day should, by rights, become husband and wife." The two children, not knowing any better, took such words to be true and privately acknowledged each other as such. Each wrote a pledge, vowing to remain true to the other till death. (MC: *A childish thing to do, but they do have a marital bond.*) Their parents knew nothing about any of this.

After four or five years of schooling together, they reached fourteen years of age. Experiencing the first stirrings of love, they took note of people's idle comments about what went on in conjugal chambers and said to each other, "Aren't we also husband and wife? Why don't we try it out?" Since the two had the most tender affections for each other and knew nothing about what was at stake, what was there to hold them back? In front of the classroom stood a pomegranate tree with a stone stool under it. With Luo Xixi seated on the stool and leaning against the tree, Zhang Youqian raised her feet, held her in his arms, and began to make his moves, but at their young age and uninitiated in the art, they were just having some fun out of their affection for each other. But later, after they had a taste of the sweetness of it, they began to go at it every day.

In the middle of winter, the teacher dismissed the class, and Xixi went back home for the new year. After the New Year celebrations were over and Xixi was fifteen years old, her parents decided to stop letting her take lessons outside her own home because she had reached puberty. (MC: *Too late now.*) Every so often, Youqian went to the Luo residence and loitered around the gate, hoping to run into Xixi, but how could a girl from such a wealthy family be let out of the depths of her boudoir without a good reason?

Xixi had a maid called Feiying who often served her in the study and accompanied her on her way to and from the school at the Zhang residence. Now that Xixi's lessons were over, Feiying also stopped going, and she could leave the house only when she needed to pick flowers in the morning to put in Xixi's hair. Sorely missing Xixi, Youqian wrote two poems the following winter, meaning to give them to Feiying when she was out so that she could

transmit them to Xixi. The first one was a *ci* poem to the tune of “A Spring of Plum Blossoms”:

*Sharing the same birth date and the same classroom,
If we are not a pair of phoenixes, who are?
Time rushed by under the pomegranate tree;
The lovebirds, alarmed, are driven apart!*

*Your yearlong absence from the classroom
Cannot but stir sad thoughts in me.
From morning to night, I burn incense,
Praying that a wedded couple we will soon be!*

While he was waiting for Feiying after completing the poem, he wrote another:

*The ancients, when away from their dear ones,
Sent plum blossoms to the distant hills.
The flowers here are in bloom, but where are you?
They face a lonely soul torn with grief.*

Just as he finished the poem, Feiying came to the school to pick plum blossoms. Youqian broke off a sprig and gave it to her, along with the two poems. He whispered into her ear, “With the plum blossoms in bloom, why don’t you use flower picking as a pretext and bring me a reply from her?”

Feiying promised to do his bidding, took the poems, and, on returning, showed them to Xixi. Shedding furtive tears, Xixi meant to write a reply poem using the same rhyme scheme, but because it was the end of the year, there were so many demands on her time that she did not do this.

In the following year, the prefect of Yuehou [in present-day Zhejiang] hired Youqian’s father, Zhongfu, as his secretary. And so Zhongfu took Youqian along and tutored the boy himself. Youqian did not return home until two years later. On hearing of his return, Xixi quietly told Feiying to deliver a small box to him, since she still owed him a reply from two years ago. (MC: *Paying a debt.*)

Youqian took the box, opened it, and saw that it contained ten gold coins and one red love bean. The symbolism was not lost on Youqian: The

round coins stood for a reunion, and the meaning of the red love bean was self-explanatory. Jubilantly he said to Feiying, "I'm grateful to your mistress for kindly keeping me in her thoughts, but how I wish I could meet her somewhere!"

"My mistress can't come out, and you can't go in. How would it be possible for the two of you to meet? The best I can do for you is to deliver your letters."

Thereupon, Youqian wrote another poem for Feiying to take back as a reply. The poem read:

*One day without you is as long as three years;
Imagine the misery of three long years!
Gold coins can hardly buy your smiles,
But one love bean is worth dying for!*

After Feiying departed, Youqian tied the coins to his undergarment, and whenever he missed Xixi, he would take them off and toss them by way of divination or toy with them. Coming upon him as he was doing so one day, his mother asked, "Where did those gold coins come from? You've never had such coins."

"Mother, I wouldn't hide anything from you. They're a recent gift from my classmate Miss Luo."

Catching on to the situation, Mrs. Zhang thought, "My boy is now of marriageable age. He and Miss Luo have been classmates since they were small. Sending gifts is an indication that they're in love. What's more, when Miss Luo was here in our home, I was impressed by her character as well as her looks. Why don't I ask a matchmaker to make a marriage proposal? Wouldn't that be a happy arrangement on both counts?"

There lived next door to them a flower seller, Madam Yang, who was an experienced matchmaker and a frequent visitor to both the Zhang and Luo families. So Mrs. Zhang invited her home and confided in her, saying, "We're too poor to aspire to a marriage alliance with such a wealthy family, but Miss Luo has been visiting this house since early childhood as a classmate of my son's, and they were born on the same day, too. Perhaps the Luo family will stoop to accept him out of these considerations."

"That's no way to talk!" said Madam Yang. "You may be in reduced circumstances now, but yours is a family with a long line of officials. The Luos

may be flush with cash now, but they're only upstarts. If you compare the two families, yours comes out ahead! (MC: *People nowadays certainly don't look at things the way she does!*) I'll talk to them."

"Thank you so much for your trouble!" said Mrs. Zhang.

Youqian talked to old Madam Yang in private and enjoined her repeatedly to give Xixi his regards. Madam Yang promised to do as instructed and went straight to the Luo residence.

When Luo Renqing and his wife asked Madam Yang about the purpose of her visit, she said, "I'm here to make a marriage proposal for the young lady."

"Which family is it?" asked Renqing.

"In fact, you need not even produce your daughter's natal chart, because the young master I have in mind was born on the same day she was." (MC: *She does have a glib tongue.*)

"So, you're talking about Zhang Zhongfu's son."

"None other. And what a fine young man he is!"

"Yes, he does come from a long line of Confucian scholars. The family background is distinguished enough, but they've fallen on hard times. What can be expected of him if his father makes a living as a traveling tutor?"

"The young master is exceptionally brilliant. He'll surely make his mark in the world."

"But in this day and age, what matters is the here and now. Who can say for sure what will happen in the future?" (MC: *Yes, indeed, this is the way vulgar people see it.*) The young man does seem to be nice, but a successful career is a matter of fate. Who knows what's in store for him? If he wants our daughter, I'll give her to him only if he passes the exams and becomes an official."

Madam Yang said, "I believe he will someday."

"If so, I won't go back on my word."

Mrs. Luo said the same.

"All right," said Madam Yang. "I'll relay your words to Mrs. Zhang and tell her to urge her son to apply himself to his studies and get himself an official post."

"Yes, please," said Mrs. Luo.

"May I also visit the young lady in her room?" asked Madam Yang.

"Yes," said Mrs. Luo. "This will be a good time to sit in her room and have a cup of tea."

As a frequent visitor to the Luo residence, Madam Yang needed no help in making her way to Xixi's room.

After asking Madam Yang to sit and instructing Feiying to serve tea, Xixi asked, "What brought you here, ma'am?"

"I'm here to make a marriage proposal on behalf of young Mr. Zhang next door. He wants me to give you his warm regards and said, 'We've shared the same classroom since early childhood. (MC: *They have shared more than that.*) I haven't seen her for so long. She's never absent from my thoughts.' I'm here by his order, to ask your parents for permission, and he wants you to think of a way to make your voice heard, so as to be sure of success."

"But this is up to my parents. How can a daughter bring up such a matter? What did my parents say?"

"Your parents, as they told me a moment ago, find the Zhang family not wealthy enough and said that they wouldn't give you to young Mr. Zhang unless he passes the exams and gets an official post."

"Brother Zhang will surely do so someday. (MC: *Good guess.*) I'm only afraid that my parents may not have the patience to wait and therefore may go back on their word. But since they've already promised, please tell him to try hard. I'll wait for him, and him alone." Then she furtively took out two gold rings, as an incentive for Madam Yang to deliver messages between her and young Mr. Zhang, and said, "In the future, please deliver his messages to me quietly. You'll be generously rewarded. Don't let my parents know."

Dear audience, won't you agree that those old women specializing in arranging illicit love affairs know all too well what is expected of them? Having rightly surmised that the two youths were in love, she was ready to render her services as the secret go-between even if marriage was off the table. There was a great deal of money to be made that way. At the sight of the two gold rings, she switched on an ingratiating smile and said, "Young lady! Just leave everything to this old woman! I won't fail you."

After leaving the Luo residence, Madam Yang went back to the Zhang residence and repeated everything to Mrs. Zhang. On hearing the report, Zhang Youqian said with a scornful smile, "Succeeding on the exams is no more nor less than what a real man is supposed to do. What's so difficult about that? She'll surely be my wife!" (MC: *He does have ambition.*)

Madam Yang added, "The young lady is also confident that you'll make it someday. She's afraid only that her parents may grow impatient and change their minds, but she's determined to be loyal to you and wants you to study hard."

"It's so good to hear this from her," said Mrs. Zhang to her son. "Don't fail her!"

In private, Madam Yang said to Youqian, “Miss Luo is deeply in love with you. Before I left her, she told me to deliver messages for her on the quiet, and she gave me two gold rings. This young lady will indeed make a very caring and loving wife.” (MC: *So, a gift of gold rings elevates her to a caring and loving wife!*)

“When I ask favors of you in the future, please don’t turn me down!” said Youqian.

“Of course not!” promised Madam Yang. With that, she took her leave.

The next year, Zhang Zhongfu sent a messenger home from Yuezhou to say that he would be accompanying the prefect of Yuezhou to the capital to await a new appointment and, afraid that Youqian’s studies would suffer, wanted the young man to join him in the capital. Youqian saw nothing for it but to oblige his father. Enough about Youqian for now.

Let us turn our attention to Luo Renqing. He was in fact against the idea of marrying his daughter to a poor family. He did not mean it when he said he would let Mr. Zhang have his daughter as soon as the young man landed an official post. He could not afford to wait until that happened. His daughter was getting older year by year. If Mr. Zhang landed his post late in life, like Lü Wang, who met King Wen when he was eighty years old, wouldn’t his daughter be an old lady by then?² Also, the Zhangs’ frequent trips did not bode well for a successful future. What did he care about his daughter’s heart?

In the neighborhood, there was an immensely rich man named Xin, whose son was also eighteen years old. Having heard about Miss Luo’s beauty and talent, the Xin family engaged a matchmaker and made a marriage proposal. The Xins’ wealth impressed Luo Renqing. (MC: *As is usually the case with such despicable people.*) What’s more, the Zhang family had made nothing more than an oral offer. Since no betrothal gift was given, he could not be accused of breaking off an engagement. And so, his promise to the Zhangs did not carry the least weight with him. He readily gave his consent to the Xin family and chose a date for the betrothal ceremony.

On learning the news, Xixi could do nothing more than groan to herself. Unable to open her heart to her parents, she fretted inwardly but confided in her maid Feiying, saying, “I was born on the same day as Mr. Zhang, and we went to school together. Everyone said that we were born to be husband and wife. Since childhood, we’ve been as close as brother and sister and as affectionate to each other as husband and wife. (MC: *Maybe more than affectionate.*) How can they marry me off to another man? I’d be better off dead and be done with it! It’s just that I can’t rest easy without seeing Mr. Zhang once more.”

“Mr. Zhang also said to me the other day that he wanted to see you, but I said it wasn’t possible, and so he gave up the idea. And now Mr. Zhang is away. Even if he were at home, you wouldn’t get a chance to see him.”

Xixi said, “I’ve got an idea that will bring us together. But I’ll have to wait until he comes back. Go outside from time to time and make inquiries.”

Feiying kept her instructions in mind.

By the time Zhang Youqian returned from the capital, another year had gone by. On hearing that Luo Xixi was now betrothed to the son of the Xin family and that no objections had been heard from Xixi, Youqian said bitterly, “I don’t blame her parents, but how can she be so obedient without ever letting out a peep?” (MC: *He is quite unforgiving.*) In a towering rage, he picked up his writing brush and wrote a *ci* poem to the tune of “Eternal Longing”:

*The gods in heaven and the gods on earth
All witnessed our vows of eternal love
Written in ink that is fresh to this day.*

*As the years go by, one after another,
The gold coins changed to tons of silver.
How could you have forgotten so quickly?*

After he finished writing the poem, he stuffed it in his sleeve and hastened to see Madam Yang. Madam Yang led him into the house and asked, “What brought you here, young master?”

“Madam, do you know that Miss Luo has been betrothed to another man?”

“Yes, I’ve heard about it, but I’m not the matchmaker. What a nice young lady she is, and she’s so fond of you! Too bad you’re not fated for each other.”

“I don’t blame her parents. I blame her. How can she let her parents give her away to someone else without raising any objections?”

“But how can a girl do that? She must have a reason for it. Don’t blame her unjustly!”

“That’s exactly why I’d like you to deliver a little poem of mine to her, just to sound her out. Please take this to her.” So saying, he took from his sleeve the poem as well as the tael of silver that the prefect of Yuezhou had given him as a gift, which he now presented to Madam Yang as a tip. Drawn to the sight of money as flies are to blood, she would do anything for money. Gladly, she accepted the mission and went off.

She went straight to the Luo residence, ostensibly to sell flowers, and entered Xixi's room. Xixi greeted her and said, "You haven't been to our house for quite some time now."

"Nothing has happened all this time, and I wouldn't presume to come without a good reason. But Young Master Zhang has come back, and he has a message for you, which is why I'm here."

On hearing that Youqian was back, Xixi said, "I've told Feiying to find out news about him, but I had no idea he was already here!"

"He's very upset that you've been betrothed to the Xin family. He told me to bring you a message." So saying, she extracted the letter from her sleeve and handed it to Xixi.

With a sigh, Xixi took it, opened it, and saw that it was a poem. After reading it from beginning to end, she said tearfully, "He's being unjust to me."

"I can't read. What does he say in the letter?"

"He accuses me of having forgotten him. He has no idea that the betrothal is my parents' idea. I have no say in the matter!"

"What are you going to say to him, young lady?" (MC: *A true go-between!*)

"Ma'am, since you delivered the message for him, you must have his trust. May I tell you something from the bottom of my heart?"

"I received a hefty gift from you last year without having done anything for you so far, and Young Master Zhang has also taken me into his confidence. Whatever job you have for me, I'll make every effort to do it, even if I have to walk through water and fire. I'll never breathe a word!"

"Thank you for your kindness, ma'am. First, please tell him about my feelings. I've been keeping myself under control because I haven't been able to see him. If I get to see him just once, I'll be with him until death rather than marry someone else and hang on to a life of shame."

"Of course I'll relay this message to him, but seeing him will be out of the question. Your family's compound is many layers deep. Mr. Zhang can't fly, and I can't fit him in my sleeve. (MC: *Sheer nonsense, when her wit fails her in the rush of the moment. This is exactly what is likely to come out of a go-between's mouth.*) How am I going to bring the two of you together?"

"I have a plan to make him come," said Xixi. "It's a surefire plan, but it needs your help."

"Didn't I just tell you that I'm at your disposal? As long as you have a good plan, I'll go to any lengths to carry it out."

"My room, in the last row of rooms, is separated from the rest of the compound. The gate downstairs leads to a small garden with a low wall all around it. Beyond the wall is a patch of weed-covered land that's not part of our residence. On this side of the wall, there are four or five large camellia trees that can serve as a ladder up the wall. Please tell him to wait outside the wall. After nightfall, I'll tell my maid to climb up the wall by grabbing the branches and then put a bamboo ladder on the other side. Mr. Zhang can climb up the ladder and use the branches of the camellia trees to get down into the yard. He'll then be able to come straight to my room. Please have pity on us two lovers and transmit every detail of this plan to him." Having said that, she went to an inner room, groped around, and produced an ingot of silver that probably weighed four or five taels. Stuffing it into Madam Yang's sleeve, she said, "This is just for you to buy some simple snacks with."

Madam Yang feigned demurral. "Surely I don't deserve such a hefty reward without having done anything yet. But if I don't take it, you may suspect me of harboring other intentions, so let me be so bold as to accept it." She thanked Xixi and went off to make a full report to Youqian.

After being informed of the plan, Youqian could hardly wait for nightfall. The Zhang and Luo residences being near each other, Youqian went before dark to check out the grounds, and, sure enough, he saw four or five camellia trees with branches overhanging the wall. Confident that this was the designated spot, he went there again after dark. He waited and waited, but no sound came from inside, to say nothing of the appearance of a bamboo ladder. It was in the wee hours of the next morning, when the street night-watch drum sounded, that he made his way home in dejection. The next night went the same way, and the night after that. After waiting in vain for three nights (MC: *Hard to bear.*), he thought, "Could she be pulling a prank on me? Or maybe something was lost in the transmission of the message. Or she may have slept so well, at her age, that she forgot about it, little knowing what I have to go through, waiting outside."

And so, as is only to be expected, he asked Madam Yang to get to the bottom of the matter. Again, he wrote a poem on a piece of paper:

*The camellia trees block the east wind
Like ten thousand cloud-crested mountains.
While she dreams behind her gilt bed curtains,
He waits in the wind, on moonlit dewy ground.*

After completing the poem, he went to Madam Yang's home and asked her to deliver it for him and find out the reason for Xixi's failure to keep the assignment.

What happened was this: Since the management of the Luo household was in Xixi's capable hands, an aunt of Xixi's came for a visit on the very day Youqian was supposed to meet Xixi, and so Xixi was obliged to keep her aunt company and sleep in the same room with her at night. (IC: *Here is the problem.*) Thus she was not at liberty to do anything on her own. (MC: *The aunt is of no help. Must be her karmic enemy.*)

The aunt did not leave until the day Madam Yang went to deliver Youqian's poem to Xixi. On reading the poem, Xixi exclaimed, "Mr. Zhang is again accusing me unjustly!" Turning to Madam Yang, she said, "My aunt shared my room for three days and nights. I didn't sleep one wink all three nights but still didn't have a shadow of a chance. It's not that I deliberately stood him up. Now that my aunt has left, tell him to come tonight at lamp-lighting time. I won't fail him again!"

Thus instructed, Madam Yang went to report to Zhang Youqian, saying, "She didn't have a chance to send out a message for three days, but she won't fail you tonight, at lamp-lighting time."

At the appointed time, Youqian strolled to the fence and saw that there was indeed a bamboo ladder leaning against it. Beside himself with joy, he climbed up the ladder, rung by rung. (MC: *Like going up a scaling ladder to take a fortress.*) When he got to the top of the wall, he was startled to see a dark shadow by the branches of the camellia trees, but it was Feiying waiting there for him. After a cough as a signal that reassured them both, they got down by means of the branches. Feiying then led him to Xixi, who had been waiting for him on the ground floor. Hand in hand, Youqian and Xixi went up the stairs. By lamplight, each found that the other's looks had changed for the better. Overwhelmed with joy, they said in unison, "Imagine our getting to meet today!" Oblivious to Feiying's presence, they fell into an embrace. Feiying had the good sense to depart, taking the lamp with her. (MC: *What a tactful girl!*)

By the moonlight that found its way through the window, the two lovers, in each other's arms, went to bed and brought their desires to fruition.

*Apart for four years, joined for one brief moment,
They recalled the dreamlike sweetness of their childhood.
What had been skirmishes then was total war now.*

*The bud burst and bled; the rod grew robust;
Because of the love that filled both hearts,
They banished their parents from their minds.*

After their passion abated, they began to talk, spilling their hearts out to each other. But then Youqian said, "Our joy is only temporary. You'll eventually belong to another man."

"Why do you still not know my heart?" said Xixi. "Since I was betrothed, I've often thought of death, but the wedding date hasn't come, and I wanted to have a happy reunion with you, my love. If I yield my body to someone else, I'll be worse than a pig or a dog! You'll see when the time comes."

The two of them talked the whole night through. At dawn, Xixi told Youqian to rise, put on his clothes, and leave. When Youqian asked her if he could come again that evening, she replied, "Things come up frequently in this household, so I may not be available every evening. Let's settle on a signal. The west chamber of this row is visible from afar outside the fence. From now on, whenever three lamps are lit in that room, the bamboo ladder will be there for you. (MC: *Wonderful signal. This goes to show Xixi's efficiency in getting things done.*) If you see only one lamp on, you can't come, and don't stand outside waiting as if you're under some spell, as you did last time. You'll only be tiring yourself out for nothing." (IC: *This shows her affection for him.*)

Having settled on the signal, they took leave of each other. As before, Youqian lifted himself up by means of the camellia branches and descended by the bamboo ladder, after which Feiying scaled the fence and withdrew the ladder, unbeknownst to god or ghost.

Henceforth, Youqian went regularly to watch for signals from afar. Whenever he saw three lit lamps, he would approach the fence, use the ladder that never failed to be in place, and enter the residence for a union of delight with Xixi. They managed to enjoy four or five nights together in a row. If something came up in the household, the break would not be more than one or two nights. More than a month went by in like fashion. They were at the height of their enjoyment when something happened. Indeed, the road to happiness never runs smooth.

The marshal of Hubei, out of admiration for Zhang Zhongfu's reputation, hired him as secretary. So Zhongfu resigned from his tutorial post with the prefect of Yuezhou and returned home to pack for his next job, and he wanted to take Youqian with him so that the young man could take the

provincial-level civil service examinations there. (MC: *The marshal may seem to be Youqian's karmic enemy at this point, but he will turn out to be of great help.*) This news upset Youqian. However much he hated to leave Xixi, he could not bring himself to counter his father's wish. No alternative was left him but to tell Xixi about it. As they bade each other a mournful farewell, Xixi produced a great deal of valuables for him to use as travel money. Tearfully, she said, "I'll wait for your return if I remain unmarried until then, but if I'm forced to marry before you come back, I'll throw myself into the well in the courtyard and fulfill my marriage bond with you in our next lives. In the event I don't see you again in this life, this will be our last parting."

The two of them sobbed half the night through. Even in their intimacy, their pleasure was diluted by sadness. Before Youqian's departure, Xixi held his hands and enjoined him, "Don't ever forget our love. Seize the first opportunity to come back. The earlier, the better, if only by one day!"

"You don't need to tell me that. If not for the sake of the exams, I'd surely find a pretext for not going. But I can't turn down this opportunity. And yet this is by no means something I look forward to! I'll return at the first opportunity. It will give me such joy to see you again, if only one day sooner!"

After staying in each other's embrace for the longest time, hating the thought of parting, they bade each other a tearful farewell.

It goes without saying that the sights he saw along the way to Hubei with his father saddened Youqian because they brought back memories of his loved one. The examinations took place soon after their arrival. Indulging in wishful thinking, Youqian said to himself, "If I win first place, I may still be able to marry my love, for all I know!" He poured all his talent and learning into the composition of the essays on the examinations. After leaving the examination grounds, he said to his father, "I miss Mother. I'd like to return home."

Zhongfu said, "Can't you wait until you see the list of successful candidates?"

"If I don't make the list, how will I be able to show my face again? What's more, Mother is lonely at home and sorely misses me. (MC: *Attachment to his mother doesn't explain such eagerness.*) And this place is so far from home. Unlike in Yuezhou, where we were constantly in touch, how am I going to stop worrying about her? Literary honors and official rank are but external things and are preordained by destiny. What's the use of reading that list?" He pestered his father for several days before his father finally gave in and released him. Another few days and he was back at home.

The Xin family had already chosen a date in the coming winter for the wedding. Xixi grew desperate. She wore her eyes out looking for Youqian to return and sent Feiying on frequent missions to Youqian's home on all sorts of pretexts to find out how things stood. That day, on learning that Youqian had returned, Feiying flew back to tell Xixi about it.

"Go quickly and tell him not to fail to come here tonight! He can enter the house the usual way." She wrote a *ci* poem, sealed it, and asked Feiying to deliver it.

Thus instructed, Feiying went to the Zhang residence and found herself face-to-face with Zhang Youqian at the Zhangs' gate.

"Good!" exclaimed Youqian. "I was on my way to see old Madam Yang and ask her to deliver a message, and now here you are!"

Feiying said, "My mistress misses you so much that she often cries, and every day she tells me to ask for news about you. As soon as she learned you'd arrived, she sent me to ask you to go and see her, using the bamboo ladder as before. She also has a letter for you."

Youqian opened it and saw that it was a *ci* poem to the tune of "Song of Divination":

*How shall I make him come
Now that luckily he has returned?
Missing him all night and all day,
I just cannot dismiss him from my heart.*

*It was to be a good marriage bond;
My fear is that it will melt away.
Should I be given to another man,
I will see him under the Yellow Springs.³*

After reading the poem, Youqian said, "I understand." When Feiying left, he carefully put the poem away.

At nightfall, on seeing from afar three brightly lit lamps in the west chamber, Youqian rushed over and saw the bamboo ladder already in place against the wall. When he entered and saw Xixi, she put her arms around him as if she had found a treasure and grumbled, "How can you be so heartless, returning so late when my wedding date has already been set! Even if you and I meet every night, we have only a little more than two months left. When our time is so limited, I should enjoy life to the fullest with you before

I die, so that I'll have no regrets. (MC: *What deep passion!*) You, in your youth and with your talent, will have boundless prospects. I wouldn't presume to force you to die with me, the way ungracious people do. But in the future, after you're married, don't forget me!" With that, she broke down in violent sobs.

Youqian also burst into tears. "How can you talk like this? If you die, I die! After I left you, not a day passed that I didn't miss you. That's why I wanted to come back as soon as the exam was over, without even waiting to learn the results. I'm a few days late only because I yielded to my father's insistence. Please accept my apology and don't hold me to blame. I thank you for your new poem. Let me write a reply poem using your rhyme scheme and lay my heart bare to you." Taking Xixi's writing brush and paper, he wrote:

*I left because to pressure I succumbed,
Nor had I much say about my return.
Our lovers' knot is tied all the way.
Why despair and lose heart?*

*All my heart to you belongs;
To you I shall always stay true.
If my late return warrants strokes of the cane,
I will gladly take three thousand beatings.*

On reading the poem, Xixi stopped complaining, understanding that he was not in a position to do otherwise. They got into bed behind the bed curtains and experienced the very height and fulfillment of love. As the saying goes, "The joy of reunion after a long separation exceeds that of newlyweds." Moreover, aware of the limited time they had left and the preciousness of each moment, they fulfilled their desires to the utmost, oblivious to all consequences.

After half a month went by in like fashion, Youqian began to grow a little afraid. He said to Xixi, "I've been coming every night, and you go to bed early and get up late. I think we've been too imprudent. What if word should get out, and we're caught?"

"I'm determined to die anyway, sooner or later. So why shouldn't I enjoy life while it lasts? Even if we're found out, nothing can be worse than death. What's there to be afraid of?" (MC: *What a daredevil girl!*) Indeed, she was too reckless.

Mrs. Luo noticed her daughter's listlessness and frequent yawns during the day, as well as her red eyes and puffy eyelids some mornings. She wondered to herself, "This girl is not quite her usual self. I hope she hasn't done anything improper." She began to keep a watchful eye on her.

One evening, when all had become quiet, she tiptoed to her daughter's room and listened at the door. On hearing her talking in a subdued voice, she said to herself, "How very strange! At this time of the evening, she can't very well be talking to Feiying. And why does she have to keep her voice so low? I can't make out anything she's saying." After listening intently for a while, she heard the sound of snoring coming from below. Even more surprised, she thought, "She's talking with someone upstairs, and someone else is sleeping downstairs, so there must be three people!" (MC: *She is right.*) If the one who's asleep is Feiying, to whom is my girl talking? Something is wrong here!"

In great haste she went to tell her husband about this. Alarmed, Luo Renqing said, "With her wedding day around the corner, she'd better not cause trouble!" (MC: *The approaching wedding day is exactly the reason for this.*) He told his wife, "Don't hesitate! Let's force our way into her room, and we'll know immediately. There's no escape route from the second floor of that wing."

Mrs. Luo hauled two maidservants out of bed. Each holding a lamp, the girls followed Mrs. Luo to Xixi's door with the father, cudgel in hand, bringing up the rear. (MC: *How formidable!*)

On finding the door tightly bolted, Mrs. Luo cried out, "Little Feiying!"

Feiying was asleep and did not answer, but the two lovers upstairs heard her. Xixi said, "It's my mother. It must be some family affair for me to take care of."

Youqian began to panic.

"Don't panic," said Xixi. "Stay where you are. Let me go down. She doesn't usually come up in the evenings." So saying, she rose, put her clothes on, and went downstairs. Feeling ill at ease, Zhang Youqian also got dressed, afraid that he might be caught naked. Without an escape route, he could do nothing more than dive into a dark corner to listen.

Xixi thought that her mother was there just for a brief question and therefore would be easy to get rid of, but as soon as she opened the door, she was startled to see two bright lamps. Even her father was there. Before she found her voice, her mother snatched a lamp from one of the maidservants and, along with her cudgel-wielding father, stormed up the stairs. (MC: *Now he is really desperate.*)

Seeing the ugly turn of events, Xixi knew that her secret was out. Heading for the courtyard, she made as if to throw herself into the well. One of the maidservants, wondering why the mistress was in such a hurry, followed behind, lighting the way with her lamp. The other maidservant, with hands now free, quickly put her arms around Xixi before she could jump and exclaimed, "Why would you want to do this?" Then she cried out at the top of her voice, "The young mistress is about to throw herself into the well!"

The commotion awoke Feiying. She rushed to the scene and saw her mistress trying to struggle free from the two maidservants, who were holding her back with all their might. Feiying leaned against the railing around the well and cried, "Mistress, don't do this!"

Let us leave this scene of chaos and come back to Luo Renqing and his wife. They found a man hiding in a dark corner upstairs. Renqing's cudgel was about to land on him when Mrs. Luo's lamp lit up his face, and Renqing recognized him as Youqian, son of Zhang Zhongfu. He stayed his hand and cursed, "You little beast! You swine! You're as close to me as a nephew. How could you do such a vile thing to sully this family's name?"

Youqian fell to his knees and pleaded, "Uncle, please forgive me! I've been in love with your daughter since childhood. We were born on the same day, and we shared the same classroom. Two years ago, when a marriage proposal was made on my behalf, you, Uncle, promised that you would give your daughter to me once I passed the exams. So I've labored at my studies in the hope of bringing about the marriage. Little did I know that you'd suddenly betrothed her to someone else. (MC: *He's turning the tables on Mr. Luo and accusing him of lack of faith! Desperate, he could not think of anything better.*) It was in anger that your daughter asked me to come for a secret rendezvous. We pledged to die on the same day, just as we were born on the same day. Now that we've been found out, your daughter will surely die, and I don't want to live without her. Please beat me to death!"

Renqing said, "I did give that promise, but have you passed the exams? How can you turn around and blame my family for betrothing her to someone else? (MC: *Renqing is right.*) A foul beast like you won't succeed on the exams anyway. You've committed a serious crime. Since the law will deal with you, I'm not going to beat you in private." With that, he seized Youqian with a firm grip.

On hearing the commotion outside, Mrs. Luo rushed down the stairs and urged her husband to do the same, afraid that their daughter might kill herself. Renqing dragged Youqian down to the reception hall, trussed him

up with rope, marched him to the study, and ordered male servants to watch him and, as soon as it was daylight, deliver him to the authorities. By the time he returned to check on his daughter, he saw her hair all loose and in disarray from the tussle, and his wife and the maidservants still in a tangle, screaming. In a rage, he roared, "Let that good-for-nothing die! Why hold her back?" He was about to hit her with his cudgel when his wife and the maidservants herded her up the stairs, leaving Renqing alone. Raising his head, he saw Feiying still by the railing of the well. (MC: *Bad luck for her!*) With no outlet for his pent-up anger, Renqing grabbed her hair with one hand, pulled her up to him, and began to rain blows on her, saying, "You must have acted as the go-between and caused all this mess! Out with the truth now! How did it all begin?"

At first, Feiying pleaded ignorance because her sleeping quarters were downstairs but, unable to hold out against the blows, came out with all the details, adding, "My mistress and Mr. Zhang often wept and wanted to die together." (MC: *This is an important point.*)

Having heard her out, Renqing sharply dismissed her. Feeling slightly remorseful, he thought, "If I had accepted him as a son-in-law, things might not have come to this. But now, with the Xin family involved, this has grown into a complicated case. I'll have to appeal to the authorities."

The sky turned light, but the commotion went on. In fact, during a crisis, dawn always seems to arrive earlier. (MC: *Easily said!*) While Mrs. Luo and the maidservants kept a close eye on Xixi to prevent her from doing violence to herself, Renqing marched Youqian to the county yamen. The county magistrate opened his court session and took the accusation paper. On realizing that the perpetrators in this case of illicit fornication had been caught red-handed, he was relieved that evidence was not lacking. Since the accusation mentioned the offending party's status as a *xiucai*, he told Zhang Youqian to approach the bench and said to him, "You should be well read and sensible. Why did you do such a filthy thing?"

"Your Honor," said Youqian, "I won't conceal anything from you, but there's more to this case than meets the eye. It's not a case of sexual depravity." (MC: *Clever words.*)

"Do tell," said the magistrate.

"Miss Luo and I were born on the same day in the same month and the same year, and we shared the same classroom in my home since childhood. We understood each other perfectly and took secret vows to live our lives together as husband and wife. Later, a matchmaker made a marriage proposal

on my behalf, and the Luo family responded, 'The marriage will take place only after his success on the exams.' Then I followed my father on his journey and pursued my studies at his workplace. By the time I returned two years later, the Luo family, to my surprise, had broken their promise and betrothed their daughter to the Xin family. Miss Luo, however, stayed loyal to our pledge and planned to commit suicide on the wedding day as a gesture of gratitude to me. Therefore she invited me over to bid me farewell. We weren't careful about covering our tracks and were caught. If Miss Luo is forced to marry, she'll surely die, and I won't live either, out of loyalty to her. (MC: *Forceful words.*) But since the secret is out, I'm ready to accept any legal punishment."

The magistrate was impressed by his refined look and his articulateness and had a good mind to help him. So he asked Luo Renqing, "Did he speak the truth?"

Renqing replied, "Yes, what he said is the truth, but what he did was wrong."

Meaning to test the young man's written skills, the magistrate handed him paper and a writing brush, saying, "Such being the case, a verbal statement doesn't count. I need a written deposition of all the facts."

Youqian took the writing brush and wrote the deposition without a single pause:

Devotion is a quality that forms part of character. As long as loyalty is not lacking, I give no thought to rumors. Born on the same date in the same year and having shared the same classroom, Miss Luo and I are perfect soul mates. This is by no means a case of scaling walls for illicit love affairs. What delighted Sima Xiangru lay beyond the notes of the zither.⁴ Song Yu was not guilty of lust for being admired.⁵ The pledge tying marriage to success on the examinations did not upset me. However, her parents offered her to another family, thus inflicting aching grief on the lovers. Her determination to die before the wedding date testifies to her unparalleled chastity. My decision to return from afar for the appointment and lay down my life as well was made for the sake of our profound love, however far apart we were. (MC: He praises himself instead of confessing his faults. This is a continuation of Dongfang Shuo's style.)⁶ Since I have run afoul of the law, I will gladly take my due punishment. But I humbly pray that the previous engagement be reinstated, out of your sympathy for our deep attachment, and the punishment be

magnanimously dispensed with, out of sympathy for our profound love. If so, the winter-devastated valley will come back to life with the breath of spring, and the dying embers will regain their glow. Your kindness in bringing about our marriage will be remembered even unto our next lives.

The county magistrate sighed in admiration at the deposition and said to Luo Renqing, "Isn't such a talented young man good enough to be your son-in-law? Since what your daughter has done cannot be undone, why don't you just compromise and bring about their happiness?" (MC: *What a good magistrate!*)

"But I've already accepted betrothal gifts from the Xin family," said Luo Renqing. "I'm not at liberty to step back from the commitment." (MC: *True.*)

"When the Xins hear about this, they may not want to honor their end of the agreement," said the magistrate. He was about to dispense more advice to Luo Renqing when the Xin family also came to the county yamen to present their complaint and ask for punishment for the adulterer. The Xins being an immensely rich family and well acquainted with him, the magistrate thought he could not turn them down out of hand because, after all, they were in the right. He was also afraid that if he set Zhang Youqian free, both the Xin and Luo families, at the height of their anger, might beat him to a pulp. (MC: *Truly a good magistrate!*) So he accepted the Xin family's indictment paper and sent Zhang Youqian to jail for the time being. He also summoned Mrs. Luo for interrogation.

In the meantime, Mrs. Zhang did not see her son at breakfast that morning, nor did she find him in his study. She was wondering where he could have gone (MC: *Mrs. Zhang is in the dark.*) when old Madam Yang showed up, looking alarmed, and asked, "Ma'am, do you know that your son has been caught committing adultery and is now in jail?"

Mouth agape with astonishment, Mrs. Zhang said, "No wonder he's been absentminded lately. So he has indeed got himself into a scrape!"

"The Luo and Xin families are both very rich. I'm afraid the yamen will come down hard on your son. What can we do to save him?"

"Let me send a messenger to his father and ask him what to do. Being but a woman, I can do no more than deliver his meals to jail." Whereupon Mrs. Zhang told a servant who often served as a messenger to go to Hubei with a letter and ask Zhang Zhongfu for ideas. (MC: *Good move.*) The servant left before the night was out.

Now, Zhang Youqian in his cell thought, "The county magistrate means so well that I may not be sentenced to death after all. But I wonder if Xixi survived last night. I'm afraid I may never see her again." While he was shedding tears, his thoughts with Xixi, the wardens approached to ask him for tips. Even though the magistrate had already instructed them not to be hard on Youqian or raise a hand against him, they still hurled verbal abuse at him. (MC: *But that's not as bad.*) Being a scholar and in a dejected mood, Youqian could hardly take the insults. At this juncture, there burst upon everyone's ears the sound of gongs from outside. The next moment, a group of men barged in. (MC: *What occasion could be happier than this?*) Everyone in the jailhouse was taken aback. Youqian saw that the leader of the group was carrying on his shoulder a red banner from which hung copper bells. On the banner were inscribed the characters "Good tidings from the Marshal."

"Who is Scholar Zhang Youqian?" clamored the men.

"He is," said the wardens, pointing at Youqian. "Who are you?"

Without bothering to answer them, the men gathered around Youqian, saying, "We've been sent by the marshal of Hubei to inform you that you've passed the exams. Tips, please!" With that, one of the men whipped out a slip of paper and a writing brush, took Youqian's hand, and asked him to write a slip for three hundred or five hundred strings of cash.

"Not so fast!" exclaimed Youqian. "First, I need to see my place on the list before I write you the slip."

"You got a high pass!" said the men as they produced a red scroll that showed Youqian was the third one on the list.

"I'm a criminal in jail," said Youqian. (MC: *At this time, he can afford to stress the word "criminal."*) You should have gone to my home to make the announcement instead of making so much noise here. You'll only be upsetting the county magistrate."

"We did go to your home and were told that you were here, and we did send someone to report the matter to the county magistrate. This is good news. His Honor won't be upset."

Youqian continued, "My life is still in His Honor's hands. I'm in no position to write you slips for tips!" (MC: *Good excuse.*)

The men kept clamoring for tips, and the wardens also took up the cries, throwing the entire jailhouse into an uproar.

At this point, the voices of yamen criers were heard, shouting to clear the way. The wardens scattered, crying, "The county magistrate is here!"

Soon, the magistrate came in, smiling. On seeing a group of men gathered around Youqian, refusing to let go of him, the magistrate barked, "What do you think you're doing?"

The men replied, "We're looking forward to your coming, sir! Scholar Zhang refused to give us a tip because he says he's still a criminal. Please do right by us!"

With a laugh, the magistrate said, "Quiet! To celebrate Scholar Zhang's high pass on the exams, I'll give you fifty strings of cash from the county coffers. Go to the county treasury to claim it." He took the writing brush and wrote down the number. But the men found the sum too paltry and did not leave until the magistrate added ten more strings.

The magistrate invited Zhang Youqian to the yamen, where the young man was given a change of clothes and a hat. After a proper salute, the magistrate ushered him into the main hall and said, "Congratulations on passing the exams with such high distinction!"

Youqian said, "Thanks to Your Honor's kindness, I got lucky this time, but please be lenient in the case against me."

"That's a trivial matter. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Before this, the magistrate had summoned Luo Xixi to the yamen for interrogation, but she had not yet arrived. Right there in the main hall, the magistrate issued another order, saying, "Mr. Zhang, who has just passed the examinations, will be escorted home by percussionists. Miss Luo need not be brought to court but will await further decisions by the prefectural yamen." Having written that, he ordered the yamen's runners to prepare an artificial flower, red bunting, musical instruments, and a horse. After the magistrate offered Youqian three cups of wine, the artificial flower and the red bunting were put on Youqian, and, with Youqian on a horse and the band of percussionists leading the way, the procession went out through the county gate. (MC: *How thrilling!*) Truly,

Yesterday he was in the jailhouse;

Today he is up on a high horse.

The world of love takes on new colors;

The god of marriage is filled with joy.

When Youqian's procession had covered about half the distance, a woman's sedan-chair preceded by two yamen runners came into view,

heading toward the county yamen. Sobs were faintly audible from the sedan-chair. The runners in Youqian's procession, realizing that Luo Xixi must be in the sedan-chair, cried out, "Stop! You don't have to go! Scholar Zhang has passed the exams, and Miss Luo need not be brought to court!" They then produced the magistrate's note to show to the runners escorting Xixi.

In the sedan-chair, Xixi heard everything loud and clear. She raised the curtain and saw a smiling Mr. Zhang approaching her on a horse, making an impressive sight. Her heart overflowed with joy, but she did not show it. (MC: *Her joy is not any less than his.*)

The sight of Xixi in the sedan-chair lifted a heavy weight from Youqian's mind. It was now obvious that she had not died that night. As their eyes locked, grief and joy intermingled. Xixi's sedan-chair carriers turned around to walk behind Youqian's horse. As they went along, they presented the picture of a bridegroom leading his bride's sedan-chair. The only thing missing were the festoons on the sedan-chair. When they came to a fork in the road, they threw each other significant looks and parted ways.

After returning home, Youqian greeted his mother and gave tips to the members of his procession and the welcoming party. After they all left, Mrs. Zhang said, "A fine thing you did! I almost died from all the worrying! If Heaven hadn't sent this fortune, how would this case have ended? When the announcers came in with all that noise, I thought they were yamen runners, and I was so afraid that I couldn't find a hiding place quickly enough! It wasn't until they explained everything that I relaxed. I told them that you were in jail, so they headed for the jailhouse. Why did the county yamen set you free just like that?"

"I'm so sorry, Mother, for having done something improper in my passion and made you worry. The county magistrate was full of good intentions and meant to reinstate my marriage to Miss Luo, but the Xin family objected. Now, with this lucky break, the magistrate is delighted. He sent me home and called off his summons for Miss Luo. My wishful thought is that I'll not only be exempted from punishment but may even hope for something more."

"Yes, the magistrate is kind enough, but I heard that the Xin family refuse to call it quits. They think themselves so important because of their wealth that they're going to appeal to higher authorities, and that may be bad for us. I sent a messenger to your father. I wonder if he can find someone to help us out."

"We need to see how the prefectural yamen reacts to the county magistrate's report before we know what to do next. Don't worry, Mother." (MC: *Mr. Zhang can now afford to be audacious.*)

In the twinkling of an eye, the neighbors swarmed to their door to offer their congratulations. Old Madam Yang also came, to Mrs. Zhang's great joy, but let us pass from this to other matters.

The prefect, on opening his court session, received a letter from the marshal of Hubei. He opened it and saw that it was a plea for him to take care of the case involving Zhang Youqian and Miss Luo. The letter, ostensibly from the marshal at Zhang Zhongfu's request after the latter had received information from home, was in fact written by Zhongfu himself and therefore intensely earnest. As the marshal was in a powerful position at the time, the prefect felt obligated to do his best to help them. However, knowing nothing about the details of the case, he wanted to summon the county magistrate for information. It just so happened that the county magistrate's report arrived that very day, and after reading the letter, the prefect learned the ins and outs of the case and was determined to do something for the scholar who had just passed the examinations.

At this point, Mr. Xin appeared in court and made this accusation: "The county magistrate practiced favoritism and freed Zhang Youqian, who was in jail for the crime of illicit fornication. The magistrate is guilty of bending the law."

The prefect told him to approach the bench and offered him this advice: "The way you put it, Miss Luo is a fallen woman. So why do you still want to fight for her? Even if the court of law judges in your favor and gives her to your son, she stigmatizes your name. Why don't you take back your betrothal gifts and find a girl of spotless chastity? Won't that be better? Unlike the Luos, yours is a family with a stainless reputation. Why be so hard on yourself?" (MC: *He is talking to Mr. Zhang, but his words have universal applications.*)

Impressed by the logic of the prefect's words, Mr. Xin found himself tongue-tied for a moment. Then he kowtowed and said, "Whatever you say, Your Honor."

The prefect ordered that paper and a writing brush be brought over and made Mr. Xin write a pledge to release Miss Luo from the betrothal. (MC: *He does take care of details.*) He then drew up an order for the county yamen to recover the betrothal gifts from Luo Renqing and return them to Mr. Xin.

Mr. Xin dared not raise objections to the prefect's decision. He kowtowed and left the court. Then and there, the prefect wrote a personal note

to the county magistrate and attached it to the official file. The note said, "Mr. Zhang and Miss Luo make a nice couple. It would be good if you could bring about their marriage. I'm writing this based on information provided by the marshal of Hubei. Please give the matter the importance it deserves."

After reading the file and the private note, the county magistrate prepared two invitation cards and ordered one runner to invite Luo Renqing and another to invite Zhang Youqian. The two runners went in obedience to this command.

Luo Renqing, a rich man of humble origin, dared not drag his feet on receiving an invitation from the authorities. He promptly put on a small cap and a robe with multiple folds and presented himself at the county yamen. The magistrate, determined to bring about the marriage, treated him with great courtesy and said, "Zhang Youqian makes a nice son-in-law. I tried the other day to talk you into accepting him as such. Now that he's succeeded on the exams, it will be good if you accept my judgment."

"I wouldn't dream of contradicting you, Your Honor! But Miss Luo has been promised to the Xin family, and the Xins are determined to have her. How am I supposed to turn them down? Please understand my dilemma."

"As long as you agree to my idea, you need not worry about the Xin family." Gleefully, he told a runner to retrieve Mr. Xin's release pledge from the file and show it to Luo Renqing. The county magistrate said, "Since the Xin family has agreed, please accept my congratulations on your gaining a good son-in-law!" (MC: *What a good magistrate! But such happenings were not so unusual in those times.*)

Renqing thought for a moment before saying, "Why was Mr. Xin willing to write the pledge?"

With a smile, the magistrate replied, "For your information, it was the prefect's idea. The prefect made him do it in order to bring about your daughter's marriage." So saying, he extracted the prefect's note from his sleeve and showed it to Renqing. With both the prefect and the county magistrate bending over backward to bring about this marriage, how could Renqing reject them out of hand? He saw no option but to say thankfully, "With two such weighty personalities going to such trouble over such a trivial matter, I'll surely comply."

At this time, Zhang Youqian also arrived. The magistrate greeted him and said with a grin, "Your father-in-law has given his promise." With that, he showed Youqian the prefect's personal note and Mr. Xin's release pledge and acquainted him with all the details.

Overjoyed, Youqian thanked the magistrate profusely. The magistrate told Youqian to bow to Luo Renqing right there in the courtroom and acknowledge him as his father-in-law. Luo Renqing was also pleased. Then the magistrate invited them into a rear chamber and treated both men to a feast. Luo Renqing demurred and refused to take his seat at the table, but the magistrate said, "With your son-in-law also here, what's the harm?" He obliged, and they did not part company until they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

After returning home, Youqian told his mother about how his father had asked a favor of the marshal of Hubei, how the marshal had, in turn, asked a favor of the prefect, and how the prefect had instructed the county magistrate. Mrs. Zhang was beside herself with joy. As for Luo Renqing, the magistrate's feast took a great weight off his mind. (MC: *It was a stroke of luck for him.*) Since this had been made possible out of deference to Zhang Youqian's status, his son-in-law rose considerably in his estimation. Mrs. Luo, having always doted on her daughter, naturally glowed with pride on learning from her husband about the way both the prefect and the county magistrate had judged in favor of the successful candidate. The next day being an auspicious day, the Luos engaged the services of old Madam Yang, the matchmaker, and brought Zhang Youqian over as a live-in son-in-law, pleading aversion to being separated from their daughter.

On the wedding night, the bride and the groom, being old friends and having experienced so many trials and tribulations, shed so many tears, and even had a brush with death, were ecstatic over their reunion. As husband and wife, they went to the Zhang residence to greet Mrs. Zhang. With joy flooding her heart at the sight of her beloved son and daughter-in-law, she advised them, "You mustn't forget the kindness of the prefect and the county magistrate. Now that you're married, you must go express your thanks to them."

Youqian said, "That's exactly what I was planning to do." So he told Xixi to stay at home and keep her mother-in-law company. Having known Xixi since she was a little girl, Mrs. Zhang now found her even more endearing. In the meantime, Youqian went to offer his thanks to the prefect and the county magistrate. After he returned home, the prefect and the magistrate had gifts of congratulations sent over. After the porters left, the newlyweds went back to the Luo residence.

The next spring, Youqian sat for the examinations held by the Ministry of Rites and also passed. He rose through the ranks of officialdom until he

became administrative aide to an imperial inspector. He and Xixi lived to a ripe old age. As the following poem says:

*The jailhouse turned out to be a blessed land
Where the bridegroom's success was announced.
Without a bone-chilling cold spell,
Fragrant plum blossoms are not to be had.*

Commissioner Wang Rides Roughshod Over His Subordinates

Adjutant Li Gets His Comeuppance from a Reincarnated Victim

I N the words of a poem,

*Retribution has never been wanting;
Reap what you sow; heaven and earth are fair.
Doubt not that he who kills will be killed;
If you don't believe this, give ear to my story!*

Mark this: Of all things between heaven and earth, life is of the first importance. Buddhism forbids killing but also advocates a life for a life, especially when a human being deliberately kills another human being out of malice. That is why the law of the land is harshest when it comes to murder. When abolishing the Qin dynasty's draconian laws, Emperor Gaozu [Liu Bang, r. 206–194 BCE] of the Han dynasty retained three of them, the first of which being "Death unto those guilty of murder." Clearly, murder is the worst of crimes. However, if the crime is not brought to light while the murderer is still alive, how is the law to be applied? With murderers escaping the law, wouldn't the victims have died in vain? No, because there is retribution in the unseen world.

Instances of retribution in the netherworld abound, but because they occur in the Region of Darkness, there are no eyewitnesses, even though

retribution never misses the mark, not by a hair's breadth. Even if some return to life from the netherworld and spread the word, some headstrong people dismiss such accounts as dream talk out of contrariness. Without seeing the acts of retribution with their own eyes, they turn a deaf ear to such stories. Now, there are also cases in which the guilty ones receive retribution in their own lifetimes from their reincarnated victims, cases that are distinctly recorded in the annals of history. Are they also to be dismissed as incredible, just out of contrariness?

I will refrain from citing the stories of the soul of Peng Sheng scaring Duke Xiang of Qi to death, that of Prince Ruyi of Zhao chasing Empress Lüshi, and the spirits of Dou Ying and Guan Fu whipping Tian Fen.¹ These cases may be dismissed as figments of the imagination conjured up by those whose wits are dulled by their ill fortune or whose suspicious minds can produce the wildest fictions. They may have been deceived by their failing eyesight at the end of their lives when what had preyed on their minds seemed to burst into view. I will confine myself only to crystal-clear cases of timely retribution visited upon the guilty while they are alive, although the manner of retribution in each case may vary. Dear audience, if you don't mind my long-windedness, I propose to cite an example or two before I move on to our story proper.

The first case was recorded in *Unofficial Histories* of the Tang dynasty.² To the south of the city of Chang'an [present-day Xi'an], a monk was begging for alms one day when he saw a woman in a mulberry tree, picking its leaves. Joining his palms in a Buddhist salute, the monk asked, "Madam, do you know of any kind donors in the neighborhood who would give me some food?"

Pointing a finger into the distance, the woman said, "Three or four *li* from here, a Wang family is holding a prayer service. They'll be happy to offer food to another monk. Please go quickly."

The monk followed her directions, and, sure enough, he saw a group of monks about to sit down for a meal. He was greatly pleased that he had come at the right time. After the meal was over, Mr. and Mrs. Wang asked him, marveling at his good timing, "Your Reverence, you look like someone from a long way off. Who guided you here?"

"A young woman picking mulberry leaves three or four *li* from here gave me directions."

Mr. and Mrs. Wang looked at each other in alarm. "We didn't tell anyone that we're having a prayer service. How would she know from that distance?

She must be some kind of prophet, definitely no common sort.” Turning to the monk, they said, “Could Your Reverence take us to her?”

Thereupon, they went with the monk and saw the woman still in the mulberry tree. At the sight of Mr. and Mrs. Wang, she jumped down, dropped her basket, and ran away as fast as her legs could carry her. The monk went his own way, but Mr. and Mrs. Wang gave chase. The woman entered a house that Mr. Wang recognized to be that of Lu Shulun of the same village. As they also went in, the woman dived into an inner chamber and pushed a bed firmly against the door. Wondering why the elderly couple were running after her daughter, Mrs. Lu asked, “What brought you here?”

“We held a prayer service at home today, and a monk from a long way off popped in at the last moment to ask for alms, saying it was your daughter who directed him to our home. But we never told anyone about the prayer service, so we wonder how your daughter learned about it. That’s why we’re here. Nothing more.”

“Oh, that’s easy! I’ll bring her out.” So saying, she went to knock on her daughter’s door, but her daughter adamantly refused to come out. Losing her patience, Mrs. Lu said, “What’s the meaning of this, you little swine? What are you up to?”

The young woman replied from inside, “I just don’t want to see those two old things. What kind of crime is that?”

“They’re just neighbors paying you a visit. There’s no need to be shy. Why shut yourself up in your room?”

The young woman’s refusal to come out of hiding increased the Wangs’ suspicions. “There must be something quite unusual about this,” they thought. Standing outside the door, they pleaded insistently to see her. (MC: *The monk’s visit and the Wangs’ pleas are both driven by karma.*)

From inside the room, the young woman shouted at the top of her voice, “On a certain date in a certain year, a sheep seller and his two sons went to your house. Where are they now?”

Turning pale with fright at this question, Mr. and Mrs. Wang made a fast exit. Not daring to cast a look back, they ran at top speed, wishing they had an extra pair of legs each. Only then did the young woman emerge through her door. Her mother asked, “What were you talking about?”

“Mother, let me tell you: In my previous incarnation, I was a sheep seller from Xiazhou [present-day Jingbian County in Shaanxi, near the Inner Mongolian border]. The three of us, father and sons, stayed the night with the Wangs, and they murdered us and took all our money for their own

enjoyment. My unavenged spirit survived, so I was reincarnated into their family as their son. Because of my more-than-average intelligence, they cherished me as they would some precious treasure. But I fell ill at fifteen and died at twenty. The money they spent on medicine totaled several times what they had robbed from us. On every anniversary of my death, they would hold a prayer service with sacrificial food, and, to their credit, they've shed more than three piculfuls of tears so far. (MC: *How frightening! What do evildoers gain?*) I'm now your daughter, but I still remember what happened in my past lives. Quite by chance, I saw that monk begging for food, so I gave him directions. Those two are my enemies from another lifetime. Why would I want to see them? Now that I've brought up their past, the shock will soon kill them, and I'll be getting even with them."

To her amazement, Mrs. Lu learned later, upon inquiry, that Mr. and Mrs. Wang did indeed fall ill after returning home. Although ignorant of the details, they did realize that their debt remained unpaid. In trepidation and fear, they died shortly thereafter.

Dear audience, isn't it hair-raising to think that the young woman, murdered in one life, spent her next lifetime collecting repayment for the loot and, in her current incarnation, demands the old couple's lives! Now listen to a shabby poem that I made up:

*How remarkable the mulberry-picking girl!
She remembered collecting the debt as the sick son.
By directing the monk to beg for food,
She was demanding nothing less than the Wangs' lives!*

So you have just heard a story that covers three lifetimes. Let me now tell one that covers only two lifetimes, one in which an aggrieved ghost seeks revenge. It is recorded in *Records of the Listener* of the Song dynasty.³

In Yindu Village, twenty *li* from Wujiang County [near the city of Suzhou, Jiangsu], there lived a rich man named Wu Ze. A Court Gentleman for Ceremonial Service, he was addressed as "Court Gentleman Wu." He had a son, nicknamed Yunlang, who, from his earliest years, had a quick mind and an aptitude for learning. Later, he passed the civil service examinations and was put on the wait list for appointment to office. His parents had high hopes for his rise to prominence, but in the eighth month of the fifth year of the Shaoxing reign period [1135], he fell ill and died. In aching grief, his

parents went to a great deal of expense holding prayer services for him and drained their savings. In their agony, they never stopped yearning for him.

The next winter, a brother of Court Gentleman Zhao's, Instructor Wu Zi, was on his way to his parents-in-law's home at East Hill, Dongting, when his boat was caught in a storm only several *li* after it set sail. As the boat could not proceed any farther, it had to be moored by the temple of the King of Fortune and Kindness until the storm subsided. When Wu Zi went ashore for a leisurely walk, he saw a man in a short-sleeve black silk garment slowly emerging through the temple gate, which was standing ajar. Believing that the man bore a resemblance to Yunlang, Instructor Wu approached for a closer look and was aghast on realizing that he was indeed none other than Yunlang. Well aware that it was a ghost he was seeing, he still said to his nephew, "Your parents miss you day and night. Goodness only knows how many tears they've shed over not being able to see you again. But why are you here?"

"I'm being held here to serve as a witness. I feel miserable. Uncle, please tell my parents that if they want to see me, they'll have to come here. I can't go to them." Heaving one sigh after another, he took himself off.

This encounter changed Instructor Wu's plans. Instead of continuing on to his parents-in-law's home, he hurried to see his brother and sister-in-law to tell them about this. The three of them cried their hearts out and went to the temple by the same boat that Instructor Wu had used. There Yunlang was, already standing at the water's edge. As soon as he saw his parents, he ran up to them in tears, bowed deeply, and told them about his sufferings in the Region of Darkness. His parents were about to ask him for more details and tell him how they missed him when his face suddenly hardened. (MC: *A real ghost.*) His eyebrows flying up, he grabbed his father's clothes and screamed, "You murdered me for my money and made me suffer for more than forty years. Even though you've gone to a great deal of expense for my sake, you must pay me back with your lives. I'm not going to spare you today!" Having said that, he came to blows with the old man and both tumbled into the water.

In a panic, Instructor Wu cried out to the servants and boatmen for help, and they all jumped into the water for a rescue attempt. People who live by Lake Tai all know how to swim, so they brought the father back to dry land, but Court Gentleman Wu did not stop gesticulating wildly and brandishing his fists until evening fell. Instructor Wu had no clue as to what had led to

all this, but having heard Yunlang's accusation, he knew there must be some dark secret.

When he asked his brother, Court Gentleman Wu said with a frown, "Back in the year of Renwu [1102?], when Jurchen cavalrymen broke into the city, a young man came to me for shelter. He had a lot of money with him. I coveted his possessions and, a few months later, killed him while he was drunk and took everything he had. Bearing this karmic debt, this old man has never known peace of mind all these years since then. (MC: *If he had known he was to have no peace of mind, would he have done it?*) My son was born in the same year, and he must have been the young man's wronged soul reborn. What happened today is clearly an act of retribution." He fell into a depression and refused to take any food. He died more than ten days later.

This "son" lived two lifetimes, one in which he was murdered and one collecting what was owed him. Then he returned as a ghost to seek his murderer's life. With one lifetime fewer than in the last story, this one takes less time to tell.

Now please listen to one more shabby poem that I made up:

*The aggrieved soul exhausted all his parents' money,
Leaving them with nothing but grief.
When your children die, shed no tears,
For you must have hurt them in their previous lives.*

Now that I have told these two bizarre stories, I'm going to dispense with more commonplace ones about ghosts of murder victims losing no time in demanding the lives of their murderers, because there are just not enough days in the year to tell them all. I simply have no time for them in my eagerness to move on to our story proper.

Storyteller! Are you saying there is one more story to tell, and the story proper at that?

Dear audience, the two stories I have just told you are about multiple lifetimes in which the victims remember their previous lives well and therefore succeed in exacting revenge. This is not something entirely unimaginable. My story proper, however, is about a victim who has no memory of his previous existence but is bent on killing a total stranger whom he encounters entirely by accident. In fact, they were enemies in their previous lives. As is only to be expected, divine justice caught up with the murderer,

although no one could figure out the truth. The retribution is more straightforward but the events even stranger. Lend me your ears!

Our story takes place in the Zhenyuan reign period [785–804] of the Tang dynasty. North of the Yellow River, there lived a Mr. Li who had more than average physical strength from the time he was a child. Of an impulsive nature, he was a lover of martial arts. He defied conventional decorum and was in the habit of riding horses and practicing swordsmanship with groups of young ne'er-do-wells. In the evenings, they frequented the paths of the Taihang Mountains, engaging in activities of a questionable nature. (MC: *It's not hard to imagine what activities they might be.*) Later, his family circumstances suddenly improved. (MC: *This is karma at work.*) He thoroughly mended his ways and forced himself to labor at his studies. He came to be something of a poet and built a name for himself as a man of good character. He obtained an official post in the region and advanced through the ranks until he became the administrative supervisor of Shenzhou [in present-day Hebei]. He greatly impressed the prefect of Shenzhou with his prepossessing looks and graceful deportment, his conversational abilities, his sense of humor, his professional knowledge, and his integrity, prudence, and efficiency at work. He also knew the ins and outs of *ju* football, chess, and other board games. With his enormous capacity for wine and his good table manners, his absence from any feast was a damper on the spirits of the company. The prefect was so fond of him that he could not do without Mr. Li for even one moment.

At that time, the regional military commander of Chengde, Wang Wujun, was emboldened by his meritorious service to the imperial court in joining forces with Li Baozhen and suppressing the rebellion [782–84] of Zhu Tao, and, with his well-equipped and powerful army, defied law and order. All the prefects in his jurisdiction stood in fear of his harsh commands. He appointed his son Wang Shizhen to be vice commissioner-in-chief. An arrogant young man made even more presumptuous by his father's power and influence, Wang Shizhen was as much a monster as his father, capable of killing a man without even batting an eye.

One day, his father sent him on an inspection tour of the subordinate prefectures. Verily, his procession

*Shook the sky and the earth like lightning and thunder.
Water changed to ice, and hills moved out of his way.*

*Rivers and mountains trembled; grass and trees cowered;
Tigers and leopards vanished; dogs and chickens grieved.*

After inspecting other prefectures, Wang Shizhen headed for Shenzhou. Out of fear of Wang Wujun, the father, the prefect was determined to cultivate the favor of the son and play up to him. So the prefect sought detailed information in advance from prefectures that Wang Shizhen had just visited, to learn about how the inspections went, what the young man liked and disliked, and what he did on the tours. On hearing that the young man was made unhappy at the feast table by things said and done against his taboos and by the hosts' lack of obsequiousness (MC: *Maybe his hosts were even more unhappy.*), the prefect pulled out all the stops to prepare a grand banquet complete with the finest meats, wine, dishes, and music. His wife and daughters served as chefs, and he himself saw to the setting of the banquet table. After everything was ready for the vice commissioner-in-chief's arrival, a messenger came to announce that the vanguard of the procession was already approaching. Behold:

*The banners block the sun;
The drums shake the sky.
The blood-stained battleaxes gleam;
The lances with their iron balls reek of brain matter.
The chains rattle, ready for luckless victims;
The copper bells ring, scaring even the reckless.
Grass dies out under their merciless tread;
Fear strikes the souls of those asleep.*

Upon Shizhen's arrival, the prefect went all the way to the outskirts of the city to greet him and installed him in a grand mansion. Without a moment's delay, the feast was laid out and the gifts were carried into the hall. Afraid that other people might offend the young man, the prefect himself danced attendance on the guests. No subordinate or friend of his was invited. Shizhen was impressed by the sumptuousness of the banquet, the lavishness of the gifts, the humility and courtesy of the prefect, and the absence of ill-chosen fellow diners. Jubilantly, he commented that none of the prefectures he had just inspected measured up to this one. Darkness fell, but the feast showed no sign of coming to an end.

For all his high-and-mighty airs, Shiyun was still a young man brimming over with high spirits. Having spent so much time at the dinner table with

no other companion than the fawning prefect voicing agreement with everything he said, he was pleased but also a little bored. (MC: *It could not have been other than boring!*) So he said to the prefect, "I'm grateful to you for your lavish hospitality, and I do intend to enjoy myself to the full this evening. However, it seems that we're not having enough fun, with only the two of us toasting each other. I wish I could have a few more drinking companions, to add to the fun." (MC: *A tyrannical man like him also finds delight in wine.*)

The prefect replied, "This prefecture is an obscure backwater of the empire with very few people who are anybody at all. Besides, your name inspires such awe that I'm afraid people might say the wrong things. So I didn't dare bring in other guests to serve as your companions."

Shizhen objected, "What harm could there be? We'll only be drinking and having fun! And yours is a famous prefecture. How can there be no worthy guests to invite? Bring some in, so as to add to the fun, and let's enjoy ourselves to the full! Otherwise, with too few drinking companions, we won't get full satisfaction from even the finest feast."

The prefect acknowledged the good sense in what he said and thought, "I can't invite just anyone. Those with no manners will only do me a disservice. (MC: *If only he had invited anyone but Mr. Li!*) It was all I could do to make him so happy. I shouldn't bring in someone who won't humor him and causes trouble. Only Administrative Supervisor Li, with his dashing looks, graceful manner, prudence, knowledge of drama and art, and large capacity for wine, fits the bill and won't cause me any worry. I'll invite no second guest." After reflecting for a while, he said to Shizhen, "There's indeed a shortage of men worthy of sharing a table with you. There's only Administrative Supervisor Li, who can hold his drink and is full of good cheer. He also has a good sense of humor and knows all there is to know about the various arts. I can summon him and give him a seat at the table to add to your enjoyment. May I go ahead? I wouldn't presume to make the decision on my own. Please advise."

"Anyone you recommend must be worthy. Bring him in!"

The prefect immediately ordered an attendant to bring Mr. Li to the banquet.

Dear audience, if this storyteller had been a neighbor of Mr. Li's in Shenzhou and had the skills of a fortune-teller, I would have grasped him around the middle or seized him by the front of his clothes and stopped him from partaking of such a meal, so fraught with dangers, just like the feasts offered by the treacherous Empress Lü-shi.⁴

On receiving the invitation, Mr. Li felt slightly confused, as if he had fallen into a trance. But it was an order that came from the vice commissioner and the prefect. It was a favor. How could he dare disobey? Little did he know that

*Like a pig or sheep on its way to the butcher's,
With each step he went nearer to his death.*

Storyteller, you are quite mistaken! He was invited just to serve as a drinking companion, something very much in his line. Was it possible for him to give verbal offense and land himself in trouble?

Dear audience, please get this: If he should give Mr. Wang verbal offense and land himself in trouble, there would have been no element of surprise. The outrageous thing was that he died without having said one word. You will know soon enough if you let me go on.

And so, Administrative Supervisor Li arrived in the hall, as ordered, and bowed in greeting to Shizhen. The next moment, as Mr. Li raised his head, Shizhen flew into a rage. (MC: *It's so sudden!*) Since Li was already there, he was offered a seat, as could hardly be expected otherwise. Mr. Li forced himself to sit down. In great trepidation, he grew even more deferential and timid in his manner. The more Shizhen looked at him, the more he found the man repugnant. He balled up his fists and rolled up his sleeves, and his eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. His smiles gone, he kept silent and looked as if he had pent-up anger that was ready to burst out on the slightest pretext. In short, Shizhen was now a completely changed man, to the prefect's consternation.

Not knowing what to do or what had caused this change, the prefect stole glances at Mr. Li, only to see the latter turning deathly pale and breaking into a sweat. Trembling all over, Mr. Li had trouble holding on to his seat. Even the cup and saucer in his hands shook and looked like they were about to drop to the floor. How the prefect wished he could get into Mr. Li's body and say something funny (MC: *The situation between Mr. Wang and Mr. Li is quite interesting but also quite hard on the prefect.*), and yet, one looked as if driven by unseen demons and spirits, and the other as if he had lost his soul. Mr. Li's usual poise and humor had fled to the faraway kingdom of Java. He seemed to have no more life in him than a clay or wooden statue, except that he kept trembling. (MC: *Good description.*)

All the attendants in the hall were panic-stricken. Not daring to utter one word, they observed the two men out of the corners of their eyes. Before

long, Shizhen's patience ran out. "Guards!" he cried out. As the guards around him roared in acknowledgment, Shizhen ordered them to seize Administrative Supervisor Li. Like eagles swooping on a sparrow, the guards seized Mr. Li and awaited further orders.

"Take him to the county jail!" said Shizhen.

The guards grabbed Mr. Li by his clothes, took him to the jailhouse, and then returned to give their report. Shizhen snorted twice (MC: *Why doesn't he kill Mr. Li at this point? Because the operations of karma have not yet been brought to light.*) and, growing cheerful again, resumed drinking. Since he gave no explanations for his actions, the prefect did not venture to ask for any and continued to offer his toasts until the drinking stopped. By this time, night had given way to daybreak.

The prefect was frightened out of his senses by what had happened. He was also afraid that his own position could be in jeopardy because he had given displeasure to Wang Shizhen. But he had no clue as to how Mr. Li could have offended the vice commissioner in any way. (MC: *Truly surprising.*) Very much baffled, he summoned his attendants and questioned them one by one. "You were watching closely, weren't you? What telltale signs did you see?"

They invariably answered, "Administrative Supervisor Li never even said a word. How could he have given offense? We were all wondering about this, but we had no idea why he was so frightened and lost control of his shaking body."

"This being the way things are," said the prefect, "I'll have to ask Mr. Li himself. Maybe he knows how he gave offense and therefore was so quick to panic." Having said that, he quietly ordered a trusted attendant to go to the jailhouse and deliver a message from him.

Once in the jailhouse, the attendant asked Mr. Li, "Yesterday, you, sir, were all respect to the vice commissioner, and you never even said a word. So you couldn't have offended him in any way. Why was he so angry as to send you to jail? Do you know?"

Mr. Li just kept weeping and shaking his head but refrained from saying anything. As mystified as ever, the attendant went back and reported to the prefect, "Mr. Li said nothing but only kept weeping."

The prefect was all the more intrigued. He wondered to himself, "He's such a detail-oriented and capable man. What could have made him lose his good sense to such a degree? I'm baffled." Left with no choice, he went to the jailhouse himself to question Li.

The sight of the prefect reminded Mr. Li of the many kindnesses the prefect had done him, and he broke down in louder sobs. The prefect hastened to ask him why. After a prolonged silence, Mr. Li wiped his eyes dry and replied with a sigh, "I thank you, sir, for your concern. I do have something preying on my mind, and I'm not going to hide it from you any longer. I've heard Buddhist believers talk about retribution in the sinner's own lifetime. I always dismissed that as a lie, but now I know better."

"What *do* you know?"

"Please don't be alarmed as I tell you everything. I was poor in my youth, so poor that I couldn't afford to pay for my own food and clothing. But I was strong, so I spent a lot of time with swordsmen and committed robbery to supplement my income. I often carried a bow and rode my horse in the Taihang Mountains and covered about a hundred *li* a day. When I ran into lone travelers, I'd rob them of their possessions before returning home. One day, I ran into a youth. With a leather whip in hand, he was driving a donkey laden with two large bags that looked heavy. I followed him to a mountain pass flanked by tall cliffs. It was getting dark, and there was no one around. So I gave him a mighty push over the cliff. I don't know if he died or survived because I drove the donkey home in all haste. Then I opened the bags and found more than a hundred bolts of silk, which went a long way toward improving my family circumstances. I did some soul-searching and repented of my wrongdoings, so I threw away my weapons, closed my door, and devoted myself to my studies. I never reverted to my old evil ways again. Then I obtained an official post and rose to my present position. Twenty-seven years have gone by since then. (MC: *To his credit, he repents quickly. Even so, his sins come back to haunt him. Imagine what happens to those who do not even repent!*)

"Yesterday, when I received your invitation to the banquet in honor of Mr. Wang, I felt nervous and jumpy without knowing why. Then I persuaded myself that nothing would happen, and I wouldn't have declined the invitation anyway. Upon my arrival, I saw by the light in the banquet room that Mr. Wang was the very image of the youth I'd pushed over the cliff. After I bowed in greeting, I was shocked out of my senses. I knew that the operations of karma had caught up with me. My time is up. I need only stretch out my neck and wait for the sword. What else is there to say? You're so good to me that I can't bring myself to hide anything from you. Now that I have nowhere to escape to, may I ask that you not leave my dead body unburied? That's all I wish for." Having said that, he burst into sobs.

The prefect was also involuntarily saddened. He wanted to be of help, but there was nothing he could do. Then he thought, "Since this is a matter of karma, I'm afraid he won't get away with it." Not sure what to believe, he decided to wait and see.

The prefect then sent servants to check on the vice commissioner and report back to him on whether Mr. Wang had risen from bed and, in fact, to report everything about Mr. Wang that they could find out while waiting on him. As if he was in possession of some dark secret, the prefect wondered what Mr. Wang could have up his sleeve. (MC: *The prefect is unnecessarily anxious about the retribution that will be rightly and inevitably visited upon Mr. Li.*) Indulging in wishful thinking on Mr. Li's behalf, he said, "How nice it will be if Mr. Wang wakes up from his wine-induced sleep and forgets about the whole thing!" (IC: *He is indeed Mr. Li's devoted friend.*)

A moment later, a servant came to report that the vice commissioner had awakened and summoned his guards to his room, but nothing was known about his orders to them. The prefect told the servant to go back and find out more. On rising from bed, Shizhen said, "That man, Li something, from last night—where is he now?"

His guards replied, "You sent him to the county jailhouse, sir."

His temper rising, Shizhen said, "Is that scoundrel still around? Off with his head! Now!"

Losing no time, the guards went to report this to the prefect, but in fact, the prefect had already been informed by his own servants. With all the color draining from his face, the prefect said, appalled, "Even though this is in his karma, I shouldn't have recommended him yesterday. I ruined him!" His heart ached, but he could do nothing more than let the guards go to the jailhouse and behead Administrative Supervisor Li. Truly,

*When King Yama wants you dead at midnight,⁵
You will not live to see the light of day.*

Mr. Li lived the life of a celebrity but died a violent death. When the guards presented Mr. Li's head to Shizhen for verification, the latter examined it closely and burst out in laughter. (MC: *Even though this is a case of retribution, this vice commissioner of the Tang dynasty is too vicious.*) He thundered, "Take it away!"

After Shizhen had done his hair and washed, the prefect entered for a visit. For all the turmoil in his mind, he put on an air of unconcern and

invited Shizhen to his home for dinner. All the more ingratiating as the host this time around, he greatly pleased Shizhen, and the atmosphere grew even more cordial than last time. Several times the prefect wanted to ask him questions, but he hesitated each time and dared not speak up. It was when he thought Shizhen was in his sunniest mood that he rose to his feet and said apologetically, "I venture to ask for enlightenment on one thing, but you must first forgive me before I dare to broach the matter."

"You've been such a good host, and we get along so well. Please say anything that's on your mind. Don't worry!"

"My unworthiness notwithstanding, I was lucky enough to be appointed an official with governance of a prefecture. You, sir, in your inspection of my work, have been so gracious that I received no censure from you, and this is kindness as boundless as the sky and the earth. During yesterday's banquet, you wanted me to bring in other guests to serve as our drinking companions. This being a small, backwater prefecture, there's indeed no one worthy of sharing a table with you. In my foolishness, I summoned Mr. Li because he had a good capacity for wine. To my disappointment, Li the idiot knew nothing of proper decorum and offended you. This is in fact a major trespass on my part. Since you've already executed him, as befits his crime, this need not be gone into further. But I never knew that he was such a despicable man. May I venture to ask what he was guilty of? Please enlighten me as to the wrongs he did, so that I'll be able to offer better advice about the proper decorum to observe when serving one's superiors in the future, so as to avoid mistakes. I'll be ever so grateful to you." (MC: *The prefect has a way with words.*)

Shizhen said cheerfully, "Li wasn't guilty of any offense. It was just that the very sight of him made me want to kill him. Now that he's dead and gone, I feel very much relieved, but I have no idea why. Now, you put your mind at rest and go on drinking. Let's not mention him ever again!"

After the feast was over, Shizhen gratefully took his leave and went to another prefecture. The only thing he accomplished on this mission was doing away with Administrative Supervisor Li.

With Wang Shizhen gone, the prefect felt as if a heavy burden had been taken off his back, but, sadly, he had unnecessarily caused the death of Mr. Li and there was no one to whom he could pour out his woes. Recalling what he had heard from Mr. Li in jail, he secretly asked about Wang Shizhen's age and learned that he was exactly twenty-seven years old. (MC: *How frightening!*) By now, he was sure that Wang Shizhen had been born to the Wang family

in the very same year that the youth was pushed to his death in the Taihang Mountains. Indeed, as they say, fated enemies are bound to run into each other on a narrow road. Now that one life had been taken in repayment for another, Mr. Li was the only one in the know. The one demanding repayment was in the dark, not to mention those watching from the sidelines. Heaving sigh upon sigh at these strange events, the prefect knew no peace of mind, sitting or lying down. After several days elapsed in like manner, he gave Mr. Li's body an elaborate funeral, using his own money in honor of his friendship with Li and also in atonement for his role in Li's death. Henceforth, he often used this story to illustrate the laws of karma and exhort people never to engage in evil deeds. There is a poem in testimony:

*The injustice was done in a previous life,
But he killed his nemesis on first sight.
Though in a new body, the dead still sought revenge;
Imagine what can happen to those who are alive!*

Priest He Commits Fornication via Black Magic

Registrar Zhou Wipes Out Rebels via Fornication

As the poem says,

*Divine mandates are never just for show;
Black magic must not be allowed to spread.
Zhang Jiao of the Yellow Turbans rebelled in vain;¹
When did he ever manage to ascend the throne?*

Here begins our story: In the Qianfu reign period [874–79] of the Tang dynasty, there lived in a mountain village in Tongchi County, Shangdang [in present-day Shanxi] a man by the name of Hou Yuan, who eked out a poor existence by selling firewood. One day in the cyclical year of *jihai* [879], he took a rest at the mouth of a valley on his way back from cutting firewood in the hills in the northwest of the county. Facing a huge rock the size of several rooms, he lamented, “Mine is such an unhappy lot!” Even as he sighed, the rock cracked open to reveal a cave, and out of the cave emerged a hoary-haired old man with a cane, wearing a Daoist robe and a black hat.

Astounded, Hou Yuan quickly rose and bowed deeply. The old man said, “I’m a divine being. Why indulge in such self-pity? You can become rich if you learn my magic. Follow me.”

As the old man went back into the cave, Hou Yuan followed on his heels. After tens of paces, Hou Yuan suddenly found himself in the midst of scenic splendor, with bamboo and pine trees and exotic flowers and plants stretching into the distance. The old man took Hou Yuan past green balustrades, vermilion doors, towers, and pavilions and into a small gazebo in a courtyard, where two page boys served him a meal. The meal over, he was led to a lounge, where he was given a bath and new clothes. Arrayed in proper attire, complete with a hat and a waistband, he was ushered back into the gazebo.

The old man had the page boys spread a mat on the ground and told Hou Yuan to kneel on it. The old man then proceeded to impart to him secret formulas consisting of tens of thousands of characters, formulas that taught ways of metamorphoses and body concealment. Hou Yuan was a man of very limited intelligence, but he was able to remember all the formulas after hearing them only once. The old man cautioned him, "You do have a small share of fortune in your life, and you're due for a rise in status thanks to my wonderful magic. However, your physiognomy tells me that your ill luck has yet to run out, so you need to exercise caution. If you engage in reprehensible activities, you'll land yourself in calamity and meet your death. (MC: *If he is going to fail anyway, why teach the formulas to him? Don't tell me there's no escape from fate!*) Now go home and practice what I taught you. If you want to see me, just knock on this rock in good faith. Someone will surely answer your knock, and we'll meet again."

Hou Yuan bowed his thanks and was ready to leave. The old man had one of the page boys escort him out of the cave. Once outside, he saw that the cave had changed back into a huge rock. His load of firewood and his tools had all disappeared.

Upon his return home, his parents and brothers said in joyful surprise, "You've been away for more than a year. We thought you must have been killed by some tiger or wolf. Luckily, you're still alive!" In fact, Hou Yuan thought he had spent only one day in the cave.

Surprised by his elegant clothes and high spirits, they kept asking him probing questions. Knowing he would not be able to conceal the facts from them, he told them everything. Then he went into a secluded room and practiced what the old man had imparted to him until he achieved proficiency. Before a month was out, he had become an accomplished magician, capable of transforming all objects and summoning ghosts and spirits. His incantations aimed at plants, trees, soil, and rocks changed them into foot soldiers,

cavalrymen, and armored fighters. With such magic powers, his fame spread far and wide, and he developed a large following. With some of the young and fearless men in the community serving as officers and soldiers, marching with banners amid the fanfare of pipes and drums, Hou Yuan was not unlike the prince of a small kingdom, and he called himself “the Sage.” He established titles such as the Three Elders, the Left and the Right Aides, and the Left and the Right Generals.

Every first and fifteenth day of the month, he decked himself out to pay his respects to the divine being of the rock, and each time, the divine being cautioned, “Be sure not to raise an army in rebellion. (MC: *He cannot but rebel.*) If you want to act, you must wait until Heaven approves.” Each time, Hou Yuan meekly mumbled his assent.

By the cyclical year of *gengzi* [880], the number of his troops reached into the thousands. Afraid that Hou Yuan’s sorcery might give rise to trouble, the county magistrate gave a report on the situation to the regional commander of Shangdang, Mr. Gao. In his turn, Commander Gao ordered a crackdown by the Luzhou garrison. On learning the news, Hou Yuan went to the divine being of the cave to seek his counsel. The divine being said, “As I’ve told you before, you’d do well to keep a low profile. They won’t attack if they see that we have no intention of making enemies of them. Let this not be forgotten: Do not engage them in battle!”

Hou Yuan mouthed words of agreement, but inwardly he was not convinced. He thought, “I have more than enough prowess to bring them to their knees. What’s more, this being the first time around, the government will be dispatching only a minor contingent. If I can’t fight them off this time, how am I going to deal with mightier armies in the future? Besides, if I show weakness, my men will refuse to follow my orders. How am I going to hold on to my authority?”

After he returned from the cave, he brushed aside the divine being’s advice and ordered his men to get ready for battle. That evening, the government troops pitched camp at a strategic vantage point thirty *li* from Hou Yuan’s base. As a result of Hou Yuan’s black magic, the government soldiers were intimidated by the sight of infantry and cavalrymen all over the mountain. The next day, as the government army advanced in phalanxes, Hou Yuan led more than a thousand men and charged into the phalanxes, cutting right through them. As the government troops began to retreat, Hou Yuan, believing himself invincible with his black magic, ordered that wine be served to his men in order to further boost their morale. As it turned out,

since his fighters were but a ragtag band of undisciplined men, they got rowdy after a drink or two, and the government troops took advantage of the disorder to come after them. All his men ran helter-skelter in every direction. Hou Yuan was the only one who stayed where he was. In his inebriated state, his incantation stuck in his throat, and he was captured and marched to Shangdang. There, clapped into a heavy cangue, he was packed off to the Luzhou prefectural jailhouse and put under a high-security watch.

The next morning, the guards saw only a lamp stand in the cangue. Hou Yuan was nowhere to be seen. In fact, he had gone to Tongdi County under cover of night, to apologize to the divine being of the rock. In a rage, the divine being lashed out at him, saying, "You're hopeless! You ignored my advice. You may have been spared this time, but the law will eventually catch up with you! You're no disciple of mine!" Having said that, he went back into the cave in a huff. The gate of the cave closed behind him and changed back into a rock.

Remorse seized hold of Hou Yuan. (MC: *Not thoroughly enough.*) In all sincerity, he knocked at the rock again, but to no avail. Henceforth, Hou Yuan began to forget the incantations he had learned. Even those that he still remembered did not work well. But his men, knowing nothing of what had happened, still clung to him and looked up to him as their master. Emboldened by the large number of his followers, he led them in pillaging Bingzhou Prefecture that autumn. However, his number was up. Troops from the Bingzhou garrison happened to pass by and, being informed of the situation, laid siege to Hou Yuan's men. In desperation, Hou Yuan intoned what spells and incantations he still knew, but none worked. He was killed right there on the battlefield, and his followers dispersed every which way. By refusing to heed a divine being's admonitions, he came to no good end.

Clearly, rebellion is censured by Heaven. Those who employed Daoist magic in the service of the imperial court, as did Zhang Liang and Lu Jia, naturally won distinction and acquired undying fame.² None of those who resorted to black magic in armed rebellions with hidden agendas of their own have ever succeeded. Zhang Jiao, Zheng Ce, Zheng Er, Sun En, and Lu Xun did acquire their books on warfare and their black magic from divine beings, but they all ended in defeat.³ Therefore, *Quelling the Demons' Revolt* tells about warnings against rebellions, warnings that were contained in divine instructions left in White Ape Cave.⁴

To come back to Hou Yuan: If he had followed the instructions of the divine being, he would have made something of himself. But as it turned

out, he suffered consequences of his own making. All this is as clear as day, and yet, in these times of peace and order, there are still imbeciles who join the White Lotus Society, incite riots everywhere, and die without regrets. Why? I now propose to tell a story about a woman who, inspired by some demonic verses, rebelled and got herself killed. Lend me your ears! There is a poem in testimony:

*Skilled in martial arts, she caused her husband's death;
Still, she acquired divine verses and rebelled.
For wreaking havoc in Qingzhou, she was killed.
Woe may be hidden in weal; you never can tell.*

Our story is about a woman named Tang Sai'er who lived in the Yongle reign period [1403–24] of this dynasty [Ming] in Laiyang County of Qingzhou Prefecture, Shandong. Her mother conceived her after she had a dream in which, following a god's order, she swallowed a magic pill from a gold box that the god offered to her. (MC: *Therein lies the root of her karma.*) Sensible and bright from her earliest years, Sai'er was given a good education, and she grew to be quite a beauty. She took delight in playing with paper-cut horsemen at battle. On reaching marriageable age, she wedded Wang Yuanchun of Shilin Street in the same town. Wang Yuanchun was skilled in horsemanship, archery, and the martial arts and was endowed with a sizable family fortune. After he married Sai'er, he began to wallow in the pleasures of the flesh and spent all his time drinking and indulging in frivolities. From time to time, he gave Sai'er lessons in archery and swordsmanship, and Sai'er gladly practiced what she learned. (MC: *Beginning to show her stuff.*) Time flew by. Before they knew it, five or six years had elapsed. Having spent freely, they now found themselves in greatly reduced circumstances and could barely afford adequate food and clothing.

One day, Sai'er said to her husband, "Rather than suffering from hunger, we'd better sell the pear orchard in the back, buy a good horse, and start a lucrative business. (MC: *This is when she makes up her mind to be a bandit.*) Wouldn't that be nice?"

On hearing this, Wang Yuanchun said, "My good wife, why didn't you say so earlier? But it's now too late in the day to go into action." The next day, Wang Yuanchun rose bright and early, wrote out a bill of sale, and, with a certain Li as the go-between, sold the pear orchard to Jia Bao, a rich man in the

neighborhood, for more than twenty taels of silver. Then Wang Yuanchun went to the Qingzhou market and bought a fast horse. As for bows, arrows, and daggers, he did not have to buy any, since he was already in possession of these items. On a chosen auspicious day (MC: *It may not be that auspicious.*), Yuanchun put on the uniform of an arresting officer and bade good-bye to Sai'er, saying, "I'll be back soon enough."

"Take care!" said Sai'er.

"Off I go!" He leaped onto his horse and gave it a stroke of the whip, and the horse galloped off like a puff of smoke. He did not stop until he came to a grove of wild jujube trees behind the Langya Mountains. With only one path through the middle, he could easily block a traveler's way unless his victim could take to the air. So he thought he had found a good spot for relieving travelers of their possessions. Little did he know that those who were attracted to this shortcut were not law-abiding people, definitely not the kind resigned to being robbery victims. Yuanchun's fate was against him, for he ran into exactly such a group of travelers. At the sight of the travelers' enticingly heavy bags, he said to himself, "I'm in luck!" He spurred his horse on and rode with the speed of the wind all around the group. Once assured that the coast was clear, he stretched his bow and let fly an arrow.

Among the group of travelers was a man called Meng De. Alarmed by the sight of Yuanchun riding around his group, he took precautions, and at this point, he raised his bow and knocked the flying arrow to the ground. Seeing his arrow miss its target, Yuanchun reined in his horse and let fly a second arrow. As before, Meng De intercepted it, shouting, "My good man! Allow me to return the courtesy!" So saying, he stretched his bow but did not release his arrow.

On hearing the twanging sound of Meng De's bowstring without seeing a flying arrow, Wang Yuanchun thought, "That idiot doesn't know how to use his bow. He's just bluffing." Lowering his guard until he was only half on alert, he slowly approached Meng De on his horse. Again, Meng De made a feint of stretching his bow and shouted, "Take this!" But as before, no arrow flew. (MC: *This is an old trick of the outlaws. On his first try, Yuanchun falls into the trap.*)

Seeing no arrow coming at him, Wang Yuanchun was convinced that the idiot did not know the first thing about archery. Putting his mind at rest, he charged at Meng De. Little did he know that while pretending to stretch his bow, Meng De had taken the opportunity to load an arrow and now let it fly straight at Yuanchun's face. (MC: *Wonderful.*)

In less time than it takes to describe in words, Yuanchun was raising his head to look when the arrow hit his forehead and went through his head. As he tumbled off his horse, Meng De ran up to him, drew his sword, and stabbed him repeatedly in the throat. All too obviously, it was all over with Yuanchun. As the poem says,

*Where the sword gleams, mourn the flowing water!
Where the arrow flies, lament the fallen flower!
He wants to send a message to his wife,
But how is his soul to find its way home?*

Meng De said to his five or six fellow travelers, "That idiot must have been new to the profession and didn't make it the first time around. Let's go and not lose any more time." And so they went on with their journey.

In the meantime, Tang Sai'er was waiting anxiously for her husband's return. When night was closing in and there was still no sign of him, she said to herself, "Something must have happened to him. He should have returned by now. Or maybe it's just that he needs more time with his first job. But he makes me worry so much!" Toward midnight, when there was still no sign of him, she resignedly closed the gate, entered her room, and went to bed fully clothed, but sleep just did not come to her. When daybreak came and he still did not show up, Sai'er began to feel a wave of panic. At a loss as to what to do, she heard neighbors saying, "A police officer was murdered in a clump of wild jujube trees."

In consternation, Sai'er went next door and told tofu peddler Shen Yinshi and his wife everything she knew. Old man Shen said, "You mustn't tell the truth to anyone else. Your husband was from a good family. He never did such things, and there's no evidence against him. You just say that because you had no means of livelihood, your husband sold your pear orchard the other day, bought a horse with the money, and went to the Qingzhou marketplace to sell it, and that he had only five or six mace of travel money with him, nothing more. But you need to go to the woods to identify his body before you go see the county magistrate."

Thereupon, Sai'er went with Shen Yinshi to the clump of wild jujube trees. At the sight of Wang Yuanchun's corpse, Sai'er burst into sobs. The commotion caught the attention of the local headmen, who came to the scene, and after hearing Sai'er out, they took her to see the magistrate of Laiyang County, Mr. Shi.

After Sai'er repeated her story, Magistrate Shi said, "Your husband must have been robbed of his money and his horse. You may go now to take care of your husband's burial. I'll have the police hunt down the robbers. As soon as they're brought to justice, the horse and money will be returned to you."

Sai'er and the local headmen bowed their thanks to Magistrate Shi and went their separate ways. On returning home, she said to old Mr. and Mrs. Shen, "Thanks to your advice, the magistrate bought my story, but now what am I going to do about the burial clothes and coffin?"

Old man Shen said, "Since you've already sold your orchard to the Jia family, why don't you mortgage your home to Mr. Jia as well, so as to get a few taels of silver for your husband's burial? He won't turn you down."

At Sai'er's request, Mr. and Mrs. Shen went with her to the Jia residence. After she blubbered out her story, Jia Bao said, his heart going out to the luckless Wang Yuanchun, "You keep your house for now. I'll give you two piculs of rice and five taels of silver. You can return them to me after you sell the house."

With the silver, Sai'er promptly bought a coffin, made some burial clothes, went to the woods to encoffin Wang Yuanchun's corpse, and escorted the coffin to the Wang family graveyard for burial. With the rice from Mr. Jia, she made sacrificial offerings to the deceased. After watching the stonemasons set the stones, she quickly cleaned the place up for her return home. With day giving way to evening, she and the Shens went back the way they had come.

When passing an ancient grave in the midst of a clump of trees, they saw a shaft of white light that, amid the gathering darkness, turned the surrounding area as bright as day. All three of them were violently startled. Mrs. Shen was so shocked that she collapsed and rolled on the ground. Sai'er and Mr. Shen managed to keep their wits about them and went up to that grave. On seeing that the shaft of light was coming from underground, Sai'er drove a bamboo rod into the ground where the shaft was. As she did so, the soil sank as if it were not solid, to reveal a small stone box. By the white light, Sai'er saw a double-edged sword and a suit of armor inside. She told Mr. Shen to take them while she supported Mrs. Shen, and all three of them headed for home. On returning home, she blew a lamp into flame and opened the stone box, only to see nothing but a hand-copied divine book. Mr. and Mrs. Shen, being illiterate, asked, "What can a thing like that do for you?"

Sai'er saw that the cover of the book bore the inscription "Scripture of the Ninth Heaven's Mysteries in the Chaotic World." Next to the title was a poem:

*Tang the empress of the land
Solves the mysteries of the world.
Enjoying nine-ring pills,
Successfully she dominates the palace.*

Although quite literate, Sai'er could not make anything of the poem in the rush of the moment. Mr. and Mrs. Shen, exhausted after the hectic activities of the day, were unable to hold out any longer. So they took leave of Sai'er and went back to their own house to retire for the night. Sai'er also shut her door and went to bed. She had hardly closed her eyes when she dreamed of a Daoist priest who said to her, "The Lord on High ordered me to come here and teach you the secrets of the Ninth Heaven so as to bring succor to all people. (MC: *To bring succor to all people is indeed in accord with heavenly principles. But if this was only to cause her to rise in rebellion and then fail, the heavenly book appeared in vain.*) My destined bond with you is not yet over, so I'm here to help you become empress."

When she woke up, a fragrant breeze was stirring the air, and she retained a clear memory of her dream. The next day, she told Mr. and Mrs. Shen about her dream, sparing no detail, and added, "I got a divine book yesterday and then this dream last night."

"How very strange! This is unbelievable!" exclaimed Mr. Shen.

If the truth be told, coincidences make the world go round. While Sai'er was talking with Mr. Shen, a Daoist priest, He Zhengyin, of Xuanwu Temple, overheard every word as he was intoning the scriptures next door, and an evil thought crossed his mind. In his frequent visits to the neighborhood, he had fallen for Sai'er's good looks, and now he jumped at the opportunity to get his hands on her. Knowing she was friends with the Shens, he deliberately avoided passing the Shens' tofu shop and made a big detour and returned to the temple. He thought, "Isn't it something to be an empress? If I could trick that woman into my arms, I can die without regrets." (MC: *This is the full extent of Priest He's desires. So much for his life's ambitions!*)

That evening, he bought some fine wine and delicacies and shared them with his disciples Dong Tianran and Yao Xuyu and his page boys Meng Jing and Wang Xiaoyu. With his well-lined pockets, Priest He Zhengyin always

affected cleverness and gave himself important airs. So this invitation bewildered his four guests. They said in chorus, "If we can be of any service to Your Reverence, we'll go through hell and high water to repay your kindness!"

After discreetly telling them about his designs on Tang Sai'er, Zhengyin continued, "I need your help with this job. I'll surely take good care of you without fail."

The four of them promised to do his bidding, and they did not part company until they had thoroughly enjoyed the occasion.

The next morning, after doing his hair and washing up, Zhengyin fixed himself up to look like the priest in Sai'er's dream, according to her descriptions. How did he look? As the poem says,

*Ethereal as sparkling autumn water,
Graceful in his blue-ribboned scarf,
He sought not elixir from the gold furnace
But only romance in the Peach Blossom Retreat.*

On reaching Sai'er's door, He Zhengyin coughed significantly and shouted, "Anyone home?"

As a beautiful young woman emerged from the portiere, He Zhengyin saw that it was Sai'er. With a deep bow, he said, "I'm He Zhengyin, priest of Xuanwu Temple. Last night, the Lord on High appeared to me in a dream and said to me, 'A Miss Tang will be the rightful leader of this locality. Your job is to help her. You may go without delay to explain the divine book to her and make her grand plan a success.'"

Partly because these words struck a chord as she recalled her dream, partly because Zhengyin was attired in exactly the same way as the priest of her dream, and partly because she was impressed by his prepossessing exterior and his look of intelligence, she said with delight, "Your Reverence, you do indeed possess divine power. On my way back from a burial the other day, I did find a stone box containing a suit of armor, a double-edged sword, and a divine book that I'm unable to decipher. Please enlighten me, Your Reverence. Let me take you inside and show the book to you." Whereupon she ushered He Zhengyin into the main hall, offered him a seat, and went to ask Mrs. Shen over to keep her company. (MC: *At this point, she was still concerned about proper decorum.*) Then she hurried into the kitchen, made three cups of high-grade tea, and carried them out on a tray.

The sight of her snow-white hands stirred the lust in Zhengyin. "My hostess doesn't have to serve the tea herself!" said he.

"But in my reduced circumstances, my maids have all deserted me, so I have no one to help me."

"If you want page boys, I can give you two of mine. I can also get you an older maidservant to help you out in the inner part of the house." Then, taking note of Mrs. Shen's presence, he thought, "No procuress doesn't love money. If I throw a few taels of silver her way, she'll surely become a loyal servant at my beck and call." He produced a ten-tael ingot of silver and handed it to Sai'er, saying, "This is for Mr. and Mrs. Shen, to get you a maidservant as soon as possible. If this isn't enough, I'll bring more money tomorrow. Just be sure to get a good one. Money isn't an issue."

"No, it's not necessary!" said Sai'er.

"Take it for now," put in Mrs. Shen. "I'll go find one for you."

And so Sai'er took the silver and went inside, where she lit an incense stick for the occasion. Then she took out the divine book and showed it to He Zhengyin. Inscribed in gold in the seal style, it was a divine book of military strategies.

Having once prepared himself for the civil service examinations in his early youth, Zhengyin was something of a scholar. As the meaning of the poem began to dawn on him, he asked, "Do you know what it says, madam?"

"No, I don't," replied Sai'er.

"The first line begins with 'Tang,' your surname. The second and the third lines begin with the initials of your given name. The last line begins with the word 'successfully,' which means you will be successful in your great undertaking."

These comments hit home. Her ambition raising its head, Sai'er said, "Please help me, Your Reverence. I'll never forget you if I succeed."

"That's exactly what I've been hoping for, but you shouldn't have put it like that." Then he went on to say, "The divine book is not to be treated lightly. It can teach how to make sand and stones fly, drive away tigers and leopards, and produce soldiers and horses out of thin air. If you and I practice these skills in the daytime, word will get out. That's not the way to go. And, being a priest, I can't very well come and go during the day. A better option is for me to change into lay clothes and come here to practice at night. (MC: Zhengyin is dead set on coming at night. Practicing the skills is not necessarily what he's after.) I'll return to my temple at daybreak. When we've mastered the skills, we'll have no one to fear!"

Sai'er and Mrs. Shen said in unison, "Your Reverence's advice is most wise."

Already taking a fancy to the man and eager to get started, Sai'er said, "Let's not drag our feet. How about starting no later than tonight?"

"All right. I'll go back to my temple to make preparations and return here by nightfall."

As Sai'er and Mrs. Shen walked him to the door, Sai'er enjoined him again, "I'll be waiting for you. Don't fail me."

On returning to the temple, Zhengyin said to his disciples, "I'm more than halfway there. I'll be able to pull the whole thing off this very evening. Now, Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu, you two dress yourselves as servants, and once you're at her home, be alert and do whatever you think is best under the circumstances." Then he took out about ten taels of loose silver and divided the pieces between the two.

In a burst of joy, the two disciples gathered their things together and went to Sai'er's house. On reaching the door, they cried out, "Anyone home?"

Knowing they must be Zhengyin's men, Sai'er said, "Come in!"

Once in the main hall, they put down their luggage and fell to their knees in front of Sai'er. "Madam, please accept a kowtow from us, Dong Xiao'er and Wang Xiaoyu!"

Pleased by the two young men's humility and good looks, Sai'er said, "Aya! You need not do this. You're sent by His Reverence and therefore no different from members of our family."

She led them to a small room next to the kitchen. The two young men cleaned it up, got their beds ready, picked up a basket and steelyard, and went to the market to buy the usual fare of chicken, goose, fish, pork, fresh fruit, and pastries with their own money. On seeing them return with so much food, Sai'er addressed Tianran, "You are *my* houseguests. How can I let you spend your own money?"

Tianran replied, "It's nothing much. This is what His Reverence told us to do." (MC: *Zhengyin is an experienced adulterer.*) Then they brought in wine and went into the kitchen to prepare a meal. Whenever they needed oil, soy sauce, and firewood, they asked "Madam" for them, but otherwise she did not have to lift a finger.

When the afternoon was far advanced, He Zhengyin changed into lay clothing and a scholar's cap and went to the Shen residence to ask Mr. and Mrs. Shen to go over to Sai'er's place for dinner. Then he gave twenty taels of

silver to Mr. Shen, saying, "I'll need all the help I can get from you two. I'll surely have handsome rewards for you."

Mrs. and Mrs. Shen caught on to his meaning. They thought, "This filthy priest is up to something. He must have taken a fancy to Sai'er and wants us to give him a hand. Earlier in the day, that woman was flirtatious enough, using her charms on him and hardly able to control herself. Even if we don't say yes to him, the two of them will do it on their own while they practice at night. So we might as well do him a favor and make some money out of it." (MC: *Yes, they might as well make some easy money.*)

Out loud, they said to Zhengyin, "Your Reverence, don't you worry! Sai'er has lost her husband, (MC: *Exactly the point!*) and she doesn't have any relatives. We're her closest friends. We'll serve you in any way we can. Just don't forget us." So He Zhengyin made a vow to heaven, assuring them of his sincerity.

When dusk fell, all three of them went to Sai'er's home. After the door was closed and they sat down in the main hall with Sai'er in attendance, Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu set out some refreshments and dishes and warmed some wine. Zhengyin asked Mr. Shen to take the seat for the guest of honor, Mrs. Shen and Sai'er to take the hostesses' seats, and he himself took the seat across from them. Mr. Shen demurred, but Zhengyin urged him, "Please don't decline," whereupon everyone sat down in proper order. Between sips of wine, Mr. and Mrs. Shen took turns singing Priest He's praises while throwing in some lewd comments to arouse Sai'er. (MC: *The twenty taels of silver at work.*) As Sai'er held her peace, Zhengyin thought, "This isn't going badly, but I still need a surefire plan to get where I want to go." Then an idea came to him. In point of fact, He Zhengyin's endowment was of a goodly size. He thought, "If I don't show it to her, how will she be aroused?"

It being the fifteenth or sixteenth night of the lunar month, the moon was shining as bright as day. Priest He said, "What a beautiful moon we're having tonight! Why don't we take a little walk outside?" And so everyone went out into the courtyard and stood in the shadows to view the moon. Seeing his chance, the priest went to a moonlit spot by the fence and, making as if he needed to relieve himself, held his male member with one hand and began to urinate. From her spot in the shadows, Sai'er saw his sizable equipment all too clearly. Having abstained for quite some time since her husband's death, she found herself on fire. How she wished she could snap it up!

Not knowing what further move to make, Priest He stifled his desires and asked all to return to their seats. In the course of the conversation, the two of

them threw each other a significant glance one moment, stole a look at each other the next, and turned aside with a furtive smile from time to time. (MC: *A vivid description of lovers flirting with each other.*) Feigning squeamishness, Priest He pressed his hand against his abdomen and cried, "Oh no!"

Taking the hint, Mr. Shen said, "Since Your Reverence isn't feeling well, let's call it a day. Your Reverence can take a rest here in the hall. We'll come to see you tomorrow." They then said good-bye and departed. So much for them for now.

After walking Mr. and Mrs. Shen out, Sai'er hastily closed the door, offered Priest He a few comforting words, and continued, "I'm off to my bedroom. I'll be back soon."

She went straight to her bedroom, took off her clothes, and climbed into bed, leaving her door open for the priest. Sure enough, Priest He followed closely on her heels, entered her room, and, falling to his knees, said, "Please have pity on this humble priest for giving you offense! I deserve the death sentence!"

Sai'er said with a grin, "You filthy priest! No more of your pretenses at humility! Go bolt the door before coming to talk with me!" (MC: *Why does she make no mention of their practice session and start from there? This goes to show that the affair will not come to a proper end either.*)

Eagerly, Zhengyin bolted the door, shed his clothes, and climbed into bed, calling her "Empress" over and over again. As the poem says,

*With embroidered pillows and mandarin duck quilts,
The bed in the jade tower is a source of joy.
While the lovers' dream lasts tonight,
The silver lamp may not burn for long.*

After cavorting with each other and whispering honeyed words to each other by the pillows, they hated to get out of bed even when it was already broad daylight. (MC: *No practice session took place that night.*) Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu had risen bright and early and prepared water for them to wash their faces with and cooked breakfast. Only then did Zhengyin rise. He dressed, tucked the quilt around Sai'er's shoulders, and told her to sleep some more. As soon as he opened the door, he saw Tianran approaching him, carrying a tray with two bowls of breakfast soup. Zhengyin transferred one of the bowls to the table and, holding the other in his hands, walked to Sai'er's bedside, saying, "Empress, have some soup."

With girlish petulance, she raised her head, swallowed two mouthfuls, and pushed the bowl toward Zhengyin, who also ate a few mouthfuls. At this point, Tianran entered the room, took the bowls away, and closed the door behind him.

"What a good companion!" commented Sai'er. "He's so good at getting things done."

"The cook is my servant, and this one is my trusted disciple. I brought them here expressly to serve you."

"It's quite a job for them!" said Sai'er.

After stalling for a while longer, she also got out of bed, at which point Tianran entered with a washbowl and called out, "Madam, here's water for you to wash your face with."

Sai'er took off the clothes she had thrown over her shoulders, washed her face, and did her hair. Zhengyin also washed up and did his hair. When Tianran asked Sai'er to go to the breakfast table, Zhengyin said, "Bring Mr. and Mrs. Shen in from next door to share the breakfast with us."

And so Mr. and Mrs. Shen came over to eat breakfast with them. Mr. Shen said, "Your Reverence, you'd better not go out. There are too many prying eyes around here. If people see you leave here without having seen you come, they'll get suspicious. Why don't you stay here for one more night? You can leave first thing tomorrow morning."

"Good idea," said Sai'er. And this coincided precisely with Zhengyin's own wishes. Mr. and Mrs. Shen then took their leave and returned home.

Let us skip irrelevant details and speak of the practice of black magic. Every night, Zhengyin came to practice with Sai'er and left at daybreak, and they mastered the skills before two months were out. (MC: *How do they manage to have any surplus energy for the practice sessions?*) Sai'er cut some paper soldiers and horses to try out her skills and was able to change them into what looked like real humans and horses. They bowed in gratitude to heaven and earth and began to talk about rising in rebellion.

Somehow, the neighbors heard about the affair between Sai'er and Priest He. Some troublemakers plotted to hit them up for money. There is a poem about such good-for-nothings:

*Every day they spread nets for fish and shrimp;
They spend all their time on streets of ill repute.
Last night, they got themselves drunk on credit;
Today, they earn tips at the Li Family Brothel.*

The ringleader was Ma Shou. There were also a Fu Xing, a Niu Xiaochun, and a few others. These idlers made a living by looking for trouble on the streets so as to hit people up for money. Ma Shou, believing he was the first one to hear about the affair, said to Fuxing and Niu Xiaochun when he ran into them, "Do you know about the fine thing going on next door to Mr. Shen's tofu shop?"

Fuxing replied, "Yes, we've known about this for several days now."

"Let's catch them in the act!" said Ma Shou. (MC: *An idler getting meddlesome.*) "There's quite a bit of money to be made. What do you say?"

Niu Xiaochun said, "In fact, we were on the point of coming to you for guidance."

"This is indeed a good opportunity, but there's one difficulty: That swine of a priest is no pushover. He's flush with cash, and he has four disciples. Mr. and Mrs. Shen take money from that scoundrel and cover his tracks. With so many accomplices, they'll be hard to catch. If we bungle the job, we'll not only get nothing but also put ourselves in harm's way and make fools of ourselves."

"That's no big deal," said Niu Xiaochun. "We'll just get more people on board."

Ma Shou continued, "That's an idea, but more important, we need a place to stay. As I see it, it would be best if we could stay with Chen Lin, who lives only about ten doors from Tang Sai'er. Little Niu can go now to tell Thrower Shi, Slippery An, Crooked Mouth Chu, and Lazy Zhu to gather at Chen Lin's home tomorrow. I'll go myself to see Chen Lin." And so they went their separate ways.

Let us follow Ma Shou as he went to Shilin Street to see Chen Lin. From afar, he saw Chen Lin standing at his own door. When he drew near Chen Lin, he bowed deeply. Chen Lin hastened to return the courtesy. After inviting Ma Shou into the house and offering him the seat of honor, Chen Lin said, "I haven't seen you for quite some time. Now that you do me such honor, there must be something I can do for you."

Thereupon, Ma Shou apprised him fully of the plan to catch Tang Sai'er in an act of adultery and for their friends to stay at his home.

"No problem!" said Chen Lin. "There's one thing, though. An act of adultery is done under the quilt, and Mr. and Mrs. Shen are helping them out. We can only do our thing outside. How are we going to catch that Priest He? I have an idea. When Wang Yuanchun was alive, he and I were sworn brothers, and our two families were very close. After he died, I went to his funeral. So

tomorrow, I'll have my wife pay Sai'er a visit. If Priest He isn't there, we'll call off the job and wait for another time. If he is there, my wife will give us a signal to go in together. We'll close the front door first so as not to make too much noise and end up giving the credit to someone else. After we catch them, all will be well if they do as we say. If not, we'll march the two of them to the county yamen and accuse them of the crime even if they're innocent. What do you think of my idea?"

"It's wonderful!" said Ma Shou.

They bade each other good-bye. After walking Ma Shou out the door, Chen Lin promptly went back inside to tell his wife, née Qian, about it. Qian-shi said, "I heard everything from behind the screen. You don't need to say another word. I'll surely go tomorrow." Nothing more transpired that night.

The next day, Chen Lin rose and went out to buy two food boxes, one for meats and the other for vegetables. As a matter of precaution, Qian-shi did not go out of her way to dress up for the occasion. At the appointed time, Ma Shou and his cohorts went, one after another, to hole up at Chen Lin's house. Qian-shi, for her part, left the house at Chen Lin's order. That day, Mr. Shen happened to have gone out of town, to collect debts from villagers, and Mrs. Shen was not there either. With a page boy following behind, carrying the food boxes, Qian-shi went straight to Sai'er's house. Since there was no one to stop her, she tiptoed all the way to the bedroom. (MC: *Why didn't they close the gate? Such carelessness is probably due to their confidence in their black magic.*) There, she saw Sai'er and Priest He sitting inside, talking. Sai'er saw Qian-shi before he did. She rushed toward Qian-shi, staggering in her haste, and greeted the intruder. Feigning ignorance of what was going on, Qian-shi also saluted Priest He with a curtsy. The priest quickly returned the greeting.

Blushing furiously, Sai'er pointed to Priest He and said with labored breathing, her tongue dry and her voice hoarse, "This is my consanguineous cousin. He joined the Daoist order early in his childhood and is here today to pay me a visit. To what do I owe the honor of this visit, madam?"

Before the words were quite out of her mouth, the page boy with the load of food boxes entered.

Qian-shi said to Sai'er, "I brought some dates for you, to go with tea." She then told Sai'er to empty the boxes and the page boy to go home. While Sai'er was too busy emptying the boxes to keep an eye on Qian-shi, the latter walked to the door and shot out her lips as a signal to Chen Lin before hastening back inside.

Thereupon, Chen Lin ordered his followers to go into action. They swarmed into the bedroom and bolted the door, ready to pounce on Priest He and Sai'er. Little did they know that the two of them, aided by their newly acquired black magic, had disappeared from view. With their vision blurred, they seized Qian-shi instead and shouted, "Get us ropes! Let's truss up the filthy whore first!" They threw her to the floor without knowing that the woman they had called a whore was Qian-shi. (MC: *Mistaken identities never fail to draw a laugh.*) As a matter of fact, they had seen Qian-shi only once, earlier that morning, and not clearly enough at that.

As Qian-shi screamed, "I'm Chen Lin's wife," a dismayed Chen Lin pushed through the crowd and yelled, "You've got the wrong woman!" By the time he helped her up, she was already a mess, her hair all loose and disheveled.

The men cried out, aghast, "This is impossible! We did see Sai'er and Priest He here. How did they manage to disappear?" In fact, the two of them knew the trick of body concealment. The men had seen no sign of them, but they had been watching the men milling around in a state of confusion, much to their inner amusement. (MC: *If this suffices to amuse them, why rebel?*)

At Niu Xiaochun's suggestion that they search everywhere, the men began to search throughout the house and seized Dong Tianran in the kitchen and Wang Xiaoyu in the firewood room. They tied up the two men with rope and strung them up from the post by the door. "Who are you?" they asked.

Dong Tianran replied, "We're His Reverence's servants."

"Where are the priest and Sai'er hiding? Out with it, now! If you tell the truth, we won't hold anything against you. If not, we'll send you to the yamen and leave you there to be beaten."

"We just work in the kitchen," said Dong Tianran. "Who are we to know what happens elsewhere in the house?"

The men said, "But they have nowhere to go. They must still be hiding in the house."

Little Niu said, "There's a dark attic in one corner of the house. Could they be hiding up there? Let me get a ladder and climb up to take a look."

On hearing that Little Niu was about to climb up to the attic, He Zhengyin picked up a cudgel and hunkered down to wait in the darkness of the attic. Little Niu placed a ladder beneath the attic and climbed up, but before he had gained the third rung, Zhengyin struck him right on his head. Knocked senseless, Little Niu fell from the ladder. As Zhengyin stood watching from

midair, Little Niu came to and cried, "Oh horrors! There's a demon spirit around!" The men raised Little Niu and saw that his face was dripping with blood. (MC: *Comic*.)

"This isn't a tall ladder, and you were only two rungs up. Why are you so badly hurt?"

"Luckily, I had climbed only two rungs," said Little Niu. "I was hit right on the head by a cudgel, but I didn't see anyone. Wasn't that strange?" The men were all equally mystified.

Qian-shi said, "I noticed two paper windows next to the bed, with a vacant space in between. Could there be a hiding place beyond the windows? I can take you there to search."

On hearing this, Zhengyin held his cudgel and waited there, as before. When he saw Qian-shi leading Chen Lin and the other men marching in, he thought, "The cudgel will be too much for that woman." As Qian-shi neared him, he stretched out his large hand, with fingers splayed, and struck her across the face.

"Aya!" screamed Qian-shi. "It's horrible!" Her nose began to bleed profusely, and golden stars danced before her eyes. Luckily, Chen Lin propped her up from behind, so she did not collapse.

"How very strange!" said Chen Lin. "I did see a hand striking her, but I didn't see the owner of the hand. That filthy priest must be a sorcerer. Let's stop wasting our time here and take the two page boys to the county yamen!" (MC: *Words of the older and wiser*.)

His followers said, "Some demon spirit has been playing pranks on us for so long that we're hungry now. Let's cook something and eat before we take them to the authorities."

"Right you are," said Chen Lin.

In spite of her pain, Qian-shi measured out rice and went into the kitchen to prepare a meal. Thrower Shi said, "Little Niu is badly hurt. Let me go cook the meal." In the kitchen, he saw two jars of fine wine by the tea brewer and a few chickens in front of the stove. "Why don't we kill the chickens and cook them?" (MC: *His petty acquisitiveness is going to cost them dearly*.)

When he was about to wash the rice and start cooking, Sai'er said to Zhengyin, "You had your fun with them twice. Let me also have some fun in my gentle way."

"What's a gentle way?"

"Let me show you."

While tending to the fire as Qian-shi was cooking, Thrower Shi killed two chickens, washed them clean, and cooked them in a pot. When the rice was almost done, Sai'er scooped up some ash along with some chicken droppings, stirred the mixture evenly into the rice, and covered the rice pot again. When the chicken pot came to a boil, Sai'er threw a few ladlefuls of water onto the kitchen fire and doused it. Thrower Shi knew nothing about what was happening under the pot as he busied himself with the chores. At this point, some of the men were sitting in the main hall, and some were rummaging in the bedroom for valuables. Thrower Shi carried the two jars of fine wine out of the kitchen, opened the clay seals, and ladled out one bowl for Chen Lin first.

"Why should I be the first to drink?" asked Chen Lin.

"Just take a sip, please," insisted Shi as he offered the bowl to Chen Lin again. This time, Chen Lin took it. Then Thrower Shi ladled out a bowl for Ma Shou.

Addressing Thrower Shi, Chen Lin said, "You drink one bowl yourself."

Thrower Shi ladled out another bowlful of wine and was about to drink from it when Sai'er knocked the bowl from his hands, smashing it. (MC: *Comic*.) As Sai'er moved aside, the three men exclaimed, "How strange! This must be another trick of that filthy priest's. Let's stop drinking and save the wine until everyone else is here."

Since she was invisible to the men, Sai'er went to her room again and took out a chamber pot, emptied half the urine into each jar, and put the lids back on the two jars. None of those present were any the wiser.

"The chickens must be done," said the men. "Let's take them out, cut them up, and enjoy them with the wine."

Thrower Shi raised the lid of the pot and found the two chickens still only about half cooked and the broth not boiling. The other men said reproachfully, "You didn't tend to the fire, which is why the chickens aren't ready yet."

Thrower Shi protested, "I did let the broth boil for a while, and I added a lot of firewood. I didn't leave until the fire was going well. I wonder why the broth stopped boiling." So saying, he bent down to check the fire and found only water in the stove. Even the pilot flame was gone. "Who put the fire out with water?" asked Thrower Shi.

"Can't be one of us!" said the men. "It must be that swine of a priest, up to his tricks again. Let's just take whatever meat there is in the kitchen and cut it into slices to go with the wine!"

After the men sat down in order of precedence, Thrower Shi came in with two flasks, to fill them with wine from the two jars. It would have been all right if he had not done so, but he did, and the jars, once opened, emitted the foul smell of urine.

Chen Lin said, "When the three of us drank from the jars, the wine was fragrant. Why has it turned into this? One of you must have stolen a few drinks from the jars, and then, afraid that we'd notice the difference, you tried to add water and, in your haste, poured in urine instead." A commotion ensued.

Sai'er and Zhengyin abandoned themselves to mirth. Sai'er said to Zhengyin, "Those two who have been tied to the post the whole day must be hungry by now. While the others are still in the hall, let me offer them some refreshments." She also picked up some loose pieces of silver for them. When she reached the post, she whispered into Tianran's ear, "Don't panic. If you're taken to the authorities, just tell the truth. Don't try to deny anything, for you'll only get yourself beaten. I'll come and rescue you. Here's some food and silver for you."

Tianran said, "We'll look to you, ma'am, to save our lives." At this point, Sai'er took her departure.

The men in the hall said, "So the wine is undrinkable. What a let-down! Oh well, let's just grab something to eat and be done with it."

Accordingly, Thrower Shi went into the kitchen to get the rice, but it turned out to be all black and gave out such a stench that it was quite an assault on the nostrils, as it would be on the palate. "This must be another of that evil priest's tricks. That cursed swine has been pushing us around long enough. Let's take those two urine pots to the county yamen! (MC: "*Urine pots*" is quite an original epithet for the two page boys who serve at the priest's pleasure.) The yamen will surely dispatch officers to get the two adulterers." So saying, they opened the gate and went out.

The commotion inside the house having been going on for some time, a crowd of spectators, male and female, old and young, had gathered on the street, eager to watch an operation against adulterers. On seeing two pretty boys, both tied with rope, being marched out of the house and Chen Lin's wife following behind, the spectators thought they were looking at the culprits. They picked up bricks and clods of earth from the ground and, raising mighty shouts, hurled them at Qian-shi and the two page boys. (MC: *Another case of mistaken identity. Funny.*) In the heat of the moment, no word of explanation would work. Qian-shi's head was covered with bumps and

bruises. Once she was extricated from the mob, she showed a clean pair of heels.

The procession left Shilin Street and headed straight for the county yamen. The magistrate happened to be in late session. After the roll call was finished, everyone approached him on bent knees to state the case. They gave a complete account of Mr. Shen's tricks, the adultery between Sai'er and Zhengyin, and how their black magic had wreaked havoc in the area. (MC: *What havoc did they wreak in the area? Didn't the men drive them into a corner? If they wreaked havoc, it was because they were left with no other choice. This is true of most rebels.*) They added, "The two main culprits are at large. We've brought here only the two accessories, Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu."

The magistrate addressed Dong and Wang, "Tell the truth and I won't have you beaten."

Dong Tianran said, "There's no need to beat us. I'll tell the truth and won't hide anything."

After Dong Tianran told the truth, sparing no detail, the magistrate announced to everyone, "The two adulterers must still be hiding at the woman's home." Right away, he ordered the chief arresting officers Lü Shan and Xia Sheng to lead a thousand soldiers, with Chen Lin and his followers in tow, to arrest the main culprits. (MC: *The magistrate is too meddlesome.*) The two page boys were sent to the county jail for the time being.

Day had given way to evening when Lü Shan left the gate of the county yamen, bearing the magistrate's command. Consulting his followers, he said, "I know this is an urgent case, but if we knock at their door at this hour, we'll only put them on alert and let them escape. If so, what are we going to say to the magistrate? A better option is to not alarm them for now but stake out the house and get them tomorrow morning."

"Good idea," conceded everyone.

Chen Lin and his men invited Lü Shan and Xia Sheng to a restaurant that they often patronized, bought some wine and food on credit, and finished their meal before proceeding to Sai'er's house for the stakeout. They did not breathe even a word to Mr. Shen, afraid that he might give them away.

Let us now turn our attention to the priest's other disciple, Yao Xuyu, and his other page boy, Meng Qing.⁵ Having heard rumors about their master's trouble with the law, they went to Sai'er's house for information. Since all the men were now out of sight, Sai'er asked the visitors who they were and, on learning that they were from Zhengyin's temple, let them in and

closed the door. She returned to her room to put things back in order while the page boy went to the kitchen to cook supper. Sai'er said to Zhengyin, "That gang of good-for-nothings went to the county yamen to report us. The yamen will surely dispatch officers to get us. You and I can't just resign ourselves to death. I'm going to make some preparations and move in for the kill when they come, and when they do, woe to the luckless!" Having said that, she started preparing her magic formulas, paper soldiers and horses, banners, and other accessories. That done, she and the priest retired for the night.

The next morning, after they rose, washed, did their hair, and ate breakfast, they told Meng Qing to open the door. The moment he did so, Lü Shan and his followers came charging into the yard. Meng Qing promptly turned on his heel and rushed inside, screaming as he ran along. Chuckling at the sight of officers here to arrest her, Sai'er produced more than twenty paper soldiers and horses, tossed them into the air, and cried, "Change!" Before everyone's eyes, the paper soldiers changed into men of towering build. Lances or swords in hand, they stormed out of the house. As Yao Xuyu waved a small black flag as she had ordered, a streak of black vapor rolled out of her bedroom. The unsuspecting Lü Shan and Xia Sheng were still busily urging their men on, but in a trice, the black vapor engulfed all of them. While the officers were invisible, Sai'er, putting the martial arts she had learned from her deceased husband, Wang Yuanchun, to good use, wielded her sword and chopped off their heads one after another. Appalled by this ugly turn of events, the men turned tail and ran for dear life. Those in the front were able to escape unscathed, but those behind, unable to outrun the ones ahead of them, came to grief. Sai'er said, "I might as well go through with this and finish them off!" So saying, she let herself go and slashed her way forward. Zhengyin also beat quite a few men to death with his cudgel. Then Sai'er gave chase to those who thought they had made it out of harm's way and, raising a mighty war cry, pressed on toward Shilin Bridge.

Seeing that the fleeing men were already far in the distance, Sai'er called off the chase when she reached the bridge. Turning back, she said to Zhengyin, "Those we killed are dead and gone, all right, but those who survived will surely go and report to the magistrate, who will surely raise an army against us. What better time than this to rebel?" (MC: *Sai'er is ruthless but capable.*)

She donned her armor, conjured up two to three hundred horsemen and, raising her seven-star banner high, began to draft new recruits. She had her

men shout, "Those wishing to join the army are welcome to share the county treasury with us!" (MC: *Good recruiting method*.) Residents of the area, far and near, had all heard about how Sai'er had used black magic in the events of the previous day. Now that her ranks had swelled, they were convinced that she was due for a rise in the world. Local people as well as out-of-towners who found themselves in desperate situations came to join her ranks. Four powerful men in the region—Fang Da, Kang Zhao, Ma Xiaoliang, and Dai Deru—took the lead and gathered two to three thousand men behind them. They took two fine horses by force from somewhere and offered them to Sai'er and Zhengyin. With gongs and drums clanging and thumping, they marched belligerently to the county yamen.

On hearing from those who had gotten out that Sai'er had killed many officers, Magistrate Shi immediately called on the docket officer for a consultation, but while they were talking, Sai'er and her men stormed into the yamen and seized the magistrate and the chief of police. Then they opened the treasury and distributed the gold and silver. Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu, as well as all other detainees, were released from the jailhouse. About seventy to eighty men volunteered to join the rebels. By late afternoon, four bandits—Zheng Guan, Wang Xian, Zhang Tianlu, and Zhu Hong—came, bringing more than two thousand underlings and forty or fifty fine horses. Sai'er's heart leaped for joy.

Zheng Guan, a master of martial arts as well as a strategist, said respectfully to Sai'er, "This is a small coastal county in a far-flung corner of the empire. If we stay holed up here, the imperial court will mobilize a mighty army, and they'll block our access to Qingzhou. With no replenishment of funds and provisions, we'll die of starvation without even putting up a fight. Now, the prefectural seat of Qingzhou is a densely populated city with ample funds and provisions. To its south is the strategic town of East Xuzhou, and to its north, it controls access to the Sea of Bohai, so it can serve as a good base from which to launch battles and is quite defensible, too. Speed is crucial in warfare. News of your conquest of Laiyang County won't reach Qingzhou in one day's time. You can take this opportunity to attack the Qingzhou prefectural seat tonight. Thus, we'll be able to stay there for a while and build up our strength before we move on to dominate the region."

"That's a brilliant idea!" said Sai'er. She rewarded all four of them with two ingots of silver and four lengths of fabric each, appointed them commanders, and said, "After Qingzhou is taken, you'll be promoted and assigned to key positions."

Sai'er went to a back room, called out Magistrate Shi and Officer Xu, and said, addressing the magistrate, "Since the prefect is a close relative of yours, why don't you write him a letter for me? Just say that this county is too small for me. I need to go east to take Wenshang County, and the prefectural seat lies on my way. In order to prepare against anything untoward, you'll order Officer Xu to lead three hundred soldiers and help with the defense." (MC: *Sai'er is such a good strategist. Heaven is aiding her.*) If you write this for me, I'll provide you with more than enough travel money and escort you and your whole family back to your hometown."

The magistrate refused at first but then yielded to Sai'er's coercion and wrote the letter. Sai'er had a clerk of the county garrison make this private note into an official document and impress the county seal on the sealing wax. Next, she sent Magistrate Shi and Officer Xu back to the yamen to be put under house arrest. Then she ordered the fierce warriors Fang Da, Kang Zhao, Ma Xiaoliang, and Da Deru to lead three thousand men each and march quietly to Mancao Hill in Qingzhou before the night was out. Their assignment was to wait there for the signal of a cannon shot and then go to the east gate of Qingzhou to provide support. She found a soldier who bore a strong resemblance to Officer Xu, put the latter's official gauze hat and crew-neck robe on him, and told him to await further instructions from her. A group of daredevil men who had recently joined her ranks was ordered to assist Zhengyin in defending Laiyang County. She also personally picked three hundred crack troops and ordered Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu to command Zheng Guan and his three companions. After treating all to wine and food, she donned full armor, mounted her horse, and led her troops on their night march.

When they arrived at the eastern gate of the Qingzhou prefectural seat, the first faint glow of dawn had just begun to light the eastern sky, and the city gate remained closed. Sai'er had one of her men raise the scroll of the official document and shout to the guards on top of the wall, "We're sent by the Laiyang County police to deliver a document!"

Right away, the guards let down a basket. The scroll was deposited in it, and the basket was raised up again. On recognizing Officer Xu, the guards made haste to deliver the scroll to the prefectural yamen, where Wen Zhang, the prefect, was at his desk. The guard carrying the scroll approached the bench on his knees and presented the document. On opening the scroll, the prefect found the seal and the handwriting to be genuine. With not a

suspicion in mind, he said to the guard, "Let Officer Xu come in first. Tell all the other soldiers to stay outside the city gate for the time being."

Thus ordered, the chief guard opened the gate, announcing, "By the prefect's order, only Officer Xu will be let in, but not the others."

One of Sai'er's men replied, at her order, "We've been marching all night. We're hungry. Why can't we go into the city and find something to eat?"

As all three hundred of them forced their way through the gate, the five or six guards could hardly be expected to block their advance. Once they cleared the gate, they replaced the guards with their own men. As a cannon thundered, the men from Mancao Hill poured into the city and filled the streets and alleys. With lightning speed, Sai'er led her three hundred men into the prefectural yamen, where the unsuspecting prefect was still sitting in the hall, waiting for Officer Xu. Seeing that things had taken such an ugly turn, he stood up to go, but Fang Da ran up and slashed the prefect with his sword. Wounded on the shoulder, the prefect fell down. While he was writhing on the floor, Fang Da swung his sword again and beheaded him. The prefect's head in hand, Fang Da roared, "Don't move!" Frightened out of their wits, all the yamen employees fell to their knees. Kang Zhao and his men barged into the prefect's private quarters but were able to seize only two beautiful concubines and three servants and their wives—eight in all. The vice prefect and the assistant prefect had scaled the fence and fled. Sai'er put up a notice to reassure the public and prohibited anyone from taking captives or looting property. She then opened the government granary for the poor and attempted to raise an army. All her followers, regardless of rank, received rewards according to their merit. As she had promised, County Magistrate Shi and Officer Xu of Laiyang were set free along with their families. Terrified, they fled with all the haste they could muster, but of them, no more.

Now, Wang Xian, one of the four commanders, captured two beautiful women and a young man, eighteen or nineteen years of age, who was even more striking in his looks than the two women. As he offered the young man to Sai'er, she asked, "Where did you get them?"

"I got them from the Xiaos' yarn shop on Xiaoshun Street. The older girl is called Chunfang, the younger one, her sister, is called Xixi. The young man, their brother, is called Xiao Shao."

Sai'er gave the older girl to Wang Xian as his wife, by way of rewarding him for his service. Xiao Shao captured her fancy. Wishing to have him for

herself, she said to him, “Your two sisters will be my personal attendants, and I’ll take good care of you.” After assigning the prefect’s beautiful concubines Zilan and Xiangjiao to Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu respectively, she took Xiao Shao to her own quarters to retire for the night. (MC: *Little does she know that this is the root of disaster. This goes to show that lust can kill, and this applies to women as well as men.*) As for Xiao Shao, being in the first flush of youth and a little in awe of her, he tried his very best to play up to her and please her in every way. Radiant with her triumph, Sai’er grew so infatuated with him that she could not bear to be so much as a step away from him. He Zhengyin had completely faded from her thoughts.

Now, in the prefecture, there was a top-level official, head of the registry, by the name of Zhou Xiong. He had fled the yamen while his family members were being kept inside under house arrest. After spending a few days in hiding, he gave up. For the sake of his family, he went to surrender himself to Sai’er, feigning sincerity. (MC: *A remarkable man.*) Bowing deeply to Sai’er, he said, “This humble official used to be head of the county registry. Since you, madam, took over Laiyang County and Qingzhou Prefecture, your love for the troops and civilians has won everyone’s heart. You’ll surely accomplish great things. I’ve decided to forsake darkness for light. Out of gratitude to you for sparing my family members’ lives, I’ll spare no effort to be of service to you.”

Since he claimed to have family members still in the yamen, Sai’er let her guard down halfway, if she had even been on guard to begin with, and consulted Registrar Zhou on matters concerning the defense of the prefecture and plans to capture neighboring counties. Registrar Zhou said, “This prefecture is north of Teng County and south of Linhai Garrison, both serving as gateways to Qingzhou. If you don’t take Teng County and Linhai, it will be as if you’re living in a house with no doors. How will you be able to defend the prefecture? To tell you the truth, Magistrate Xu of Teng County is a cousin of mine. I’ll surely be able to talk him into surrendering. If Teng County is won over, Linhai will surely be as weakened as if it had lost an arm. It won’t be able to hold out.”

“If so, I’ll share all the riches and power with you after we make a success of it,” said Sai’er. “I’ll take good care of your family members here. You needn’t worry.”

“We have no time to lose,” said Registrar Zhou. “Otherwise, he may do something preemptive.”

Promptly, Sai’er gave him a fine horse and several followers to escort him out of the yamen.

And so Registrar Zhou went to Teng County and saw Magistrate Xu. Startled on seeing the registrar, Magistrate Xu asked, "How did you manage to escape and come here?"

After Registrar Zhou told him about feigning sincerity in surrendering to Sai'er and how Sai'er had sent him to talk the magistrate into surrendering, the magistrate said, "You and I may be feigning, but the imperial court will not take the matter lightly."

"Let's talk Commander Dai of the Linhai Garrison into surrendering with us. But in the meantime, we'll report the matter to the pacification commissioners and work out a plan to capture Sai'er. After we take back the territories, we won't be held responsible."

Without a moment's delay, Magistrate Xu sent for Commander Dai. After the three of them reached agreement on a plan to fake surrender, Magistrate Xu said, "Let's prepare some congratulatory gifts of meat and wine and offer them to her but tell her that we must not leave our duty stations, lest something untoward happens." (MC: *Perceptive*.)

When Registrar Zhou led a gift-bearing procession to see Sai'er and presented her with a letter of surrender, Sai'er read the letter, accepted the gifts, and, although she lacked the authority to do so, promoted Magistrate Xu to prefect and Commander Dai to regional commander and ordered them to guard the areas under their jurisdiction, as before.

On seeing notification of his promotion, Commander Dai went to see Magistrate Xu and said, "Sai'er must be suspicious of us. What looks like a promotion is in fact meant to strip us of real power."

"Don't you have a troupe of young entertainers in your garrison?" asked the magistrate. "Why don't you offer them to Sai'er as a thank-you gift? They can work for us on the inside." (MC: *The young entertainers will be quite useful in this secondary role!*)

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Commander Dai. On returning to his yamen, he summoned Wang Jiaolian, a female attendant, and Chen Yin'er, head of the entertainers, and said, "I have great trust in both of you. I'm thinking of sending you to the prefectural yamen to work as spies for me. If my plan works, I'll give you my rewards for you to enjoy."

The two of them were delighted and promised to do his bidding. Commander Dai ordered that many beautiful clothes and musical instruments be prepared. Messengers from the county and the garrison, two from each, escorted the entertainers to Sai'er's residence. How did the young singers and dancers look?

*The dancers' sleeves on fragrant grass herald the spring;
The singers' sweet voices and winsome looks have no equal.
Where swords once flourished, no one is left;
Those wine pourers of old are nowhere to be seen.*

Delighted on seeing how fetching they were and how well decked-out, Sai'er accepted them and kept them in the yamen, where they entertained, played musical instruments, sang, and danced every day.

Sai'er and Zhengyin had been living apart for more than half a year now. When winter was about to give way to spring, Zhengyin bought Sai'er lavish gifts for the lunar new year. He filled about twenty wagons with exotic food items, Sichuan brocade, silk, gold, silver, and precious jewels and put Meng Qing in charge of the procession transporting the goods to Sai'er's yamen. (MC: *By this time, Zhengyin has already lost his place in Sai'er's heart. Even with such lavish gifts, can he bring her back to him?*) His appointment of Meng Qing was a matter of coincidence and of his own fate. Two months earlier, the priest had tried to seduce a woman. The woman rejected his advances and hanged herself. Meng Qing had commented at the time, "Your fortune was made by Madam Tang. You mustn't betray her. If by any chance she gets wind of this, she'll surely be resentful." His vehement remonstration earned him a severe beating that left him more dead than alive. Unbeknownst to Zhengyin, Meng Qing seethed inwardly with hatred.

When Meng Qing arrived at Sai'er's yamen at the head of the procession, Sai'er was as delighted to see him as if he were a member of her own family and asked him to take a rest in the inner section of the yamen. On learning that Dong Tianran and Wang Xiaoyu were now happily married and awash in cash, Meng Qing thought, "I started out with the two of them, and now these lucky two are living it up here. What can I do to join them in their good life?" Then he thought, "Why don't I tell her about Zhengyin's doings in the county? If she likes me, she may keep me here."

After adjourning her court session and returning to her residential quarters in the evening, Sai'er summoned Meng Qing and asked him about Zhengyin. Meng Qing kept silent. Growing apprehensive, Sai'er pressed him for an answer, (MC: *Does she still care?*) but the harder she pressed, the more adamantly he refused to answer. When he could not ward her off any longer, he chose to burst into tears. Sai'er said, "Don't cry! You must have been ill treated somehow. Tell me the truth, and I'll keep you here."

"I'm going to die anyway, whether I tell you or not," said he, deliberately exaggerating the dire consequences. (MC: *Meng Qing is also a most crafty man.*) "In the county, my master has households send two pretty women every night in rotation, to share his bed in the county yamen. The prettier ones are kept for a few days more than the others, and those he fancies less are dismissed after the first night. He also took a singing girl called Li Wenyun as his wife. He often beats people to death when he is badly drunk, and every day he demands a hundred taels of silver as an administrative tax from one neighborhood on a rotational basis. The local people are full of complaints but dare not do anything out of regard for you, madam. Two months ago, my master wanted the beautiful wife of a Student Jiang for his bed. The woman refused and was driven to hang herself. I said, 'Consider how well Madam treated us! Now that you've done such a filthy thing only half a year after she left us, how will you be able to guard this place well?' (MC: *Malicious!*) He hated me for saying that and strung me up and beat me to within an inch of my life. I was confined to bed for half a month."

Rage seized Sai'er. Stomping a foot, she said, "That ungrateful beast! (MC: *A loose woman is a jealous woman. Why doesn't she ask herself about what she is doing with Xiao Shao?*) I'll kill that beast to vent my spleen!"

Dong Tianran and the women came to pacify her, saying, "Madam, calm down. Just let the master come back." (MC: *If he comes back, where is Xiao Shao to go?*)

Sai'er said, "You have no idea. Once those who do great things together begin to bear grudges against each other, there's no telling how many lives will be lost in the infighting. Now what can I do to make him come here?" She did not sleep a wink that night. (IC: *Why didn't she amuse herself with Xiao Shao?*)

The next day, in her court session, she dismissed everyone but Registrar Zhou and told him about Zhengyin's fornication and heartlessness, adding that she wanted to lead her troops on a mission to kill him. Registrar Zhou said in response, "Where does all this come from? You don't know if it's true or not. It may even be a ploy to drive a wedge between the two of you. You've only recently taken over such a large and important region. How can you so lightly rush into infighting when the public is not yet quite reassured. (MC: *Registrar Zhou makes such a perfect show of being a loyal follower that she never questions his sincerity.*) The best thing is for me to go with a confidante of yours to verify the facts. If we find the allegations to be true, you'll still have enough time to act."

"What you said makes perfect sense. So let me trouble you with the mission. If the allegations are true, kill that beast for me!"

Registrar Zhou spoke up again, "It would be better if I had a few companions. I may not be able to do the job if I go alone."

Thereupon, Sai'er ordered Wang Xian and Dong Tianran to take about twenty men and go with the registrar. Handing a sword to Wang Xian, she said, "If the facts are established, chop off that beast's head for me! Anyone who disobeys me will be punished by military law. (MC: *Sai'er is merciless.*) Giving Zheng Guan a document, she said, "Upon He Zhengyin's death, you'll be the acting county magistrate." (MC: *This seals Zhengyin's fate.*) The men took leave of Sai'er and set off for Laiyang County.

Suspecting Dong Tianran of being loyal to Priest He, Registrar Zhou purposefully said to him along the way: "Priest He has Madam's full trust. If the allegations are false, we'll all be off the hook. Heaven and earth be praised! But if they're true, Madam will apply military law to us if we don't act. What are we going to do?" (MC: *Registrar Zhou is very clever.*)

Dong Tianran said, "My master has a suspicious mind and a bad temper. In the future, if he gets word that you and I have been investigating him, he'll surely hate us and find one pretext or another to lay murderous hands on us. (MC: *Even Tianran is not on his side. Clearly, Priest He does not know how to deal with his subordinates. He is courting his own death.*) If he's guilty, we'd better act according to the law. We'll be the safer for it and rid ourselves of a source of future trouble."

Zheng Guan chimed in, voicing his support for the idea, for he was only too eager to finish the priest off so that he could take over the post of county magistrate. Relieved to know that they were on Sai'er's side, Registrar Zhou continued, "Let's check around first and establish the facts. If we need to act, I'll stroke my beard as a signal."

After entering the city, they heard nothing but curses against He Zhengyin from the populace. Dong Tianran said, "So the rumors are true."

They went straight to the county yamen to see He Zhengyin. Sitting haughtily in his seat, Zhengyin did not even bother to rise and salute the visitors. Looking at Dong Tianran, he asked, "What gifts are you bringing me?"

"We left in a hurry," said Dong Tianran, "so we didn't bring any, but we'll have some brought to you later."

Directing his next question to Registrar Zhou, Zhengyin said, "What is the purpose of your visit?"

Feigning discretion, Registrar Zhou said in a subdued voice, "Someone from this county lodged a complaint against you with Madam, sir, saying that you blocked women of this county from marrying and that you collect too much funds and provisions from the populace. So Madam sent us here to inform you about this."

On hearing these words, Zhengyin slapped the table in a burst of rage. "That cheap hussy!" he thundered. "It was all thanks to me that she now rules over such a large region and lives in such grand style! She must have taken on another lover. (MC: *A good guess.*) The audacity! What do men like you know? A lot of sense you have!"

Alarmed by the way things were going, Wang Xian moved closer to Registrar Zhou and then, taking a step toward Zhengyin, said, "Please don't be angry. Let's work out a good solution, so that we can report back to Madam."

Zhengyin shot back, "So you can't report to her if no good solution is to be found."

At this point, Registrar Zhou gave his beard a stroke. Amid a roar from the other men, Wang Xian whipped out a knife and cut off He Zhengyin's head. Head in hand, he announced, "Madam ordered us to kill only He Zhengyin and spare everyone else." Having said that, he showed everyone Sai'er's letter appointing the acting county magistrate. (MC: *Zheng Guan's term of office begins.*)

All the married and unmarried women forcibly detained by Zhengyin were now released from the yamen, and their families were notified to go to the yamen to claim them. The rotating tax was also abolished. (MC: *To their credit, they also do something good.*) All the residents of the town rejoiced. The men helped themselves to the abundant stock of gold and silver in the treasury and filled several carts with more, as well as bolts of silk to offer to the prefectural yamen. Registrar Zhou and his companions reported to Sai'er and went their separate ways. Of this, no more.

In the meantime, Imperial Inspector Jin of Shandong addressed a memorial to the imperial court, informing the emperor of the fall of Qingzhou and the murder of Prefect Wen. In view of the gravity of this regional situation, the secretary of the Ministry of War immediately presented the file to the emperor. Right away, the imperial court appointed Commander in Chief Fu Qi to be vice marshal and Li Xiao and Lai Daoming, commanders of the mobile cavalry, to be vanguards, to lead ten thousand troops of the capital garrison on a punitive expedition. Their mission was to assist Yang Rudai, inspector-cum-governor of Shandong, in wiping out the rebels by a

set deadline. They had funds, provisions, and troops from not only Shandong but also Henan and Shanxi at their disposal. When Commander in Chief Fu led his men to the governor's yamen and told Governor Yang and his subordinates about the imperial court's urgent order to arrest Tang Sai'er, the governor said, "With her sorcery and skills in communicating with spiritual beings, Tang Sai'er won't be subdued easily. Recently, Registrar Zhou and Magistrate Xu of Tengxian County and Commander Dai of Linhai feigned surrender. If we attack Laiyang County, and Commander Dai and Magistrate Xu attack Qingzhou from behind, her troops will be stretched too thin to cope with attacks from two opposite directions, and victory will be ours."

"Brilliant!" said Commander Fu, who then put Li Xiao the vanguard in charge of five thousand men for the attack on Laiyang County. Commanders Du Zong and Wu Xiu and troop leaders Gao Xiong, Zhao Gui, Zhao Tianhan, Cui Qiu, Mi Xuan, and Guo Jin were put in charge of twenty thousand men redeployed from elsewhere. They pitched camp at a spot twenty *li* from Laiyang County in anticipation of the battle the following day.

On learning the news, Zheng Guan ordered the city gate closed and reported to the prefectural yamen before the night was out. As soon as she received the report, Sai'er assembled all the officers and announced, "Commander in Chief Fu is leading a mighty army to wipe us out. I'll lead my troops myself to put them to flight." She ordered Wang Xian and Dong Tianran to guard Qingzhou, and Ma Xiaoliang and Dai Deru to lead ten thousand men each, to station them no farther than thirty *li* from Teng County and the Linhai Garrison and stay on guard against sneak attacks. The troops of Teng County and Linhai were also not to be let through. (MC: *Quite the military strategist, she would be difficult to defeat if she had stayed clear of wine and debauchery.*)

Registrar Zhou said to himself with an inward groan, "What a holy terror this woman is!"

Next, Sai'er put Fang Da in charge of five thousand men and ordered them to set out forthwith. She herself then led twenty thousand men to Laiyang County. When they were about ten *li* from their destination, they pitched five camps—one in the front, one in the back, one on the left, one on the right, and one in the middle—which also served as the base for two mobile contingents. Abatis, caltrops, and alarm bells were installed all around the campground, and the gate was closed. After a meal was cooked and

eaten, the men took a rest. They were ordered not to react rashly even if cavalrymen were trying to force their way in.

Vanguard Li, leading five thousand men, raised battle cries for what seemed like half a day without getting any response from Sai'er's camp. Upon his report, Commander in Chief Fu and Governor Yang, followed by a group of officers, went to the front line and climbed up scaling ladders for a look. What met their eyes were orderly battle arrays of valiant-looking soldiers and commanders, brightly colored flags, glinting lances and halberds, and a dashing woman general under an official parasol flanked by two handsome, young generals, one on each side. They were Xiao Shao and Chen Yin'er, each holding a small seven-star black flag. There were also two pretty young women in armor. (MC: *What a goodly sight!*!) One was Xiao Xixi, carrying a sword, and the other was Wang Jiaolian, holding a bag of arrows. In front of the camp stood the seven-star black flag of the Lord on High, fluttering in the wind. The commander in chief was agape with astonishment. Then he went down the ladder and ordered that Gao Xiong, Zhao Gui, Zhao Tianhan, and Cui Qiu hack their way in together and see what Sai'er would do. As the poem goes,

*Where the swords gleamed, thick frost was seen;
In triumph, they returned haughtily from battle.
How laughable such sorcerer-rebels old and new!
They all cherish impossible dreams.*

Sai'er opened the gate and ordered Fang Da to lead his men out and take on the enemy. After the second round of combat, Sai'er unhurriedly began to chant her incantations. As the two small black flags were waved, a column of black vapor rolled out of the camp and engulfed Vanguard Li's men and horses in darkness. Unable to see even his comrades in arms, Li Xiao was overcome by panic. Fang Da gave him a frontal blow with his halberd and knocked him off his horse, with brain matter flowing. Gao Xiang and Zhao Tianhan were both captured. Alarmed by the failure of the vanguards, Commander Fu led the defeated troops in retreat and returned to his tent in dejection.

When Fang Da marched Gao Xiong and Zhao Tianhan into the camp to see Sai'er, the latter said, "Send them to the county jailhouse. They can be taken care of on our return." Then she continued to Fang Da, "Although

we've won the day, their great numbers haven't been reduced by much. They'll be back for another battle tomorrow. A better course of action for us is to march to their camp while they're still trying to recover their breath and wits. We'll surely score a total victory." (MC: *A preemptive attack, like the one they launched against Laiyang County.*)

She ordered Fang Da to guard the campground and Kang Zhao to be the vanguard while she herself led ten thousand men in a sneak attack against Commander Fu's camp. Raising a mighty shout, they slashed their way in. Commander Fu had been on guard against a surprise attack by Sai'er at night, not one in broad daylight right after her victory. The terrified soldiers lost all fighting spirit. Commander Fu and Governor Yang mounted their horses and fled for their lives. Of their twenty-five thousand men, about one to two thousand died and the rest all surrendered. Along with more than a thousand fine horses, Sai'er's troops gained liberal amounts of money, food, provisions, and weapons, all of which they transported back to Qingzhou.

Those officers who survived followed Commander Fu to Governor Yang's yamen for consultations on another memorial to the emperor, to request reinforcements, but Governor Yang said, "The imperial court will surely hold us responsible for the loss of thirty or forty thousand men, including many officers. As far as I know, Magistrate Xu of Tengxian County is a capable man and a man of integrity, loyalty, and honor. He feigned surrender with Registrar Zhou and Commander Dai, swallowing the humiliation of collaboration, in order to prevent this region from plunging into chaos. As we speak, Registrar Zhou is being held captive by the rebels and therefore can't come out, but Xu and Dai are still at their own yamen. I suggest that they be brought here secretly. They'll surely come up with a good plan for defeating the enemy."

Losing no time, Commander Fu invited Magistrate Xu and Commander Dai over, to get their counsel on a plan for defeating Sai'er. Magistrate Xu leaned in close to Commander Fu and Governor Yang and told them about his plan in a low voice, adding, "We'll thus be able to crush the enemy within ten days."

Commander Fu said, "If so, I'll surely ask the imperial court for a promotion and a reward for you."

After taking leave of the commander in chief and returning to his county yamen, Magistrate Xu prepared gifts, together with Commander Dai, and each sent a trusted follower to take the gifts to Sai'er, to congratulate her

on her victory and, while on the mission, to inform Registrar Zhou about their plan.

In fact, Registrar Zhou had already worked out a plan of his own. Noticing that Xiao Shao enjoyed Sai'er's special favor and what a sensible and clever young man he was, the registrar had been going out of his way to befriend him, win his trust, and shower flattering attentions on him. (MC: *Crafty machinations for a purpose.*)

Feeling unworthy of the attentions, Xiao Shao said, "I used to be a commoner under your jurisdiction, sir. I don't deserve such special treatment."

"But how could I dare not show proper respect to someone so dear to Madam's heart?"

"All my family members were killed. I'm just hanging on to a life of shame. Dear to her heart indeed!"

"That's no way to talk," said Registrar Zhou. "Your sisters are still around you, and that's quite exceptional."

"My older sister married a bandit. I may be sharing a quilt with you-know-who, but it's no different from sleeping with a tigress. What kind of mood can that put me in? (MC: *Xiao Shao has pride in him, not the kind that falls prey to lust.*) And my younger sister is but a maidservant. To whom can I pour out the woes of my whole family?"

Struck by these words, Registrar Zhou persisted, "In that case, why don't you wait for an opportunity to break with her and cross over to the side of justice? The imperial court will surely reward you. Otherwise, when she's brought down, jade and common stone will be destroyed together, as they say. Since you share her pillow, you'll have the hardest time trying to defend yourself. And all the wrongs you suffered will go unavenged."

"I know what's right and what's wrong. It's indeed as you say. It's just that I have no idea how to get myself out of this situation."

"In your position as an insider, you need only do such and such. I'll take care of actions on the outside." With that, he confided the plan laid out by Xu and Dai to Xiao Shao.

Overjoyed, Xiao Shao said, "I'll let my younger sister in on this, so that she can join the action." (IC: *Meticulous.*)

After they thrashed out their plan, they set the date for the Mid-Autumn Festival [the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month]. The signal for action was to be the hoisting of a lantern on a tall post after midnight. Registrar Zhou duly notified Magistrate Xu and Commander Dai of this new development. This happened on the twelfth day of the eighth lunar month.

On the thirteenth day of the month, Magistrate Xu and Commander Dai put capable officers in charge of thirty to forty men each and spread them around the prefectural yamen for an ambush. Upon the firing of a cannon, they were to act by assisting Registrar Zhou in capturing the rebels. Magistrate Xu also secretly ordered his son Xu De to contact Registrar Zhou. Everyone involved having been notified that the gate was to be stormed at the cannon shot on the night of the fifteenth, we need not dwell on this anymore. In the meantime, Xiao Shao and his younger sister went to inform Wang Jiaolian and Chen Ying'er of the plan. Those two, being Commander Dai's spies in the first place, naturally kept their eyes and ears open.

On the fifteenth night of the month, Sai'er set out a banquet in celebration of the festival. While everyone was viewing the moon and drinking, Wang Jiaolian came and said to Sai'er, "On such a rare occasion when the moon is so glorious and you, madam, have just routed Commander Fu's troops and seized their funds, provisions, and soldiers, we womenfolk would like to offer our congratulations to you since we have no other means of showing our gratitude to you for your favors."

Beating time with her hand-held hardwood clappers, Wang Jiaolian began to sing a song:

*Tigers cross the three rivers with the speed of the wind;
Dragons fight for the four seas and the vast sky.
The swords gleam in the light amid falling stars;
The hidden foxes and rabbits prove their worth.*

The song so pleased Sai'er that she drank three large cups of wine in a row. All the other women present at the table offered toasts, with Wang Jiaolian singing for them. Everyone involved in the plot was intent on getting Sai'er drunk so that they could spring into action. When it was Chen Ying'er's turn, Sai'er said, "I've had too much to drink. But in appreciation of your goodwill, I'll accept your toasts, but only one cup for each toast."

After she downed about twenty more cups, the wine began to take its toll. As the songs and dances resumed, the women continued to take turns offering her toasts. When she slumped in her seat, stinking drunk, Xiao Shao said, "Madam is drunk. Let's help her to her room." With Xiao Shao holding Sai'er, the others all joined in and helped carry her to her bed. Then Xiao Shao dismissed the others, took off Sai'er's clothes, tucked her in, and bolted the door. The others also went to their own rooms. Only those involved in the

plot stayed awake to wait for word about Sai'er. Afraid that Sai'er might be faking drunkenness, Xiao Shao trimmed the lamp until it shone brightly, got into bed, held Sai'er in his arms, mounted her, and started to sport with her as best he knew how. (MC: *A meticulous man but one with a heart of flint.*) After he had cavorted with the unsuspecting Sai'er for a considerable while, Xiao Shao thought that everyone else outside must have gone to sleep. "If I don't act now, when will I have another chance?" So thinking, he rose, hurriedly threw some clothes over his shoulders, drew his sword from the head of the bed, quietly turned back the quilt, and, with all the force he could muster, swung the sword down on her neck and cut off her head, along with part of her shoulder. In her drunken stupor, Sai'er lay there motionless.

Quickly, Xiao Shao left the room and whispered to his sister, Wang Jiaolian, and Chen Ying'er, "I've killed Sai'er."

"Don't wake Dong Tianran and the other one," said Wang Jiaolian. "Let's go quietly and finish them off."

"Good idea!" Chen Ying'er agreed.

Holding blades, they knocked at Dong Tianran's door and shouted, "Madam isn't feeling well. Get up, quick!"

On hearing this, Dong Tianran, still drowsy with sleep, hurriedly threw some clothes over himself and went to answer the door. Caught completely off guard, he was cut down by a single plunge of Chen Ying'er's blade and collapsed by the door. While he was struggling for life, another swing of the blade finished him off. Wang Xiaoyu was also drunk, as if dead to the world. After making short work of him as well, everyone said, "All right! Mission accomplished! But how do we make it out of here?"

"Stay calm!" said Xiao Shao. "We have a signal to give." So saying, he lit a lantern and hoisted it up a tall lamppost.

Before long, Registrar Zhou, ten cooks, and several stout-hearted men whom he had taken under his wing, knocked at the gate of the yamen and charged inside. To Registrar Zhou, Xiao Shao said, "Sai'er, Dong Tianran, and Wang Xiaoyu are all dead. All the other people in the yamen are Sai'er's victims. Please do right by them, sir." (MC: *Xiao Shao has the right idea.*)

"Of course," said Registrar Zhou. "Feel free to help yourself to what's in the treasury. What's left of the huge piles of valuables will be sealed and confiscated." (MC: *Registrar Zhou has the right plans.*)

Carrying the three heads, Registrar Zhou opened the gate of the prefectoral yamen, along with Xiao Shao, and fired one cannon shot. In a trice, about seventy to eighty soldiers and police officers went to Registrar Zhou

and said, "We've been dispatched by the county and the garrison to help catch the bandits."

Registrar Zhou said, "The bandits have all been taken. Their heads are right here. Now follow me." With that, he went to the east gate, fired three cannon shots, and opened the city gate, admitting Magistrate Xu and Commander Dai, each leading five hundred men. Registrar Zhou announced to them, "Spare the city residents! Sai'er is dead, but there are still surviving members of the rebellion." So the men fanned out to get them all.

On hearing the cannon shot, Wang Xian and Fang Da got out of bed, wondering what could have happened. While they were at a loss as to what to do, Registrar Zhou and his men stormed into Fang Da's house. Before Fang Da had time to ask what was happening, he was brought down by a lance from the side and beheaded. Commander Dai seized Ma Xiaoliang and Dai Deru. Magistrate Xu killed Kang Zhao, Wang Xian, and twelve other men in a fierce fight. Shen Yin had died from a contagious disease two months earlier and thus escaped a more ignominious end.

Afraid that things might get out of control, Registrar Zhou quickly ordered his troops, "Kill only those with official titles. Don't touch the rank and file and innocent civilians!" He also put up notices to calm the public. (MC: *So as to reestablish post-victory order.*)

Magistrate Xu announced to the assembled troops, "Laiyang County is about forty or fifty *li* from here, so news may not have reached there yet. Since speed is what matters most in warfare, Commander Dai and I will take that county before the night is out. Registrar Zhou will stay behind to take charge of the prefectural seat."

Leading five thousand men, Xu and Dai marched at top speed to Laiyang County, claiming, on reaching the city gate, that they had been deployed by the prefectural yamen to take the neighboring county. (MC: *Repeating Sai'er's trick when she attacked Qingzhou.*) The guards on the city wall let them in. Zheng Guan was sitting in court when Magistrate Xu and his men stormed in and killed him. In terror, Zhang Tianlu, Zhu Hong, and the others surrendered and were taken to the prefectural jailhouse to await judgment.

After reassuring the public, Magistrate Xu returned to the prefectural yamen and, together with Registrar Zhou and Xiao Zhao, went to see Commander Fu and Governor Yang, carrying the heads of Sai'er and the others. After they gave an account of everything that had led to Sai'er's death, Commander in Chief Fu said, "This is all thanks to the master moves of you gentlemen." He was profuse in his praise. (MC: *The commander in chief*

and the governor succeeded only because they employed the right people.) He then drew up a memorial to the emperor announcing the victory while having preparations made for his return journey to the capital.

The imperial court promoted Registrar Zhou to prefect, Commander Dai to regional military commissioner, Xiao Shao and Chen Ying'er to inspectors (MC: *Two handsome inspectors.*), and Magistrate Xu to vice commissioner of military defense. They were all rewarded with lavish gifts commensurate with their respective ranks. Wang Jiaolian and Xiao Xixi were betrothed advantageously. Those who tried to surrender after Sai'er's defeat were not allowed to do so and were convicted of crimes. This can serve as a lesson to all those who engage in sorcery. There is a poem in testimony:

*The air of battle engulfed the four seas;
The she-wolf ravaged Shandong for no good reason.
One night's playing of the xiao flute dispelled all the vapor;
A waning moon and wilted blooms sent the wind away.*

Mr. Hu Corrupts a Fellow Man in a Wife-Swapping Scheme

A Chan Master in Meditation Explains the Principle of Retribution

IN the words of a *ci* poem,

*The fierce warrior with his curved sword
Was ready to chop off ten thousand heads.
Why did his heart of flint soften for a flower?*

*Consider how fearsome Xiang Yu and Liu Bang were.¹
But alas! Ladies Yu and Qi entered their lives,²
Spelling the end of the mighty heroes.*

The lines cited above were written by a worthy poet of yore, illustrating the destructiveness of lust. Mighty heroes or iron-hearted men who kill without even batting an eye invariably go weak in the knees at the sight of a powdered face and an alluring body. Consider the cases of Xiang Yu, the Hegemon King of Chu, and Liu Bang, later Emperor Gaozu of Han, who fought each other for the crown. What mighty heroes both were! But the former could not put Lady Yu out of his mind even when he took his last breath, and the latter, when he was the worse for liquor, did not have the heart to deny Lady Qi's wish. If they were susceptible to feminine charms, how much more so are lesser men? Romantic youths with fine sensibilities can

hardly be expected to keep their wits about them when they fall prey to lust, something that has a major bearing on one's credit record in the netherworld. (MC: *Quite so!*) Those men who refuse to sully other men's wives or daughters so as not to spoil their chastity are amply rewarded by the lord of the unseen world. Some get high passes on the civil service examinations, some obtain posts that carry generous remunerations, and some are blessed with sons who later rise to eminence. Historical records are rife with such instances, which we will therefore refrain from enumerating here. As for those who indulge in sexual depravity and go out of their way to hatch plans for defiling decent women, such men, without exception, are driven to early graves, deprived of their posts, or have their sins visited upon their wives or children. The lord of the netherworld shows no mercy to such men.

A case in point: Toward the end of the Chunxi reign period [1174–89] of the Song dynasty, a *xiucaí*-degree holder named Liu Yaoju, courtesy name Tangqing, and a native of Shuzhou [in present-day Qianshan County, Anhui], was staying in Pingjiang [present-day Suzhou, Jiangsu], where his father was serving as an official. When it was time to take the autumn provincial-level examinations, he hired a boat, as a dependent of a government official, to go to Xiuzhou [present-day Jiaxing, Zhejiang], where the examinations were to be held. After the boat got under way, Tangqing cast a glance at the stern and was taken aback by what he saw. At the helm was a beautiful girl of sixteen or seventeen years of age with lovely brows and eyes and beautiful long hair. Wearing homespun, simple clothes and little makeup, she was unique in her graceful deportment. As she stood at the helm like a branch of flowering crab apple adorning the surface of the water, Tangqing feasted his eyes on her and found his desires stirring. After carefully observing what went on in the boat, he concluded from the look of things that she was the boat owner's daughter. Sighing in admiration, he said to himself, "So the old saying about 'Old oysters producing bright pearls' is right, after all." He meant to exchange a few meaningful words with her, but he was afraid of arousing the suspicions of the girl's father, who was with her at the helm. So he feigned indifference without daring to take more than a furtive glance at her out of the corner of his eye. The more he looked at her, the more enchanting he found her to be. Overcome by his amorous desires, he came up with a plan. He asked the boat owner to go onto the bank and help tow the boat because, he claimed, at the slow pace the heavily laden boat was traveling, he would miss his deadline.

The old boat owner operated his business with the help of his son and daughter. That day, the son was on the shore, towing the boat, and at Tangqing's insistence, the old man joined his son, leaving the daughter alone at the helm and Tangqing alone in the cabin. Now that things were going the way he wanted, Tangqing, as was only to be expected, began to make conversation by way of sounding her out, and she responded once or twice in her charming voice to each ten of his questions or remarks. While she was speaking, Tangqing threw her significant looks, looks that she either evaded coyly or ignored with a straight face. Whenever Tangqing was silent and looking elsewhere, she would make a wry comment and, while furtively stifling her mirth, give him a sidelong glance. (MC: *She is obviously a member of a gang and an old hand at ensnaring men. Tangqing is but a pedantic young man of limited experience.*) Outwardly, she was being the virtuous woman, but in fact she was leading him on, making herself all the more desirable and sending him into raptures.

Meaning to make bold advances to the girl, Tangqing opened his trunk, took out a white silk handkerchief, attached it to a walnut, tied it into a lover's knot, and tossed it at the girl. She saw it all too clearly but pretended not to have seen it and went on working at the helm, her face expressionless. Afraid that his handkerchief would be seen by others, since he believed the girl was genuinely unaware of his move, Tangqing kept signaling her with his eyes to pick it up. (MC: *Tangqing is too green.*) But the girl, to all appearances, remained impervious to what was happening. With the boat owner taking in the towrope and about to board the boat again, Tangqing grew desperate and began to gesticulate wildly. Not knowing what else to do as the girl stood motionless, he deeply regretted his move. How he wished he had a long arm with which to take the handkerchief back.

By the time the boat owner returned to the boat, Tangqing was crimson in the face and bathed in cold sweat, fervently wishing he were elsewhere. Lo and behold: The girl, all calm and composed, gently hooked the handkerchief with the tip of her shoe and drew it under her skirt. (MC: *Is this meant to make the infatuated stop dreaming?*) Slowly, she bent down, picked up the handkerchief, and stuffed it into her sleeve while smiling affectedly at the surface of the water. (IC: *A real old hand! But interesting.*) Exasperated by her a moment earlier, Tangqing was now grateful to her for having so successfully averted a crisis and fell all the more deeply for her charms. The attraction was mutual from this moment onward.

The next day, Tangqing repeated his trick and drove the boat owner out to tow the boat with his son. Obsequiously, Tangqing said to the girl, "I'm so grateful to you for helping me out yesterday. Otherwise I would have been too ashamed to show my face."

The girl said, giggling, "I thought you were fearless. So you're a coward after all!"

"With your peerless beauty and your quickness of mind, you need a worthy spouse. But with a phoenix like you finding yourself so unjustly amid chickens, isn't this a sad waste?"

"No, you're quite mistaken, sir. It has always been the case that one blessed in looks is cursed by fate. It's not just me. This is just a matter of destiny. I wouldn't dream of complaining."

Tangqing melted with admiration for her good sense. Finding pleasure in their conversation, they warmed up to each other and exchanged meaningful glances across the few feet of distance between the cabin and the helm. However, since the father could turn around at any moment and see them from the shore, they limited themselves to verbal passes and were not able to get physical. (MC: *All the more difficult to take.*)

On reaching Xiuzhou, Tangqing did not go look for an inn but stayed on the boat. (IC: *He is harboring designs.*) Even on the examination grounds, Tangqing was unable to dismiss the girl from his thoughts. As soon as he received the essay topic, he wrote his composition without a pause, left the examination grounds well before the set finishing hour, and ran to the boat with all the speed he could muster. The father and son had told the girl that they were going into the city to make purchases because they had no passenger to serve at the moment and that her job was to keep watch over the boat. (MC: *Since heaven bestowed this bond on him, why let him fail in his scheme in the end?*)

Now that the girl was alone on the boat, imagine Tangqing's joy at this blessing from heaven! Losing no time, he jumped onto the boat from the shore and asked the girl, "Where are your father and brother?"

"They went into the city."

"Could you please move the boat to a quiet place so that we can talk?" So saying, he began to untie the rope.

Taking the hint, the girl worked the helm and maneuvered the boat to a secluded spot. Tangqing then leaped onto the stern and, gathering the girl in his arms, said, "I'm in the prime of youth and still single. If you don't find me unworthy, let's unite in blissful marriage!"

The girl demurred. "A girl of such inferior qualities and looks should be more than content to be the wife of a gentleman like you. But how can a withered vine in the wilderness aspire to attach itself to a tall pine? You're meant for a brilliant career. When your day comes, you'll find it demeaning to even look at a lowly girl like me. So I won't presume to comply. Please cherish your own future above all else."

These well-chosen words further impressed Tangqing. Burning with amorous desires, he grew frantic at the thought that the girl would reject his advances. (IC: *His fears are quite groundless.*) Tapping her back, he said, "Why all this talk of gains and losses? Because of you, I've been in a trance for two days now, unable to keep a grip on myself and fretting at the lack of opportunity to have a private moment of intimacy with you. And now, with only the two of us left here, this is a heaven-sent opportunity for us to indulge ourselves and fulfill our wishes of a lifetime. But you so firmly reject me out of hand, dashing all my hopes. If a man with any pride in him can't fulfill his wishes, why should he hang on to life? I'm deeply grateful to you for hiding the handkerchief for me yesterday. Since there's no predestined bond between us, I must end this life in repayment of your kindness." (MC: *The very fact that she moored the boat in a quiet place means that his outburst is quite uncalled for. Tangqing is too naive.*)

Having said that, he made as if to jump into the river. The girl was quick to detain him. Seizing the back fold of his garment, she said, "Easy! Let's talk!"

Turning around, Tangqing embraced her and said, "What's there to talk about?" He carried her into the cabin and onto the bed to enjoy the pleasures that had come to him so unexpectedly. Indeed, he was as ecstatic as if he had laid his hands on some rare treasure. After their passion abated, the girl rose, smoothed her hair into place, and helped straighten Tangqing's clothes. (IC: *She's an old hand, definitely no virgin.*) "Since you stoop to favor me with such kindness, I venture to accept the honor. For all the brevity of the encounter, my loyalty to you is as firm as metal and rock. In the future, don't let me end up like a withered flower drifting, unwanted, down flowing water."

"I'm so honored to be an object of your affections that I'd never dream of forsaking you. The list of successful examination candidates will be released soon. If I make the list, I'll surely marry you with all due ceremony and offer you a life of luxury." (MC: *What if he doesn't make the list? He is a man without a fallback plan.*)

After a few more loving and delightful moments, the girl cautioned, "My father may return from the city any moment now." Thereupon, she moved the boat back to its original mooring place. Tangqing went ashore, to avoid suspicion, and embarked again after the return of the father and son, who were none the wiser. But in fact,

An evil deed done in a dark room

Is seen as clear as lightning by the gods.

In the meantime, Tangqing's father was waiting anxiously at his duty station in Pingjiang for news about his son's examination results. One night, he had a dream in which two yellow-robed men holding a piece of paper appeared to him, announcing, "The imperial court has released the results of the examinations. Your son won first place." At this point, another man came up and, snatching the piece of paper away, said, "Liu Yaoju recently did something improper and has therefore been put on the deferred list."

Mr. Tang Senior awoke with a start and realized that it had been but a dream. But the remark about his son's improper behavior troubled him. He began to give up hope that the young man would win high honors on the exams. Just as he expected, when the results were announced in Xiuzhou, Tangqing's name was not among those recommended for the *juren* degree. What happened was this: One of the examiners liked Tangqing's paper so much that he proposed giving Tangqing first place, but another examiner was impressed by another candidate and wanted to relegate Tangqing to second place. The first examiner refused, saying, "If he's to be number two, I'd rather fail him this time and put him on the list after the next round of exams. He'll surely still be first. (MC: *Examiners who ruin candidates are legion.*) He shouldn't be shortchanged." Out of simple pique, the examiner failed him this time.

Tangqing was waiting for news on the boat when a commotion broke out, with messengers going every which way to announce the results to successful candidates, but nary a soul approached his boat. Realizing that he had not made the list, he gave one sigh after another. Even the girl at the helm was disappointed and shed furtive tears. When there was no one around, Tangqing consoled her with many kind words and returned home on the same boat.

When he greeted his parents, his father told him about the dream and asked, "I knew early on from my dream that you'd fail. But what improper thing did you do?"

"I didn't do anything improper." While mouthing these words of denial, Tangqing was appalled, thinking, "How can this be?" He could hardly believe what he had heard.

Later on, he learned about what had happened on the examination grounds and that his improper behavior had compromised his credit record in the netherworld and, therefore, the place he would otherwise have deserved on the exams. He was somewhat regretful but could not stop thinking of that girl. When the list of successful candidates was publicized after the next round of exams, Tangqing's name was indeed at the top. Honoring his pledge to the girl, he sent out messengers to search for her everywhere, but she had gone none knew whither. (MC: *Even if he failed the exams, why can't he, as the son of a rich family, marry a boat owner's daughter? Why must he wait until he gains fame and honor? Tangqing should have known better.*) Later, Tangqing did pass the national-level examinations, but her disappearance remained a source of regret for him for the rest of his life. (MC: *Can't be otherwise.*)

Gentle reader, consider how Liu Tangqing was punished for one wrong move. His success on the exams was deferred, and he was not able to reunite with that girl. In fact, he did not have a predestined marriage bond with that girl, which was why his credit record was damaged all the more severely. Everyone, be advised: Do not, under any circumstances, act rashly and defile women. (MC: *Good advice.*) The ancients put it well:

*If I don't defile other men's wives and daughters,
My wife and daughters will not be defiled.
If I defile other men's wives and daughters,
My wife and daughters will surely be defiled.*

This humble storyteller now proposes to tell a story about men who seduce others' wives, to illustrate the point that the wives of those men will be seduced in a chain of retribution.

In the Yuan dynasty [1260–1368], there lived in Yuanshang of Mianzhou [present-day Mian County, Shaanxi] a man named Tie Rong, whose family was of distinguished lineage. One of his forefathers had been a bandit-suppressing commissioner. His wife, Di-shi, was the number one beauty in the city. It was a regular custom for women in the Mianzhou area to go on frequent excursions. Families of distinction competed with one another in showing off their beautiful women. Every family that acquired a beautiful

daughter-in-law would parade her everywhere on family outings, afraid that people would be denied the pleasure of looking at her. (MC: *What an odious custom!*) When the flowers were in bloom and the moon was shining brightly, young men and women filled the streets, making a babble of noises, rubbing shoulders with one another, and exchanging amorous glances, and no one saw anything wrong in such behavior. On their way home from their outings, the men would rate the women they had seen, one by one, on their looks. When commenting on the prettiest ones, they would get boisterous in their praise, oblivious to the possible presence of the women's husbands. As for the husbands, even if they were within hearing, they would invariably puff up with pride on hearing their wives' beauty praised and would not mind an occasional derisive remark about themselves. (MC: *Shameless to the highest degree.*) This became a more common practice in the Zhiyuan [1335–40] and Zhizheng [1341–68] reign periods.

Having just married a beautiful wife, Mr. Tie eagerly took her everywhere to show off her beauty. Everywhere they went, tongues clicked in admiration. I will spare the reader the details of how acquaintances of Mr. Tie teased him and flattered him but tell of those who were strangers to him. On seeing Di-shi and learning, upon inquiry, that she was the wife of a Mr. Tie, they imposed themselves on him, inundating him with sugared words, wining and dining him, calling him a “darling of fortune,” and fawning on him in every way. Thus, Mr. Tie did not even have to take money with him every time he left his house because he would surely be invited to wine feasts, from which he would return home with a full stomach and in an inebriated state. (MC: *This is one of those cases of a man benefiting from his wife.*) No man in or outside of the city did not know him, and every one of them harbored designs on his wife. But since Mr. Tie was from a prominent family and had an impulsive and ruthless nature, no one dared run afoul of him without a plausible reason, and so those who coveted his wife drooled in vain and confined themselves to ogling and making verbal passes at her. As the ancients put it so well:

*One who fails to hide things well invites thieves;
She who overly bedecks herself invites lust.*

A beauty like Di-shi could hardly be expected to keep her chastity intact when such were the local customs. Not surprisingly, something happened.

As they say, "No coincidences, no stories." In their neighborhood, there lived a man by the name of Hu Sui, whose wife, Men-shi, was also a delight to the eye, only a shade less so than Di-shi. She would have had no rival had Di-shi not outshone her. Hu Sui, a lascivious man, was resentful that his ravishingly beautiful wife could not quite measure up to Di-shi. As it turned out, Tie coveted Men-shi and had a good mind to make a clean sweep and have both beauties for his enjoyment. Only then would he rest content. The two men, each with designs on the other's wife, struck up such a friendship that they would gladly switch wives for a brief spell. (MC: *Neither of the two men knows when to stop. Both will end up bringing disgrace to their families.*) More than once, Mr. Tie, a straightforward man, told Mr. Hu, a crafty man, about his designs on the latter's wife. Mr. Hu turned the tables on Mr. Tie and deliberately said everything Tie wanted to hear with not a word against the idea. Mr. Tie thought that Mr. Hu was quite open to persuasion and that his plan stood a good chance of success, little knowing that Hu was plotting to seize the chance and take up with Di-shi without giving himself away. (MC: *In the end, the scheming mind gets what it wants, but retribution also comes sooner.*)

Tie said to his wife Di-shi, "People all say you're the number one beauty, but as I see it, Mr. Hu's wife is not any less beautiful. I wish I knew how to win her over so that both beauties are mine. If so, I'll not have lived my life in vain, and I'll be able to die without regrets."

Di-shi said, "You and Mr. Hu are such great friends. Can't you just tell him straight out what you want?" (MC: *The plot thickens.*)

"I did drop him a hint or two. He didn't seem to mind. But how can I say it straight out in so many words? For things to work out, you must help me pull strings. I'm only afraid that you'll get jealous and cause trouble."

"I'm never jealous. I'll help you whenever I can. But there's one difficulty: womenfolk keep to their own quarters of the house. How is your path going to cross hers, unless you and Mr. Hu extend your personal relationship to the two families, so that the wives and children can mingle freely? If you invite them to our home often, I'll look for an opportunity for you to take up with her."

"Yes, my good wife, you're right." Henceforth, he tried harder at cultivating his friendship with Hu and frequently invited him and his wife Men-shi to his home for a drink or two, with Di-shi keeping Men-shi company. He also engaged the services of celebrated courtesans and patrons of brothels for some good-humored banter and laughter, partly to please Hu and partly

to arouse Men-shi's desires. (MC: *He loses both—the lady and the money.*) While the feasts were going on, Di-shi led Men-shi in looking on from behind the portiere. At the sight of the unbridled acts of debauchery, even a stone statue would be seized with passion.

Tie and Hu, each harboring less than honorable intentions, tried fervently to flaunt their good looks and arouse the other man's wife. As it turned out, of the two women watching the goings-on from behind the portiere, one was aroused before the other. You may well ask, who was it? As a matter of fact, although Men-shi was also watching, she was after all a guest and therefore was not feeling quite at ease. Di-shi, in contrast, being at her own home, looked her fill and found her desires stirring. (MC: *Tie is courting trouble, like someone who opens the door and asks the burglar in.*) Hu was superior to Tie not only in looks but also, by a long shot, in manners, gentleness, and bearing. Taking a fancy to him, Di-shi flirtatiously showed her face from behind the portiere from time to time and replenished the wine and food with greater eagerness and without the least sign of fatigue. Tie was delighted that his wife proved to be such a good help, little knowing what she had in mind. (MC: *The idiot!*)

When well warmed with wine, Tie said to Hu, "You and I have beautiful wives, and we're also great friends. That's quite exceptional."

Hu said, in a show of modesty, "My wife's looks are far inferior to your wife's. Your wife is perfect."

"In my eyes, they're about the same. But listen: It's boring if we stay with the same wives. Why don't we indulge in some foolishness and swap wives and enjoy them for a while? What do you say?"

With this suggestion, Tie played straight into Hu's hands. (MC: *Hu has no spark of conscience left. Of course the whole thing will turn sour.*) He replied falseheartedly, "However you praise her, my wife is inferior to yours, and how can I take liberties with your honorable wife? Your idea doesn't sound proper."

Bursting into laughter, Tie said, "It's all that wine we consumed that makes us so bawdy and so carried away." They then took leave of each other amid hearty laughter.

After returning to his bedchamber, an inebriated Tie surveyed his wife and, raising her chin, said, "I'm going to switch you with Mr. Hu's wife. What do you say?"

Di-shi lashed out at him in a show of anger, "You stupid turtle! (MC: *Tie is stupid, Hu is abominable, and Di-shi is ruthless.*) You're from a decent family.

How can you covet another man's wife and sacrifice your own? Shame on you for saying such a thing!"

"Aren't our two families on the best of terms? What's wrong with something that benefits both?"

"It's all right if I help you out from the inner quarters of the house but *that thing* I won't do!" (MC: *She's saying this only for the sake of appearances.*)

"I was just joking. Surely I'd hate to part with you. I just want to get that woman."

"This isn't something you can rush into," admonished Di-shi. "You need to please Mr. Hu until he sees things your way and willingly yields his wife to you. (MC: *Right.*)

Gathering Di-shi into his arms, Tie said, "Oh, my good wife, you're so understanding! You make such good sense!" The two of them went to bed, and of the events of that night there is no more to tell.

Di-shi, who had taken a fancy to Mr. Hu, knew her husband's combustible temper all too well. She thought, "He said those idiotic things in a good mood when all his thoughts were about seducing Men-shi. If I do something with Hu and he comes to know about it, he'll be jealous and get in the way. That won't do. I'll have to work out a plan and do it behind his back so as to enjoy the pleasure in peace and quiet." (MC: *This is even more ruthless.*) And so she drew up a plan.

One day, Hu again went to the Tie residence for a drink. That day, Hu was the only guest. With Di-shi waiting on him, emerging from the portiere from time to time and dropping hints, Hu caught on and took care not to drink too much, while plying Tie with wine at the same time. (MC: *Most malicious.*) Hu said, "I'm so grateful to you, my brother, for loving me more than your own flesh and blood. You find my humble wife to your liking, and she also admires you. I've managed to talk her into being more than a little agreeable to your idea. If you can take good care of me and engage a hundred courtesans for me first, I'll surely help you do what you want."

"If you can bring this off, my brother, even a thousand courtesans won't be a problem."

Euphoric at the way the conversation was going, Tie let himself go and downed one large bowl of wine after another. With a sickeningly obsequious Hu egging him on, he soon drank himself into a stupor. Ostensibly to support him, Hu put his arm around Tie and took him through the portiere into the inner section of the house. Di-shi, waiting by the portiere, flung

out her hands to take her husband, since she did not have to remove herself from Hu's presence. By this time, Tie had lost all consciousness. As Hu pursed his lips and made as if to kiss Di-shi on the cheek, she hooked his foot with the tip of her shoe and called out for her maids Yanxue and Qingyun to help the master go inside. Left alone with Di-shi by the portiere, Hu enfolded her in his arms. As she turned around to put her arms around him as well, Hu pleaded for sex, saying, "I worship you! To be able to join with you in a union of divine bliss is to fulfill our predestined bond of three lifetimes!"

"This has also long been my wish. You need not say another word." With that, she removed her trousers, sat down in a chair, raised her feet, and let Hu have his way with her. (MC: *This is a case of a friend making a preemptive strike.*) How laughable that Tie, in coveting Hu's wife, suffered the indignity of having his own wife defiled by Hu first. Verily,

*He ignores his own and covets his friend's wife,
Not knowing that his friend has got a head start on him.
He sold his wonton to buy a bowl of noodles.
If he is not an imbecile, who is?*

An expert in the art of lovemaking, Hu put all his skills to full use. In her ecstasy, Di-shi did not forget to enjoin him not to breathe a word of this to anyone.

"I'm so grateful to you for deigning to accept me in a union of delight, but it was your husband who brought up the idea some time ago, so it doesn't matter if he knows."

"My husband said that because he has his eye on your wife. He may be a womanizer, but he's a headstrong and straightforward man, someone not to be trifled with. We must play tricks on him if we want to enjoy ourselves for a long time to come."

"What tricks?"

"He goes in for wine and sex. So, you find him famous courtesans, take him to drinking parties, and make him stay nights in pleasure houses. In his absence, you and I can have whole nights to ourselves." (MC: *How frightening!*)

"Excellent idea! He did promise to treat me to a hundred courtesans in exchange for a rendezvous with my wife. I'll take him up on the offer and

talk a couple of the best courtesans into tying him down. Surely he won't be able to tear himself away from them. The only problem is, where are we going to get the money for him to spend in the pleasure houses?"

"Leave that to me," said Di-shi.

"With you going to so much trouble, I'll do my level best to make you happy."

After settling on their plan, they went their separate ways.

In point of fact, Hu's means were slender, whereas Tie's family fortune was quite ample, so Tie had been treating Hu to lavish feasts in order to befriend him, and Hu had been playing up to Tie. Who would have expected that Hu would bite the hand that fed him? But however deep his pockets, Tie's extravagant spending habits had gradually diminished his vast fortune. And after taking up with Hu, Di-shi kept urging him to seek pleasure outside the house while she spent freely on elaborate daily feasts in Hu's honor. In her transports of joy, she did not begrudge any expense and, taking advantage of her husband's impatience, joined hands with Hu in urging him to sell off the family estate for much less than it was worth. After the sale, she kept some of the proceeds for Hu's upkeep. As soon as he found a famous courtesan, Hu would take Tie to her quarters, where the latter would drink and stay for entire days and nights. From time to time, Di-shi also subsidized some of her husband's lavish expenses by sending him some of her private savings. (MC: *Clever of her.*) In his absence, she and Hu enjoyed themselves to the full. Believing that his wife was so understanding that she knew no jealousy, Tie grew all the more wanton and was very pleased with himself. (MC: *That holy idiot!*) On the rare occasions when he came home, Di-shi exhibited such delight, unadulterated with any trace of jealousy, that Tie was overwhelmed with gratitude and, even in his dreams, believed her to be a good woman.

One day, Di-shi had just set out wine and refreshments to enjoy with Hu when her husband suddenly showed up. "Why such a fine spread?" he demanded.

"I just knew you'd come back today, so I set out the wine and food in advance. And afraid that you might feel lonely, I've sent an invitation to Mr. Hu so that you'll have a drinking companion."

"My wife! You do know me best!"

Before long, Hu did come over. Tie enjoyed the wine with him, talking about nothing but courtesans. Under the influence of the wine, Tie again mentioned Men-shi. Hu said, "Since you now enjoy the company of famous

courtesans, why would you still care for the likes of my humble wife? If you really don't mind her unfortunate looks, I'll think of a way to bring you and her together."

Tie thanked him profusely. However, in spite of the verbal promises, Hu continued to cajole Tie to visit the courtesans' quarters, where the latter spent much of his time in drunken slumber. With his eyes dazzled by all the glamour, he had no time to spare for fun times with Men-shi. (MC: *He makes verbal promises but keeps the man too busy to get around to her. Really crafty.*)

Hu and Di-shi were so attached to each other that no night went by that they did not satisfy the demands of the flesh. Since Tie's presence proved inconvenient for them, Hu gave Di-shi a recipe for precipitating wine-induced sleep. Anyone who drank up to ten cups of the drugged wine would collapse and fall fast asleep. Equipped with this prescription, Di-shi made Tie fall asleep when he was at home after drinking only a few cups with Di-shi or Hu. Hu would then leave the reception room, switch to undrugged wine, and spend the whole night frolicking in debauchery with Di-shi, unbeknownst to Tie. A couple of times, Tie came home when Hu and Di-shi were joyfully applying themselves to wine. Each time, Hu managed to make a timely exit, although there was no time to clear up the clutter on the table. To Tie's questions, Di-shi replied that a kinsman had been there and was kept for a meal but that, afraid of having wine forced on him after the master's return, the kinsman had taken his leave. Tie would stop asking questions. It was all because he believed Di-shi when she indicated her aversion to wife-swapping and thought she was a woman of impeccable virtue. (MC: *He is just too careless.*) Plus, Hu had been giving him such flattering attentions—showing him every deference, taking him to courtesans, and keeping him company at feast tables—that no suspicion of the man had ever crossed his mind. Moreover, it was a case of two conspirators against one unsuspecting party, and the maids, also being in on it, were quick to cover up any tracks that had been inadvertently left behind. And so, with his clouded wits, Tie took Hu to be a loyal friend and Di-shi to be a virtuous wife. (MC: *In fact, hiding things from a man like Tie is quite superfluous. Why even bother?*) As more people in the neighborhood got wind of the matter, a song to the tune of "Sheep on the Mountain Slope" was made up to mock him:

Who doesn't fancy some romance?

But a pretty wife should make a man content.

*Why make the rounds here, there, and everywhere,
While offering his darling to pay a debt?
He covets another man's wife,
But his own connives with another man.
The tables are turned on the one who plots first,
While the one he covets remains none the worse.
He reached deep into his own pocket
Only for another man's benefit.
Gosh! Consider the money well spent to block ill luck!
Gosh! This deal is by no means fairly struck!*

To resume: Tie gave himself up to the pleasures of wine and sex and spent his days in a dreamy, wine-induced trance. With the passage of time, this lifestyle began to take a toll on his health, and he became confined to bed at home. Finding him in the way, Hu thought it prudent to stop coming, but Di-shi sent him this message: "My husband doesn't get out of bed anyway, and the maids do keep a sharp lookout. Relax and feel free to come! Nothing will happen."

Thus advised, Hu cast all caution to the winds. Indeed, he grew so careless that he would forget himself and walk right past Tie's bed. Suddenly spotting him one day, Tie asked in surprise, "Why did Mr. Hu emerge from inside?"

In chorus, Di-shi and the maids said, "We didn't see anyone walk by. What Mr. Hu are you talking about?"

"I did see him just now, all too clearly! But if you say no one walked by, maybe my illness played tricks on my eyes and made me see a ghost." (MC: *His mind is in a daze.*)

"No, you didn't see a ghost," said Di-shi. "It's because your thoughts are with his wife all day long. It gets so bad that in your confused state of mind, you see him the moment you open your eyes. Your eyes deceived you." (MC: *A woman with a clever tongue.*)

The next day, Hu said, on hearing about this episode, "You may have convinced him for the moment, but after he gets well, he'll think about what happened and may doubt your words. Well, if he thought he'd seen a ghost, I've got an idea. Let me show him what a real ghost looks like. If he believes his eyes did deceive him, he won't have any doubts in the future." (MC: *What a crafty man!*)

With a chuckle, Di-shi said, "Surely you jest! How are you going to find a ghost?"

"Tonight, I'll hide in one of your back rooms for some fun with you. Tomorrow, I'll make myself up to look like a ghost and walk out for him to see. Won't that be nice any way you look at it?"

Sure enough, Di-shi installed Hu in a separate room and told the two maids to attend to their master by his bed. She herself, saying that she was tired from taking care of the patient and wanted to have a good night's sleep somewhere else, abandoned her husband and spent the night with Hu.

The next day, on learning from an inquiry that Tie was awake but still drowsy, Hu painted his face blue, dyed his hair red, wrapped his feet in cotton, and noiselessly charged right at Tie's bed. (MC: *Like tricking a child.*) Still weak from his illness, Tie cried out in horror, "A ghost! A ghost!" Covering his head with his quilt, he could not stop shaking.

Di-shi hurried to his bed and asked, "What's the fuss about?"

Tie said between sobs, "Didn't I tell you I saw a ghost yesterday? I saw one again today. (MC: *Falling into the trap.*) My worsening condition bodes ill. Quickly, engage an exorcist to do an exorcism for me!" The shock of it all worsened his condition. (MC: *Isn't this retribution?*) Feeling a little guilty, Di-shi was obliged to look for an exorcist.

At the time, there lived about a hundred *li* from Yuanshang a Chan master, Liaowo by Buddhist name and Empty Valley by sobriquet, whose accomplishments were unrivaled among the monks of the region. Tie invited the master to his house with due etiquette and built an altar of atonement to pray for blessings from the Buddha. That day, the master entered into meditation, from which he did not awake at the set hour. When he finally woke up at dusk, he asked Tie, "Was there a bandit-suppressing commissioner in your clan?"

"Yes, he was my grandfather."

"Is there a Mr. Hu among your friends?"

"Yes, he's a very good friend of mine."

On hearing "Mr. Hu," Di-shi, with her dark secret, drew near, perking up her ears. (MC: *Because of her deep involvement.*)

The master continued, "What I saw a moment ago was very strange."

"What's so strange?" asked Tie.

"This poor monk first saw the local tutelary god, who happened to be listening to your ancestor, the bandit-suppressing commissioner, complaining

that Mr. Hu was ruining his grandson. The local god explained that he was too lowly to handle a case like that and gave him this advice: 'The gods of the Big Dipper and the Southern Dipper will be coming down to Jade Basket Peak today. You may go and make your complaint to them. They'll surely do right by you.' The commissioner asked this poor monk to go with him. When we got there, we did indeed see two old men, one in red and the other in green, sitting opposite each other in a game of chess. The commissioner kowtowed to them and began his story, but the two old men made no response. The commissioner went on nonetheless. It was after the chess game was over that one of the old men spoke up. 'Blessing the good and punishing the evil are heavenly principles. Being a Confucian, you should not be ignorant of the principle that the evil ought to suffer consequences of their own making, and you make futile pleas for help. Your wayward grandson deserves to die. However, since you're a distinguished Confucian scholar, your family line should not end with your grandson. He'll be spared this time. Mr. Hu will either get his comeuppance in this lifetime or suffer in the netherworld for promoting debauchery and corrupting your grandson. You may go now. Hu will be duly dealt with. You need not hate him or complain to us.' Then he turned to me and said, 'You're also predestined for a meeting with us. Having witnessed this exchange, you must spread the word to mortal beings and let them know that divine justice never misses the mark.' Having said that, they departed. That was what I experienced during my meditation session. Isn't it remarkable that the bandit-suppressing commissioner was a real person, as is Mr. Hu?"

Di-shi was appalled on hearing this and was at a loss as to what to do. (MC: *In a daze.*)

Tie thought that his grandfather had complained about him because Hu had been leading him on to engage in debauchery. He had no idea of Di-shi's involvement. He did relax on hearing that he was to be spared death this time. His condition began to improve, but Di-shi, in worrying about Hu, ended up falling prey to an affliction of the mind.

Before long, Tie fully recovered, but Hu began to suffer from lower back pain. In less than ten days, he fell gravely ill with a large boil. The physician said that he was dehydrated from excessive indulgence in wine and sex and was beyond saving. (MC: *Di-shi is partly to blame.*) Every day, Tie went straight into Hu's bedchamber to see him, since the two families had been so close that house rules did not apply to them. (MC: *Exactly what has led to this mess.*)

Men-shi was at the door, tending to the patient, and tried half-heartedly to remove herself from Tie's presence. However, out of gratitude for Tie's help with the family's expenses, she gradually began to exchange a few words and glances with him. Having been a longtime admirer of hers, Tie jumped at the opportunity and played the big seducer. As she warmed up to him, they began to dally with each other behind Hu's back. Tie's long-standing wish was finally fulfilled after he had been betrayed by his wife for so long. Truly,

*What goes around comes around;
Play no tricks against Heaven.
A deal that has been long in the making
Is now finally due for closure.*

After Men-shi took up with Tie, the two became as inseparable as lacquer and glue, as Di-shi and Hu had been at the beginning. Knowing that Hu's life hung in the balance and that he stood no chance of recovery, the two of them, in their deep attachment to each other, wanted to be a lawfully wedded couple. Tie said to Men-shi, "My wife is most kind and understanding. She gave me permission to invite you home, thus helping to bring about our union. And now, it would be wonderful if I could marry you and take you to my house to live there along with her."

With a contemptuous sniff, Men-shi said, "Yes, she's very eager to help bring about other people's unions, just as she brought about her own." (MC: *She also has a clever tongue.*)

"How did she do that?"

"She's had a relationship with my husband for a long time. My husband often didn't sleep at home. He was at your home every time you were away. Don't you know any of this?"

Only then did Tie wake up to the truth and realize that Hu had been playing him false, which explained the master's meditation and his grandfather's complaints. And his winning of Men-shi was also retribution. He said to Men-shi, "I did see him with my own eyes, but I believed their lies. If you hadn't told me, I would still have been in the dark."

"You mustn't confront her with this information after you get home. She'll hold it against me."

"Now that I have you, I feel vindicated. What's more, your husband is dying. Why should I advertise his doings?" (MC: *He is the one who started it all.*)

He shouldn't have hard feelings.) Quietly, he took leave of Men-shi and returned home but kept his mouth shut about the matter.

A couple of days later, Hu died. After Tie returned home from a visit to offer his condolences, Di-shi found herself shedding tears of grief as she recalled the loving moments she had shared with Hu. Now that Tie knew the truth, he saw right through her and said with a scornful smile, "Where do those tears come from?" Di-shi was at a loss for words. Tie went on, "I know everything. You need not hide anything from me."

Her face aflame, Di-shi said brazenly, "My tears are for the death of a good friend of yours. What's there to know? And what's there to hide?"

"Don't even try to talk your way out of it. Every night that I was away, did he sleep at his own home? And did you sleep alone? When I was ill, who was it I saw? Your tears are for the death of your lover." (MC: *True.*)

Now that the truth was out, Di-shi dared not say anything in her own defense. She maintained a moody silence, her thoughts filled with memories of Hu. The moment she closed her eyes, his image popped into her mind. Her depression led to illness. Refusing all food and drink, she died.

About six months after her death, Tie took Men-shi as his wife through the services of a matchmaker. The couple found much pleasure in each other's company. Recalling the Chan master's words of caution about retribution, he said to Men-shi, "Your beauty gave me improper thoughts, but Mr. Hu seduced my wife before I did anything. I received measure for measure. Mr. Hu and my wife fornicated behind my back, and now they're both dead and gone. Your marrying me is an act of retribution for what they did. This serves as a warning to those who are guilty of improper thoughts and debauchery. The Chan master explained all this to me after his meditation session. I'm now full of remorse. Although my family fortune is nearly exhausted, we should be able to get by. Let's live an honest life."

Tie honored the Chan master as his teacher and vowed to observe the Five Precepts.³ He put a stop to his dissolute ways and forbade Men-shi to go out pleasure seeking. (IC: *Important.*) The story gained circulation in the Mianzhou region as an illustration of the point that retribution never misses its mark. The Chan master spread the word about what he had seen during meditation and changed the local customs for the better. (MC: *Great merit.*) There is a poem in testimony:

*Women of Mianzhou took pleasure trips by habit,
Exposing themselves to courtship by all.*

*The sight of beauty leads to lechery,
Each vying to get a head start on others.
The seducer brings ruin on himself;
Once he dies, his landed estates are taken.
Vice and virtue get their due in this lifetime.
Be advised: Stay away from sins of the flesh!*



Squire Zhang, in His Noble-Mindedness, Adopts an Orphan

Squire Zhang, in His Noble-Mindedness, Adopts an Orphan

Judge Bao, in His Wisdom, Recovers a Document

As the poem says,

*Gains, losses, ups and downs are all decreed by fate;
All clever intrigues are but labor lost.
Greed makes a snake try to swallow an elephant;
In the end, all efforts will come to naught.
No medicine can prolong your life span;
Money cannot buy success for your offspring.
Accept poverty and take life as it comes!
You will then be as free as a divine being.*

Our story tells that there lived in Daliang [present-day Kaifeng, Henan] a rich man by the surname Zhang. His wife died, leaving him no son but only one daughter and a live-in son-in-law. In his seventies now, Mr. Zhang ceded all his possessions, including his landed estate, to his son-in-law, believing that the merged properties of the two families provided him with enough to live on for the rest of his life. With his daughter and son-in-law making a show of bowing and scraping to him, he gave up all wishes of having a son of his own. However, it turned out that things began to go wrong for him with the passage of time.

One day, as he stood idly at the front door, his grandson went out, claiming to ask his grandfather to dinner. Old Man Zhang said, "So, you're looking for me."

The boy replied, "No. I'm looking for my own grandfather, not you."

Old man Zhang's heart sank. He thought, "How true the saying 'A daughter belongs to another family the moment she is born'! I may be old, but I'm still energetic. Why don't I get myself a new wife? If she bears me a son, I'll have an heir to carry on the family name."

Taking money out of his private savings, he engaged a matchmaker and took a Miss Lu for his wife. Soon thereafter, Lu-shi conceived, as he had hoped, and gave birth to a son on their wedding anniversary, to the immense joy of old man Zhang. Many of his relatives came to offer him congratulations, but his daughter and son-in-law privately seethed with resentment. (MC: *Such is human nature.*) Old man Zhang named his son Zhang Yifei, known simply as "Young Zhang Yi" to all and sundry.¹

About two years later, Mr. Zhang was laid up with a grave illness. On his deathbed, he drew up his will in duplicate. Handing one copy to his wife Lu-shi, he said, "I married you because my son-in-law and my grandson have no respect for me. Since Heaven, out of pity for me, gave me a son, I wish to bequeath all my possessions to him. But he's still a baby, and you're but a woman unable to stand on your own, so I'll have to ask my son-in-law to act as the caretaker. If I specify that what belongs to me will one day go to my son, my son-in-law may get evil ideas. So I've buried a secret in this will. Keep your copy of it in a safe place. When our boy comes of age, you can appeal to the authorities. A wise judge who takes up the case will do the right thing."

Thus instructed, Lu-shi hid her copy of the will in a safe place. Old man Zhang then called his daughter and son-in-law to him, gave them a few words of instruction, and handed them the other copy of his will. His son-in-law took it and read: "Zhang Yi not ["not" (*fēi*) 非 is a homophone of 飛, part of the boy's name] being my son, I bequeath all my possessions to him—my son-in-law. Someone who's not a family member has no right to fight for the inheritance."

Overjoyed, the son-in-law gave the copy to his wife for safekeeping. Privately, old Mr. Zhang gave his remaining savings to Lu-shi and their son for their daily expenses and rented a house for them. A few days later, his illness took a turn for the worse, and he died. After his burial, his son-in-law and daughter glowed with delight at the thought that whatever had belonged to the old man was now theirs.

When the son came of age under Lu-shi's care, she recalled her husband's deathbed instructions and took her copy of his will to the authorities, with her son in tow, to make an appeal. However, the officials all ruled in the son-in-law's favor because the will was in the old man's own handwriting and his intentions were clearly spelled out. Moreover, since the son-in-law was rich enough to influence the outcome of the contest anyway, who would bother to reinterpret the will? The old man's relatives all felt that Zhang Yi was being shortchanged. (MC: *The relatives have a better sense of justice than the yamen. The yamen may have other motives, but the relatives do not. But they could also be bribed into changing their tune.*) They said, "How ridiculous that Old Man Zhang was so unfair when he made that will!" But there was nothing they could do about it.

After some more time went by, a new county magistrate came into office, one who enjoyed a fine reputation for competence. Again, Lu-shi took her son to the yamen to appeal for justice and said, "My husband told me on his deathbed that there was a secret to his will."

After reading the will over and over again, the magistrate suddenly understood. He sent for Mr. Zhang's daughter, son-in-law, and other relatives and the village elders and said, addressing the son-in-law, "Your father-in-law was a very wise man. Had it not been for this will, you would have seized all his possessions. Let me read the will aloud to you: 'Zhang Yifei being my son, I bequeath all my possessions to him. My son-in-law, who's not a family member, has no right to fight for the inheritance.'" You may ask, why did he write the character 飛 as 非? Well, he resorted to this trick because he was afraid that, as his son was still too young, you might decide to murder him on reading the will. Now that I've read the will the correct way, what had belonged to your father-in-law is rightfully his son's. What more is there to say?"

Then and there, he picked up a writing brush, punctuated the text, and ruled that all of Mr. Zhang Senior's possessions now belonged to Zhang Yifei. Everyone present respectfully accepted the justice of the ruling before exiting the yamen. By now, they all realized that old Mr. Zhang had already planned out everything when naming his son. Verily,

*He with a different surname cannot be an heir;
All property doubtless goes to the son.
Who could see through the secret of the will?
How impressive the magistrate's divine wisdom!*

This story testifies to the fact that blood is thicker than water. A wise judge can detect and correct any temporary confusion in a case. Any attempt to play tricks will be to no avail in the end.

This humble storyteller now proposes to move on to another story, one that is titled “Judge Bao, in His Wisdom, Recovers a Document.”³

Where does this story take place? Well, in Yidingfang, outside the west gate of Bianliang [also known as the Eastern Capital] of the Song dynasty, there lived a Mr. Liu Da, courtesy name Tianxiang, and his wife, Yang-shi. His younger brother, Liu Er, courtesy name Tianrui, was married to a Zhang-shi. The two brothers and their wives, living under the same roof, had never divided the family property between them. Tianxiang did not have children of his own, but his wife, Yang-shi, having been married once before, had brought a daughter by her first husband into the household. Tianrui had a son named Liu Anzhu. The village chief by the name of Li lived in the neighborhood. He had a daughter named Dingnu, who was the same age as Liu Anzhu. The Li and Liu families being close friends, the two children had been promised to each other in a prenatal engagement. When Liu Anzhu was two years old, Tianrui sent betrothal gifts to the Li family. Yang-shi, a woman lacking in wifely virtues, had ideas of her own. She eagerly looked forward to her daughter coming of age and marrying a husband willing to move into the Liu residence, so that her daughter could inherit the entire family fortune. Therefore, the sisters-in-law sometimes bandied words with each other, but thanks to the amity between the brothers and Zhang-shi’s good nature, there was little family strife.

All too unexpectedly, the crops failed one year. The authorities issued orders for residents to divide into smaller families and, as a way of reducing the local demand for food, to flee to other places that had bumper harvests. Tianxiang told his younger brother about his wish to take to the road, but Tianrui objected, “You’re getting on in years, my brother. You shouldn’t undertake such a journey. Let me and my wife and son go.”

Tianxiang agreed. He asked Village Chief Li over and said to his kinsman, “Life is so hard in this year of famine that, since the government wants local residents to seek a living in places where the harvest is good, all three members of my brother’s family will be leaving on a distant journey. (MC: *The government is being meddlesome. If it has no good policy for relieving the famine, doing nothing would have been enough.*) My brother and I having never divided up our family property, we’re now planning to draw up a document in duplicate, listing all the land, farming implements, houses, and other possessions

we have. We'll each keep one copy of the document. All will be well if my brother comes back in just a couple of years. If something untoward happens and he fails to return in five or even ten years, this document will serve as evidence of his right to the properties. That's why I invited you here, to be a witness and affix your signature to the document."

"I'm so glad to be of service," said Chief Li. Thereupon, Tianxiang produced two sheets of blank paper and wrote the following:

In this time of famine, Brothers Liu Tianxiang and Liu Tianrui and the latter's son, Liu Anzhu, residents of Yidingfang outside the west gate of the Eastern Capital, hereby act on the government's orders about dividing into smaller families and seeking a livelihood elsewhere in order to reduce the local demand for food. The younger brother, Tianrui, volunteers to take his wife and son to another part of the country. All the family possessions and landed estate remain undivided, as attested by this document, which is to be kept in two copies, one for each brother.

Date: the _th year, the _th month, and the _th day

Signatories: Liu Tianxiang

Liu Tianrui, younger brother

Witness: Village Chief Li

Then and there, all three men signed the document, and each brother took one copy. After treating Mr. Li to a meal, they took leave of him.

On a chosen auspicious day, Tianrui packed and bade farewell to his brother and sister-in-law. The two brothers broke down in tears, but Yangshi was only too happy to see the family of three take their departure. There is a *ci* poem to the tune of "Admiring the Flowers in the Musical Mode Xianli" that bears witness to this event:

*With one copy of the document for each,
The brothers were grief-stricken at their parting;
As the family of three left their home,
With all crop seedlings wilting,
They were determined to go.*

And so Tianrui, his wife, and their son ate their meals in the full force of the wind and spent their nights at the water's edge. As is usual with

travelers, they dismounted their horses when they came to bridges and boarded a boat when they came to ferries.

Before many days had passed, they found themselves at Xima Village in Gaoping County of Luzhou, Shanxi. It happened to be a fat year there, and business was booming, so they rented a house from a rich man, Zhang Bingyi. Squire Zhang and his wife, Guo-shi, were generous in giving aid to good causes and were charitably disposed. In spite of their vast land estates, they were vexed with a lack of children, male or female. They found much in common with the amiable Mr. and Mrs. Liu. Squire Zhang was so taken with the three-year-old Liu Anzhu, with his refined features, good sense, and quick mind, that he consulted his wife about adopting the boy. Guo-shi had the same idea. And so they asked a middleman to approach Tianrui and Zhang-shi. The middleman said, "Squire Zhang likes your son so much that he would like to adopt the boy, and the two families can spend more time with each other. What do you think?"

How could Tianrui and Zhangshi object to a rich man adopting their son? Tianrui answered, "In our poverty and humbleness, we wouldn't even have dreamed of claiming connections with such a distinguished family. But thanks to Squire Zhang's kindness, the two of us will feel so proud to be living here."

On hearing this reply through the messenger, Mr. and Mrs. Zhang were overjoyed. They chose an auspicious day for the adoption ceremony and changed the boy's name to Zhang Anzhu. Since Zhang-shi had the same surname as the squire, she honored him as an older brother. Henceforth, Squire Zhang treated Tianrui as a brother-in-law, and they became so attached to one another that Squire Zhang waived the rent and provided the Lius with free room, board, and clothing.

About half a year later, before happiness had quite set in, disaster struck again. Liu Tianrui and his wife both came down with a contagious disease and took to their sickbeds. Indeed,

*Bitter frost likes to hit rootless grass;
Disasters strike only the most luckless.*

Treating the patients as if they were his own flesh and blood, Squire Zhang engaged physicians for them and tried to nurse them back to health, but their condition only worsened. Within a matter of days, Zhang-shi breathed her last. Tianrui cried his heart out. Squire Zhang, as kind as ever,

bought a coffin for the funeral. A few days later, Tianrui grew so gravely ill that, knowing he was not going to get any better, he asked for Squire Zhang and said to him, "My benefactor, may I tell you something that's nearest to my heart?"

"My brother-in-law," said the squire, "you and I are as close as if we were flesh and blood. I'll do anything you want me to. I won't fail you. Just tell me."

"I have a blood brother and a sister-in-law. When I took leave of them and left home, my brother drew up a covenant, in two copies. He took one and I took the other, meaning to have the document as a testament if something untoward should happen. I'm greatly obliged to you, my benefactor, for showing me such kindness. But as ill luck would have it, I'm about to die, away from my home village. Anzhu is too young to know much. Now that you've so kindly adopted him, I hope you'll add to your credit record in the netherworld and bring him up into adulthood and then give this document to him, so that he can move the remains of me and my wife to our ancestral graveyard. Since I'm in no position to repay you in this life, I'll serve you as a donkey or a horse in my next one, to requite your kindness. Please be sure to let the boy know his original family name." With that, he burst into a flood of tears. Finding himself also in tears, Squire Zhang readily gave his promise and consoled Tianrui with kind words. At this point, Tianrui took out the document and entrusted it to Squire Zhang. That evening, he closed his eyes and died. Squire Zhang again prepared a coffin and burial clothes. He buried the two coffins next to the Zhang family's ancestral graveyard for the time being.

From that time onward, Squire Zhang and his wife treated Anzhu as their own son. When he reached school age, they sent him to school without telling him the secret. Anzhu proved to be quick and clever by nature and was able to memorize a passage verbatim after a single reading. When he was barely more than ten years old, he knew all there was to know about the Five Classics, the philosophers, and the histories.⁴ In addition, he was of a gentle and amiable disposition and was full of filial respect for his adoptive parents. Squire Zhang and his wife also treated him as they would a rare treasure. Every spring and autumn, they took him to the family graveyard and made him kowtow to his own parents but refrained from telling him who they were.

Time sped by like an arrow, and the sun and the moon shot back and forth like shuttles. With the snap of a finger, fifteen years had gone by, and Anzhu was eighteen years of age. Squire Zhang consulted his wife about

telling the young man the truth so that he could return to his home village and bury his parents' remains. When the Clear and Bright Festival rolled around, he and his wife took Anzhu, as usual, to the Zhang family graveyard.⁵ Pointing to the earth mounds off to one side, Anzhu asked the squire, "Year after year, you always tell me to kowtow to them, Father, but I never asked how the ones buried there were related to me. Could you please tell me?"

The squire replied, "My child, I was about to tell you to return to your home village, but I'm afraid that once you learn who your real parents are, you'll care less about us, the ones who brought you up. In fact, your family name isn't Zhang, nor are you a native of these parts. Your true family name is Liu. You're the son of Liu Tianrui of Yidingfang Ward outside the west gate of the Eastern Capital. You have an uncle called Liu Tianxiang. Because the crops failed in your native place, your parents brought you here to take advantage of the harvests and reduce the local demand for food. As it turned out, both of them passed away and were buried here. Before he died, your father gave me a covenant that lists all the family possessions and asked me to tell you the truth when you came of age, so that you can take this document and go see your uncle and aunt and bury your parents' remains in the Liu family graveyard. My son, I have no other option but to tell you the truth today. I played no part in the first three years of your life, but I did raise you for fifteen years. Don't forget me and my wife!"

On hearing this, Anzhu broke down in such violent sobs that he collapsed onto the ground. After Mr. and Mrs. Zhang called out his name and brought him back to consciousness, he kowtowed to his parents' tombs and said, "Only now do I know who my birth parents are." Turning to Squire Zhang and Guo-shi, he continued, "Father, Mother, now that I've learned the truth, there's no time to lose. Please give me the document, so that I can take my parents' remains to the Eastern Capital. After the burial, I'll come back to serve you two. What do you think?"

"What you're about to do is an act of filial devotion. Why would I block your way? I only hope you return quickly so that you won't make us worry."

As soon as all three of them returned home, Anzhu began to pack things he needed for the journey. The next day, when he took leave of his adoptive parents, Squire Zhang produced the document and handed it to him. Then the squire had the remains of Anzhu's parents dug up and gave them to Anzhu so that he could take them along. Before his departure, the squire again enjoined him, "Don't stay on too long in your home village, to the neglect of your adoptive parents!"

Anzhu said, "I'd never be an ingrate. After this major mission is accomplished, I'll come back to serve you." The three of them took tearful leave of one another.

Traveling at top speed, Anzhu arrived soon enough at Yidingfang on the western outskirts of the Eastern Capital and asked the way to the Liu residence. At the sight of an old woman standing at the gate, Anzhu went up, chanted a greeting, and said, "Could you please announce me? I'm Liu Anzhu, son of Liu Tianrui. I've been told that this is the residence of my uncle and aunt. I'm here to pay my respects to them and claim my kinship with the clan."

Her face darkening somewhat, the old woman asked, "Where are Second Brother and Second Sister? If you're Liu Anzhu, you should have the covenant to prove your identity. Otherwise, why would anyone believe the words of a total stranger?"

"My parents died fifteen years ago in Luzhou. Luckily, I was brought up by my adoptive father. I do have the covenant in my luggage."

"I'm Liu the older brother's wife. If you have the document with you, you're no impostor. Give it to me. You stay outside the door while I show it to your uncle. (MC: *By telling him to stay outside, she is in fact playing a trick. This suffices to show her evil nature.*) Then he'll ask you in."

"I didn't know you were my aunt. I'm so sorry for my lack of manners." So saying, he opened his luggage, retrieved the document, and handed it to the old woman with both hands. Yang-shi took it and went inside. Anzhu waited for the longest time without seeing her reemerge from the house. What had happened was this: Yang-shi already had a live-in son-in-law and was eagerly looking forward to his inheriting the entire family fortune. Day and night, she was on guard against the return of her brother-in-law Tianrui and his wife and son. On hearing that her brother-in-law and his wife were both dead and gone, she thought that since her husband and the nephew would not recognize each other, she could very well resort to trickery. Having now laid her hands on the document, she hid it securely on her person and was determined to lie should the young man come again to pester her. It was Liu Anzhu's predestined ill luck to have run into her. If he had met his uncle Liu Tianxiang first, things would have turned out differently.

In the meantime, Liu Anzhu waited until his throat was parched. Without seeing even the shadow of a ghost and not wishing to force his way in, he was wondering what was wrong when an old man walked up to him and asked, "Young man, where are you from and why are you standing motionless here at my gate?"

"Might you be my uncle? I'm Liu Anzhu. My parents took me to Luzhou fifteen years ago to flee from the famine."

"From what you say, I believe you're none other than my nephew. Do you have the covenant with you?"

"My aunt just took it inside."

All smiles, Liu Tianxiang took his hand and led him into the main hall. As Anzhu prostrated himself on the floor and kowtowed, Tianxiang said, "Child, you've just had a tiring journey. There's no need to do this. My wife and I are old and ailing, like candles sputtering in the wind. We haven't heard anything from the three of you since you left fifteen years ago. You're the only male heir to me and my brother. Believing that no one was going to inherit such a large family fortune (MC: *With such a large family fortune, why did you break up the family and send him to live elsewhere?*), I've been so vexed that my eyes have gone blurry and my ears quite deaf. Luckily, here you are! What a joy! But how are your parents? Why haven't they come with you to see us?"

With tears streaming from his eyes, Anzhu told his uncle about his parents' deaths and his adoptive parents' kindness. Liu Tianxiang also broke down in tears. He called out to Yang-shi, saying, "Wife! Your nephew is here to see you!"

"What nephew?"

Tianxiang replied, "The very Liu Anzhu who left fifteen years ago to seek a living elsewhere."

"What Liu Anzhu? There are so many swindlers around here. Most likely he's an impostor trying to lay claim to our abundant family fortune. Before his parents left, they drew up a covenant. If he has it, he's my nephew. If he doesn't, he's an impostor. As simple as that!"

Tianxiang said, "The boy said he gave the document to you."

"I never saw it."

Anzhu said, "I gave it to you with my own hands. How could you say that, Aunt?"

Tianxiang said, "Wife! You jest! The boy said you took it."

As Yang-shi kept shaking her head in denial, Tianxiang again asked Tianzhu, "Tell me where the document is. I want the truth."

"Why would I lie to you? The truth is, Aunt took it. How can the truth be denied like this, against all conscience and the will of Heaven?"

Yang-shi lashed out, "What a little liar! When did I ever lay eyes on your document?"

"Wife! Don't be so defiant! If you took it, what's the harm if you show it to me?"

Flying into a rage, Yang-shi cursed, "What a muddleheaded old thing you are! You don't believe your own wife but trust a total stranger. Why would I need that document? To paper over the window? If he's our real nephew, I'll be only too delighted. Why would I lie? But he's a sweet-talking fraud, here to cheat us out of our money!"

"Uncle," said Anzhu. "I don't want the family fortune. My only wish is to bury my parents' remains in our ancestral graveyard. (IC: *Important detail.*) As soon as that's done, I'll return to Luzhou, where I have a home of my own." (MC: *Good point.*)

"I'll have none of your sweet talk!" So saying, Yang-shi picked up a thick carrying pole and swung it straight at Anzhu's face.

As blood spurted out of Anzhu's head, Tianxiang, off to one side, tried to act the peacemaker, shouting, "Let's find out the truth first!" However, since he did not know what his nephew would look like now and his wife was so adamant in her denial, he could not make up his mind. In this moment of indecision, he felt obliged to yield to his wife. Yang-shi then pushed Anzhu out and closed the door. Truly,

*A black python's tongue and a wasp's stinger
Are less vicious than a woman's heart.*

Overcome by sheer rage, Liu Anzhu collapsed to the ground and lost consciousness. After he gradually came to, he turned to face his parents' remains and burst into wails of grief. "My aunt," he exclaimed, "how can you be so cruel?"

At this point, a man coming toward him stopped and asked, "Young man, where are you from? Why are you crying?"

"I'm Liu Anzhu, taken out of this village fifteen years ago by my parents, who were fleeing the famine and looking to make a living elsewhere."

The man looked startled. Giving Anzhu a closer look, he continued, "Your head is bleeding. Who hit you?"

"This has nothing to do with my uncle. It was my aunt who refused to acknowledge me. She took my document, denied she took it, and hit me on the head."

"I'm none other than Village Chief Li. In fact, you're my son-in-law-to-be. Now tell me everything that has happened in the past fifteen years. I'll do right by you."

On hearing that the man was his would-be father-in-law, Anzhu respectfully chanted a greeting and said tearfully, "My father-in-law, my parents, and I settled down in Xiama Village, Gaoping County, in Luzhou of Shanxi. My parents rented a house from Squire Zhang Bingyi. Soon they both died of illness, and Squire Zhang adopted me and brought me up. Only when I reached eighteen years of age did my adoptive father tell me about my background. So I've brought my parents' remains here for burial, and I wanted to greet my uncle. As it turned out, my aunt tricked me into giving her my document and hit me on the head. Where can I appeal for justice?" With that, he burst into a flood of tears.

Li's face flushed purple with anger. He asked Anzhu, "Now that she's tricked you out of the document, do you remember what it says?"

"Yes, I do."

"Recite it for me."

Anzhu recited the entire text from beginning to end without making a single mistake.

"Yes! You *are* my son-in-law. No doubt about it! That woman is so unreasonable! Let me knock at the Lius' door and talk to her. If she comes around, well and good. If not, I'll take you to Prefect Bao of Kaifeng who's the wisest judge there is. He'll surely rule in your favor and give you what's rightfully yours."

"I'm in your hands, my father-in-law."

Right away, Li knocked at the Lius' gate and, once admitted, said to Mr. and Mrs. Liu, "My dear kinsmen, what is wrong with you? Your nephew has returned, but you refuse to acknowledge him and even hit him on the head and wounded him!"

Yang-shi retorted, "What kind of man are you, Chief Li? You have no idea! He's an impostor, here at our door to swindle money out of us. If he's our nephew, he would have produced the document that bears your signature. If he can produce that, I'll acknowledge him as Liu Anzhu."

"He told me you tricked him out of the document and hid it. How can you lie like this?"

"How ridiculous can you be? When did I ever see it? And you talk to me as if I were a thief! Why should you poke your nose into what doesn't concern you?" So saying, she again raised her rod to hit Anzhu.

Afraid that his prospective son-in-law would be hurt, Li stepped forward to shield him and then took him out of the house, saying to him, "How can that

vile woman be so cruel? She won't get away with her refusal to acknowledge you. I'm not done with her yet. My good son-in-law, don't worry. Take your parents' remains and your luggage to my home and stay the night. Tomorrow we'll go to Kaifeng, the prefectural seat, to appeal to the authorities."

Heeding his advice, Anzhu followed him home, where Li introduced Anzhu to Mrs. Li and treated him to a nice meal. Then they dressed his head wound and applied medicinal ointment to it.

Early the next morning, Chief Li drafted an accusation letter and took his son-in-law to Kaifeng. After a brief wait, Judge Bao declared the court session open. Behold!

*Boom, boom go the yamen drums;
Lictors stand lined up on both sides.
It is like King Yama's hall of life and death
And the dais of the God of Mount Tai.⁶*

When Chief Li and Liu Anzhu cried out their grievances right there in the courtroom, Judge Bao took their letter of accusation and, after reading it through, told Li to approach the bench first to answer questions. After Li gave a complete account of what had happened, Judge Bao asked, "Did you set him to filing this lawsuit, and are you running the whole show?"

"He's my betrothed son-in-law, and the covenant bears my signature, so I advised him to file this lawsuit out of sympathy for the young man when such an injustice has been done to him. How could I even dream of misrepresenting the truth to Your Honor?"

"Do you recognize your son-in-law in this young man?"

"He left home at age three and didn't return until now, so I can't say I recognize him." (IC: *He is hardly to be blamed if he doesn't recognize the young man.*)

"If you don't recognize him and he doesn't have the document with him, why do you believe he is who he claims to be?"

"The Liu brothers and I are the only three people who laid eyes on the document at the time it was drawn up. And now he can recite the whole text from the very beginning without a single mistake. Isn't that enough proof of his identity?"

Judge Bao then called Liu Anzhu to him and queried him on the details. Anzhu came out with everything he knew. After examining his wound, Judge Bao continued, "Could you be a swindler posing as a son of the Liu family?"

"Your Honor," said Anzhu, "in this world, any lie will be exposed in the end. Why would I do such a stupid thing? What's more, my adoptive father Zhang Bingyi's large estate will be more than enough for me to live on for the rest of my life. I repeat that I don't want my uncle's family fortune. My only wish is to bury my parents' remains in the family graveyard. That done, I'll return to Luzhou to go on living with my adoptive parents. These are the facts for your consideration, Your Honor."

Convinced of the truth in the depositions of Mr. Li and Mr. Liu Junior, Judge Bao accepted the case and summoned Liu Tianxiang and his wife. Upon their arrival, Judge Bao called Liu Tianxiang up to him first and said, "You're the master of your household. How can you have no mind of your own and listen to your wife in everything? Tell me, is this young man your nephew or not?"

"Your Honor, I haven't seen my nephew for so long that I wouldn't recognize him if I saw him. The covenant is the only proof of his identity. And now the young man insists that he had the document and my wife insists that she never saw it. I don't have extra eyes in the back of my head, so I can't make up my mind."

Judge Bao then called Yang-shi to him, but despite his repeated questions, the woman held on to her story that she had never seen the document. Turning to Anzhu, Judge Bao said, "Your uncle and aunt being so merciless, I give you permission to have them beaten so as to vent your spleen." (MC: *Just to test Anzhu.*)

His eyes misting over, Anzhu said, "No, that won't do. My father was his brother. How could a nephew beat his uncle? I came to greet my relatives and bury my parents' remains in an act of filial piety, not to fight for an inheritance. If I'm asked to do such an unfilial thing, I'll never comply."

Judge Bao gained some idea of the truth when he heard these words, as is attested by this quatrain:

*Judge Bao in his divine wisdom
Could easily get at the truth.
By refusing to have his kinsmen beaten,
The young man proved his blood ties with them.*

After a few more questions directed at Yang-shi, Judge Bao said artfully, "That young man is indeed an impostor defying all norms of human behavior and is not to be tolerated. Mr. and Mrs. Liu and Mr. Li may go home

now. The young man will be held here in jail for harsh interrogations another day.”

The Lius and Chief Li bowed and exited the court, whereas Anzhu was put in the jailhouse. While Yang-shi was privately exhilarated, Li and Anzhu were puzzled and wondered to themselves, “Judge Bao has always been known for his divine wisdom. Why is he putting the plaintiff in jail?”

In the meantime, Judge Bao secretly instructed the jail wardens not to be hard on Liu Anzhu. He also ordered yamen staff to spread the word that Anzhu had fallen prey to tetanus and was about to die. A messenger was then sent to Luzhou to bring Zhang Bingyi to court. A few days later, Zhang Bingyi arrived. After questioning him in detail, Judge Bao gained a full understanding of the situation. He told Squire Zhang to see Anzhu in the jailhouse and comfort him with kind words. The next day, after issuing the order for an interrogation session, he secretly told the jail wardens what to do during the interrogation. Soon, all the parties involved in the case, except Anzhu, were brought to court.

When Judge Bao told Zhang Bingyi to confront Yang-shi, the latter stuck to every word of her story, whereupon Judge Bao ordered that Liu Anzhu be escorted out of the jailhouse to the courtroom. A jail warden came to announce, “The prisoner is gravely ill and about to die. He’s incapable of movement.”

On seeing Zhang Bingyi, Chief Li verified the facts with him and, in a moment of anger, exchanged a few heated words with Yang-shi. At this point, another announcement came from the wardens: “Liu Anzhu has died from his grave illness.”

Not knowing what was at stake, Yang-shi exclaimed, “Heaven and earth be praised! His death spares my family from all trouble!”

Judge Bao asked, “What illness did Liu Anzhu die of? I want a coroner’s report as soon as possible.”

After an examination, the coroner appeared in court and announced, “The eighteen-year-old individual involved in this case died of an injury from an object that hit him on his temple, as can be proved from the surrounding bruises.”

Judge Bao said, “This has grown into a major case of murder. What’s to be done? Yang-shi! How are you related to the young man? Was he a close relative?”

“Your Honor,” replied Yang-shi, “he was no relative of mine.”

“If he was a relative of yours, you wouldn’t be guilty of a capital crime if you caused his death, because you’re one generation older than he was, and

a case of involuntary manslaughter of an offspring is punishable by nothing more than financial compensation. But since he was no relative of yours, haven't you heard the saying 'Pay with your life for a life you have taken; pay with money for a debt you owe.' Since he was no relative of yours, you needed only to ignore him. Why did you hit him on the head with an instrument and cause his death from tetanus? According to the law, beating an innocent person to death is a capital crime. Lictors! Put this woman in a cangue and send her to death row. She's to be executed after the Autumn Assizes as repayment for the young man's life." (MC: *Wonderful!*)

The ferocious lictors standing on both sides of the dais thundered in acknowledgment of the order and brought over a cangue. With the color draining from her face in her fright, Yang-shi cried, "Your Honor! He *was* my nephew!"

"What proof do you have?" asked Judge Bao.

"I have the covenant as proof." (MC: *A deceitful but stupid woman.*) Right away, she extracted the document from her person and submitted it to Judge Bao for his inspection. Indeed,

*The facts are all too clear
But were twisted into a mess.
A little scheme that the judge hatched
Is enough to get the paper out of her.*

After reading the document, Judge Bao said to Yang-shi, "Since Liu Anzhu was your nephew, I'll have his corpse carried out for you to bury. Don't say no."

"I'm willing to take care of my nephew's burial."

Thereupon, Judge Bao ordered that Liu Anzhu be brought to him from jail and said to him upon his arrival, "Liu Anzhu, I resorted to a little ruse and cozened her into producing the document."

With a deep bow, Anzhu said gratefully, "If it hadn't been for Your Honor, I would have been a victim of injustice."

Yang-shi raised her head to look and found Anzhu to be as healthy as the last time she had seen him. Even the wound on his head had healed. With shame written all over her face, she found herself tongue-tied.

Judge Bao picked up his writing brush and wrote the following:

Since Liu Anzhu's act of filial piety and Zhang Bingyi's kindness are quite exceptional, honors are to be conferred on both men. Village Chief Li is to

choose a date for the wedding ceremony for his daughter and Liu Anzhu. The remains of Liu Tianrui and his wife are to be buried at the ancestral graveyard. Liu Tianxiang, for all his lack of good sense, is hereby exempted from punishment on account of his advanced years. His wife, Yang-shi, should have been punished but is set free on bail. Her live-in son-in-law, with no blood ties to the Liu clan, is to be driven out and excluded from the Liu family inheritance.

After the verdict was delivered, all the parties were dismissed and therefore were free to return home. Everyone kowtowed before departing.

Squire Zhang made name cards indicating his relationship with the Lius. After paying his respects to Liu Tianxiang and Chief Li, he went back to Luzhou. Upon his arrival at home, Liu Tianxiang reproached his wife at some length before joining his nephew in burying his brother's remains in the ancestral graveyard. That done, Chief Li chose an auspicious day for the wedding of his daughter and Anzhu as a live-in son-in-law. One month later, the newly wedded couple went together to Luzhou to pay their respects to Squire Zhang and Guo-shi. Later on, Liu Anzhu rose to eminence in his career as a government official. Liu Tianxiang and Squire Zhang being without issue, Liu Anzhu inherited the property of both families. It can thus be seen that all rises and falls in life are predestined and that one should not seek the impossible. In addition, cheating one's own family is most hurtful. That is why this story advises people not to betray one's flesh and blood for the sake of some paltry family fortune. There is a poem that bears testimony:

*The boy's adoptive father was most kind,
Whereas his own kith and kin played him false.
Fate will assert itself in the future;
'Tis better not to resort to clever tricks.*



Scholar Wenren Shows His Prowess at Cuifu Nunnery

Scholar Wenren Shows His Prowess at Cuifu Nunnery

The Nun Jingguan Goes in Glory to Huangsha Lane

As the poem says,

*Wine does not intoxicate;
Men themselves fall ready prey.
Beauty does not infatuate;
Men themselves are willing captives.
Improper thoughts that arise
from what is not decreed by fate
Should be driven from the mind
by the sword of wisdom.*

Our story makes the point that marriages are predestined. There is no shortage of cases in which whole treasuries are drained and shrewd brains are racked to bring about marriages, but all to no avail. There are also impoverished men with meagerly furnished rooms who, when their fates so dictate, may find themselves betrothed, all too unexpectedly, to women who are total strangers and far out of their league, to say nothing of women whom they meet and converse with through matchmakers. Sima Xiangru is a case in point.¹ As the ancients said, “All marriages are predestined at the immortals’ Peach Banquet.” Clearly, this is no small matter. Consider these

cases from the dawn of time: Kunlun Nu, the Yellow-Robed Sojourner, Captain Xu, and other mighty heroes whose deeds moved heaven and earth and whose eternal fame stems from their accomplishments in bringing about matrimonial alliances in treacherous circumstances.² And yet, the average man covets every beautiful woman he sees and initiates clandestine affairs until, at the height of his passion, he fantasizes about a permanent union with the woman. To that end, he cudgels his brain and comes up with all manner of devious ways of taking advantage of her, needlessly tarnishing her reputation. When scandals break out, nine out of ten such men die in disgrace without even proper burial places.

Storyteller! If things are as you say, why is it that in this world of ours there are also cases in which adulterers manage to become lawfully wedded couples and sexual predators go unpunished by the law? What makes you say that they all die in disgrace?

Gentle audience, please listen: You may not know the saying "Every intake of food and drink is predestined." I need say nothing of the bond between husband and wife, but even a casual sexual encounter is also determined by fate. If a clandestine love affair leads to marriage, it is because the lovers happen to have a predestined marriage bond. As for why some sexual predators go unpunished, it is because they turn over a new leaf once their predestined debts are paid. These cases differ from those in which the infatuated rush headlong to their own destruction. I now propose to tell a story about a man who passed as a woman and died as a result of his carnal sin and deception.

In the prefectural seat of Suzhou, there was a grand mansion, to one side of which stood a nunnery named the Beneficence Temple, built by the rich and powerful owner of the mansion. In the nunnery, there were five young nuns, one of whom, by the surname Wang, was a flirtatious beauty. About twenty years of age, she had come to this establishment as a mendicant nun. Although she was the youngest of the nuns, the owner of the mansion made her the abbess because of her excellence in the following three aspects: First, she was a smooth talker, able to discourse on a wide variety of topics. Moving freely in high society, she sweet-talked all the ladies into becoming friends with her. Second, being attuned to people's feelings, she exhibited a sweet disposition and was always ready to offer help as the occasion demanded. Third, she had a pair of clever hands, able to write, paint, and do embroidery. Ladies from prominent families invited her home to give them lessons or went to the nunnery to seek instruction from her. Every so often, there were

also women who came to pray for sons or hold prayer services to ward off evil spirits. Abbess Wang also paid visits to wealthy families and village women, to lure them to the nunnery. As the nunnery had seventeen clean, nicely furnished bedrooms—all supplied with beds, mattresses, quilts, and pillows—the abbess could easily keep visitors overnight. And so not a day went by without one or more female visitors sleeping at the nunnery. Some stayed for only one night, some for longer. There were also women who refused to come again after one visit. No man dared make an appearance at the nunnery because the owner of the adjacent mansion had put up a poster prohibiting the admission of tourists and all other unauthorized persons. Even when women of that family were inside the nunnery, their men dared not intrude, in order to hold themselves above suspicion of wrongdoing, so the abbess was able to receive more and more female visitors. (MC: *A hint that something may be amiss.*)

To dispense with idle chatter, let me tell of a Director Yuan of the Changzhou Judicial Bureau. At the time our story unfolds, he was in Suzhou, accompanying a censor on an inspection tour of Suzhou prefecture. He found it inconvenient that the inspection office was too close to the office of the censorate. Moreover, the weather was hot, and Director Yuan needed a spacious place to stay, so the county yamen rented a room in the mansion for him.

One late afternoon, Director Yuan was strolling in the courtyard when he noticed a small but tall building. He walked up the stairs in order to take a look around but found a thick layer of dust and sprawling cobwebs. No one had climbed up to this place for a very long time. As a nice breeze swept through, Director Yuan stopped in his tracks to enjoy the cool air. While he stood there, unaware of the passing of time, his eyes came to rest on another small structure across the street. In that two-story structure, several teenage girls were making merry with a pretty nun. The director dodged out of their line of sight. As he stole a glance at them through the window, he saw the nun and the girls embrace one another, or rest their arms on one another's shoulders and press their cheeks together, or kiss one another on the lips. After watching them for a considerable while, Director Yuan shook his head and said, "How very strange! How can a nun engage in such behavior? Something is wrong here." He made a mental note of what he had witnessed.

The next day, he called an attendant to him and said, "There's a temple to the left of this residence. What is it called?"

The attendant replied, "It's called 'the Beneficence Temple.' It belongs to Squire So-and-So."

"Is it a temple for monks or nuns?"

"There are only five nuns in it."

"Are there worshippers and monks going in and out?"

"With the owner standing up for the nuns, no man dares enter it without a good reason, let alone monks. Only women from rich families come to visit, and on a daily basis, too."

The director did not feel reassured. It so happened that the county magistrate arrived to see him at this point. After Director Yuan acquainted the magistrate with what he had observed last evening, the latter ordered the police to carry the director to the nunnery by sedan-chair. After the police tightly surrounded the grounds, the director stepped in. As the nuns rushed out to greet him, he saw that there were only four of them. The one he had seen the day before was not there.

"I understand that there are five nuns in this nunnery," said he. "Why is one missing?"

The four nuns replied in chorus, "Our abbess is not in."

"There's a two-story house on the grounds," continued the director. "How do you access it?"

The nuns replied evasively, "There are just a few single-story houses on the grounds. There are no two-story structures."

"Nonsense!" said the director. He led a team of officers on a search of the grounds, including the nuns' sleeping quarters, but failed to see any two-story structures.

"How very strange!" said the director. He then ordered one of the nuns to follow him to another spot, where he asked her a few trivial questions and had her taken away. Then he summoned the other three and exploded in rage, saying, "How dare you lie to me! That one confessed, saying there is indeed a two-story house on the grounds. Why did you deny it? How crafty! How abominable! Apply the squeezers to them!"

Panic-stricken, the nuns confessed: "There is indeed such a house. It's accessible through the paper door next to a bed."

"Now you're talking! Why did you lie to me before?"

"We wouldn't dare lie to you, Your Honor. It's just that there are several ladies of high status in the house (MC: *The secret is out.*), so we didn't dare tell the truth."

At the police chief's order, the nuns opened the paper door and led the director and four or five officers down a winding corridor all the way to a

staircase. On hearing laughter from upstairs, the director came to a halt and told the officers, "You go up. If you see a nun, bring her down to me."

Thus ordered, the officers stormed upstairs. Lo and behold! Two girls, three older women, and a nun were sitting there, drinking. Appalled at the sight of yamen officers bursting into the room, they scattered every which way to take cover. Acting in unison, the officers dragged the delicate-looking nun downstairs into the presence of the director. Director Yuan asked her where her bedroom was and sent the officers to search it. They found nineteen white silk kerchiefs, all bearing the stains of virgins' hymenal blood. There was also a ledger with clear records of the names of the women who had stayed in the nunnery, complete with details as to the dates of their stays, the first day of arrival of Madam So-and-So, who recommended Madam So-and-So to the nunnery, and who was a virgin and who was not. (MC: *Why did they make a record of such sordid details? Because they got carried away with their success. But had they not done so, this case would not have ended in a death sentence.*)

On reading the ledger, Director Yuan was so enraged that he ordered all five nuns taken to the yamen. The women visitors in the nunnery, wondering what could have warranted the arrest of the nuns, swarmed out through the gate and headed for home in hired sedan-chairs.

After arriving at the yamen, the director ordered that torture be applied to the nuns. As they insisted that they were law-abiding nuns not guilty of any wrongdoing, the director summoned a midwife and had her examine the nuns one by one. At her report that they were indeed all female, the director was bewildered. He thought, "If so, what's the explanation for the blood-stained kerchiefs and the ledger?" He told the midwife to approach him and asked her in a low voice, "Do you have any suspicions?"

The midwife replied, "My only suspicion is about the youngest nun. There's nothing about her that suggests she's not a woman, but she is a little different."

The director was suddenly struck by a thought. "I've long heard about a way of drawing in the male member," he said to himself. "If that nun looks a little different, she must be a man. I do recall a method that can make him show his true colors." Thereupon, he ordered that cooking oil be applied to the nun's private parts and that a dog be brought over. On catching the aroma of the oil, the dog stretched out its long tongue and licked at it nonstop. After about the tenth lick of its hot tongue, the nun could not bear the itch any longer and shuddered. Presto! His member stuck out and stayed hard.

The nuns and the midwife quickly covered their faces. (MC: *The nuns, no strangers to that equipment, need not have covered their faces.*)

In a towering rage, the director roared, "Even death is not enough to exonerate such a scoundrel!" He barked the order for the man to be thrown to the floor and given forty hard strokes of the rods. The squeezer was also applied to him to make him confess his crime. The man saw no other way but to confess. "I used to be a mendicant monk in these parts," said he. "I've always had girlish looks, and I learned about ways of drawing in and letting out my male member from my tutor. Able to deal with ten women in a single night, I've often assembled women for orgies in my practice of the teachings of the White Lotus Society. When I came to this nunnery in my wanderings as a mendicant monk, the nuns fell in love with me and kept me here. (IC: *He is quite lovable.*) So I told them that I was able to draw in my male member and pose as a woman. Thus I became the abbess, with easy access to ladies of the great houses, married and unmarried, and when they visited me, I induced them to sleep upstairs. No one suspected that anything was amiss. When I aroused their passions and let out my male member, most of them did not reject me. Some did, but I cast a spell on them so that I was able to have my way with them, and I didn't break the spell until I had enough. So these women never came back after one night. The others are willing partners in the fun and look forward to a permanent relationship. I little dreamed that my secret would be exposed by you, Your Honor. I'm quite reconciled to a death sentence."

While the confession was still going on, the owner of the mansion, having heard about the nuns' arrest from his wife and daughters, had a letter delivered to the director, asking for clemency. In a rage, Director Yuan had the kerchiefs and the ledger sealed and delivered to the mansion, without even bothering to write a letter of reply. (MC: *Wonderful!*) On seeing these objects, the rich man was so ashamed that he only wished he could sink into the ground.

The director then wrote the following verdict:

This court finds the suspect, Wang So-and-So, from the region along the lower reaches of the Yangzi River, an unscrupulous and insolent criminal. He practiced the White Lotus cult to deceive people and posed as a woman in order to defile real women. In joining the Buddhist order, he should have sought enlightenment. Instead, he entered secluded boudoirs by disguising himself as Bodhisattva Guanyin. Who could tell whether he was a monk or a nun in his seated position, his palms joined, on the meditation bed? Who could tell

whether he was a man or a woman when the shoes were shed and the body began to reveal itself? It was as if a stork entering a phoenix's nest claims a union or a snake slithering around a dragon cave seeks intimacy. The bright moon, in its innocence, shines on a boudoir but finds the woman with a male companion. The fresh breeze, seeking romance, enters a grand mansion and relieves the lonely one of her boredom. Nothing less than destruction of his dwelling and burning of his books will suffice to erase all traces of him. Nothing less than gouging out his heart and his eyes will suffice as punishment for his crime.

Next, the director ordered that all kinds of torture be applied to the man. How was a monk with a delicate constitution able to endure such excruciating pain? Soon he gave up the ghost. The four nuns were each given thirty strokes of the rod and sold by the yamen. The premises of the nunnery were demolished, and the young monk's corpse was dumped into the Bodhisattva Guanyin Pond. Those who heard the news descended on the scene to view the body and, on seeing that oversize member of his, covered their mouths with their hands and giggled, saying, "No wonder he was a darling of the ladies!" Quite a few of the married women who had consorted with him committed suicide by hanging themselves on getting word of his arrest. That monk, after indulging in sexual depravity year after year, did not even have a proper burial place when he met his end. If he had ever had second thoughts and realized that there was no future in such a life, and if he had undergone a change of heart, quit being a monk, gotten himself a wife, and spent the rest of his life in peace, wouldn't he have gone "unpunished by the law," as some members of the audience put it? Well, when one has had a taste of the sweetness and gone so far, one will continue down the same road until death, against the dictates of one's conscience, until death claims him. Therefore, once you find yourself on this road, chances are that you will most likely land yourself in trouble. Truly,

*Good is returned with good and evil with evil;
Retribution is just a matter of time.*

The above is a story about a man posing as a woman. I shall now proceed to one about a woman posing as a man, whose illicit love affair later leads to a proper marriage.

The story takes place in the Hongxi reign period [1425]. Outside the East Gate of Huzhou, there lived a Yang family. Mr. Yang, a Confucian scholar,

had passed away, leaving behind his wife and a young son and a daughter. The daughter, age twelve as our story unfolds, was as pretty as a flower and had a quick mind. Her only drawback was her susceptibility to frequent bouts of minor illness. Her mother, most meticulous in her care of the girl, wished only for her to grow up well by the grace of the gods. There was simply nothing she would not do for that purpose.

One day, mother and daughter were engaged in embroidery when they saw a nun walk in. Mrs. Yang greeted her with joy. The nun was in fact the abbess of Cuifu Nunnery of Hangzhou. A long-standing acquaintance of Mrs. Yang's, she had the gift of the gab and, in her deceitful ways, was prone to lust and indulged in debauchery with her two young disciples. And now, equipped with a packet of southern dates, a jar of autumn tea leaves, a plateful of ginkgo nuts, and a plateful of chestnuts, she was in Mrs. Yang's house for a visit. After the customary exchange of civilities, the nun turned her eyes to the girl and saw that

*She was slender and lissome
And full of grace and charm.
She was as fair as pear blossoms in the rain
And as delicate as peach blossoms in the breeze.
As she moved with mincing steps,
Her dainty shoes showed under her skirt.
As she was about to speak in her shyness,
Her cherry lips began to quiver.
Only a Feng Zhi would be unmoved;³
Even the man of Lu might be aroused.⁴*

The nun asked, "How old is the young lady?"

The mother replied, "Twelve. She's a bright and clever girl. There's only one drawback that I can't do anything about: she has a weak constitution and is prone to indispositions. How I wish I could switch places with her! This is the one thing that worries me."

"Have you ever made a votive pledge to the Buddha and prayed for the Buddha's blessing?"

"Oh, I've tried everything! I've been praying to the gods and the Buddha and making votive vows to the stars, but nothing worked. Some star of bad luck must have entered her fate and refuses to budge."

"Yes, this must be the work of fate," said the nun. "Please show me her eight-character natal chart and let me tell her fortune."⁵

"I never knew that Your Reverence could also tell fortunes!"

So saying, Mrs. Yang told her the eight characters that represented the year, the month, the day, and the hour of her daughter's birth, whereupon the nun put on an exaggerated show of giving herself up to thought. Eventually, she said, "Judging from her natal chart, I believe she would be well advised to leave you and live elsewhere."

"I'd hate to be separated from her, but if that's what it takes to cure her, so be it! But the only way to do that is for some family to adopt her, and I can't think of a candidate in the rush of the moment."

"Is she engaged to be married?"

"No, she hasn't been spoken for."

"Your daughter is fated to remain unmarried. If you betroth her, her illnesses will break out in full force. (MC: *She is not meant to remain unmarried. On the contrary, a blissful marriage is in her stars.*) There is a way. And it's the only way that fits her destiny perfectly and will give her good health and a long life. But I can hardly bring it up, because you certainly won't have the heart to agree to it."

"As long as she gets well, I don't mind where she goes."

"If you can bear to part with her, I recommend that she be sent to a nunnery. As someone who doesn't belong to the mundane world, she will be spared calamities and be richly blessed. This is the best way out."

"That's indeed a good idea, Your Reverence. This will be a work of great merit. The Buddha be praised! (MC: *An incurable habit of womenfolk.*) I do hate to part with my girl, but it's better than to see her die from illness and pain. There's simply no other choice. I'm glad that I got to know you, thanks to some predestined bond between us. If you don't find her beneath you, could you please take her on as a disciple?"

"Your daughter is richly blessed by fate. Her joining our nunnery will win credit for us in the eyes of the Buddha. The honor will be mine, but I'm hardly qualified to be her teacher."

"That's no way to talk. Whatever favor you do her will be a relief to me."

"What a thing to say, madam! She'll be doing me such an honor. I'll never fail to show her proper respect. My nunnery may be poor, but with help from our donors, we won't be short of food and clothing. You need not worry."

"So let me pick a day and deliver her to your nunnery," said Mrs. Yang. As she checked the calendar, tears kept streaming from her eyes. (MC: *She is bringing grief upon herself.*)

After the nun soothed her with comforting words, she chose a date and asked the nun to stay at her home for a few days. When the chosen day came

around, she hired a boat and sent her daughter on her way with the nun. Mother and daughter fell on each other's shoulders and cried their hearts out.

After bidding farewell to her mother, the girl went to the nunnery with the abbess and, upon arrival, exchanged greetings with the nuns and officially acknowledged the abbess as her tutor. On a chosen day, she took the tonsure and was given the Buddhist name Jingguan. Henceforth, Miss Yang became a nun at Cuifu Nunnery, all because Mrs. Yang lacked a mind of her own. There is a poem in testimony:

*She may be prone to illnesses,
But death may not be right at her door.
By rashly sending her to a temple,
Her mother was to let her choose her own bridegroom.*

You may well ask, why did the nun goad Mrs. Yang into making her daughter join the Buddhist order? It's because she needed lovely girls in her nunnery to serve as bait, to attract patrons for the illicit activities that went on in the nunnery. Miss Yang's beauty impressed her. With the mother open to any of her ideas for the sake of the girl's health, she saw her chance and, under the pretext of telling the girl's fortune, coaxed the mother into letting the girl become her disciple. At twelve years of age, the girl had not yet reached puberty and therefore did not mind the arrangement. Had she been several years older, she would have preferred death rather than submission.

After becoming a nun, Miss Yang went home to see her mother a few times a year—sometimes by herself, sometimes with the abbess. In the old days, Mrs. Yang, with her love for her daughter, always made too much fuss over the girl's indispositions, however slight they were, thereby all too often giving herself undue worries. (MC: *This is what excessive maternal love can lead to.*) Now that the girl had moved out and any minor illnesses were out of her sight, she was spared a great deal of vexation. Better still, the girl looked healthy during her frequent visits home, and to dispel her mother's worries, she always insisted that none of her illnesses had ever recurred. Convinced that she had made the right decision in sending her daughter to the nunnery, Mrs. Yang stopped worrying about her.

Our story branches at this point. In Huangsha Lane of Huzhou, there lived an untitled scholar named Wenren Jia. His ancestors were from Shaoxing, but since his grandfather used to teach in a private school in Wucheng, he

had acquired local residency status. He was as handsome as Pan An and as talented as Cao Zhi.⁶ At seventeen years of age, he lived in poverty with his forty-year-old mother. He was still a bachelor. His youthful good looks, elegant manner, graceful air, and knowledge won him respect from all his friends, and donations often came his way. His presence was indispensable at dinner parties and excursions, and his absence at their gatherings was a source of regret to his friends.

One day, in the middle of the first lunar month, when plum blossoms were in full bloom, a young friend of his engaged a pleasure boat and invited him on a trip to Hangzhou to view the plum blossoms at West Creek. After telling his mother about it, Wenren joined his friend on the trip. On arriving in Hangzhou the next day, his friend said, "Let's go to West Creek to look at the plum blossoms first. We'll go into the city proper tomorrow." And so he told the boatmen to head for West Creek.

They arrived before two hours were out. With the boat moored at the shore, Wenren and his friend went ashore on foot, and the servants followed behind, carrying wine and boxes of food.

After they had covered the better part of a *li*, they saw a grove of pine trees looming ahead, each with a trunk so thick that one could hardly get one's arms around it. Half hidden among the trees stood a nunnery surrounded by whitewashed walls. A small creek flowed in front of the two-panel gate set in the south-facing section of the wall. It was truly a secluded place. The two men walked up to the gate and peered around. The gate was closed, but there seemed to be curious eyes behind it.

"What a nice, quiet nunnery!" said the friend. "Shall we knock at the gate and ask for a cup of tea before we continue with our trip?"

Wenren replied, "Let's go see the plum blossoms first, before it's too late. We can come here again on our way back."

"Good point," conceded the friend. So they swung around and went on their way.

Before long, they arrived at West Creek, where plum blossoms were at their best. Behold:

*Patches of bright silver dazzle the eye;
Row upon row of jade pieces stretch afar.
The fragrance carried by the gentle breeze
Is more pleasant than Jia Wu's stolen incense.⁷*

*With the white petals glistening in the radiant sun,
Xishi in her makeup pales in comparison.⁸
The graceful boughs proudly withstood ice and frost;
The mottled shadows are alluring in their charm.
When will the poets ever stop singing their praises?
When will the wine cups ever run dry?*

The two men lingered amid the flowers for some time before they had the wine and food boxes brought to them and began drinking to their hearts' content. As the day waned and their wine was about to give out, they started back to their boat, half drunk. In their eagerness to press ahead in the gathering darkness, they had no time to spare for the nunnery. Hastily, they boarded the boat, and the next morning, they went ashore when they came to the grove of pine trees, and there we shall leave them for now.

The nunnery they had seen was none other than Cuifu Nunnery, where Miss Yang was living. Jingguan, for such was her Buddhist name, was now sixteen years of age, an even greater beauty than before, and of a gentle and serene nature. Of the lay visitors to the nunnery, some ogled her and some made suggestive remarks to her. On such occasions, the other nuns would giggle, offer their services, and eagerly dance attendance on them, but she would remain indifferent and unconcerned. Whenever she happened to witness the other nuns engaging in improper behavior, she turned a blind eye and sat quietly behind a closed door reading ancient books and writing a few lines of verse. (MC: *A model for decent young women.*) And there she stayed until there was a good reason to emerge from her seclusion.

Quite by coincidence, she happened to have come out for a little walk when Mr. Wenren was loitering around the nunnery, and she was the one peeping out from behind the gate. As she fixed her gaze on Wenren, she was so impressed by his otherworldly grace that after he went off, she wished she could run after him and look her fill. Languidly, she went back to her room, thinking, "How can there be such a handsome young man in this world? Could he be a divine being from heaven? I have only one life to live. Would that I could devote mine to him! Wouldn't that be a blissful marriage? And yet, since I'm already stuck in this place, I'd better give up the idea." She gave a sigh and fought back her tears. Truly,

*A mute tasting bitter cork-tree bark
Can hardly express its bitterness.*

Dear audience, mark this: Those who have joined the Buddhist order must detach their minds from all aspects of the physical world. An accomplished Buddhist is one who has laid all desires to rest and is completely devoted to Buddhism with no stirrings of sensation in the practice of the religion day and night. But in this day and age, parents arbitrarily send their children to the temples at every opportunity. Little do they know that the life of a Buddhist may get harder as the children grow up. As for those who enter the monastic life after they have reached puberty and are not strangers to romantic longings, they do so under pressure, not of their own free will. That is why those prone to stirring up trouble commit acts that drag the reputation of monasteries through the mud. As they say, "Avoiding sins is better than doing good deeds." Be advised: Do not make your children take that path. (MC: *These comments are quite enlightening.*) But I am wandering from my story.

More than four months went by quickly since Mr. Wenren had returned from Hangzhou. It being a year for the civil service examinations at the provincial level, Mr. Wenren obtained permission from circuit authorities, on a priority basis, to take the examinations. It was the sixth lunar month, but the weather was not as hot as it usually is at this time of year. And so Wenren packed for his journey to Hangzhou. He had an aunt, a widow whose deceased husband, Mr. Huang, had been a director in the Hangzhou yamen. She had invited him to pick an airy room in her residence and stay for a while in quiet seclusion. His friends having provided him with traveling money ahead of his departure date, he made arrangements for his mother and hired a boat. Taking along his page boy A-si and his bags of books, he set out on his journey.

His boat had just gone through the East Gate when a young monk by the shore called out in Huzhou dialect, "Is this boat headed for Hangzhou?"

The boatman replied, "Yes. I'm taking an exam candidate up there."

"Could you please also take me along? I'll be paying my own way."

"Why are you going to Hangzhou, Your Reverence?" asked the boatman.

"I'm from the Temple of Soul's Retreat, now on my way back to the temple after a visit home."

"I'll have to check with the gentleman in the cabin," replied the boatman. "It's not up to me."

At this point, A-si the page boy emerged from the cabin and shouted, "What a nuisance, that little bald donkey! My master is on his way to the examination grounds to get a high pass, and here you come, an unlucky bald

thing! Go away! Or I'll give you a splash of water to clean your ball of a head!" (MC: *The words of a petty man.*)

You may ask, where does that expression come from? Well, someone had said derisively of monks, "Monks' heads are not meant to do good for all; they only assume the shape of balls." A-si had picked up that coarse expression from exchanges of jocular remarks between his master and houseguests and was now applying it to the young monk.

"I was just asking if the boatman would take me on board. I can't have offended anyone. Why all this hostility?"

Having heard the commotion, Mr. Wenren pushed open the window of his cabin and took a liking to the delicate-looking monk. On hearing that he was from the Monastery of Soul's Retreat, he thought, "That monastery is known for its scenic splendors. Why don't I take this monk on board and make a friend of him? It would be nice if I could stay at his monastery." So he rushed out and said harshly to A-si, "Where are your manners? What's the harm in having His Reverence as a travel companion on our way to Hangzhou?"

In fact, this was all destined to happen. On hearing these words, the boatman pulled the boat in to shore. The monk gave a start at the sight of Mr. Wenren. While boarding the boat, he kept his eyes fixed on Wenren. In the meantime, Wenren thought, "I've never seen a better-looking monk. He's as pretty as a woman. If he were a woman, wouldn't she be a ravishing beauty? Too bad he's a man." (MC: *Wenren is getting it completely wrong.*)

After an exchange of greetings, the monk entered the cabin and sat down. The wind happened to be favorable at this time, so the sail was hoisted, and the boat went off at flying speed.

The two men in the cabin asked each other's name and, on learning that they were natives of the same place and spoke the same dialect, they felt all the more drawn to each other. Impressed by the monk's refined speech, Wenren thought, "This is not just any monk."

The monk, on his part, kept looking at Wenren with his sparkling eyes. The weather being suffocatingly hot, Wenren asked him if he wanted to take off a layer of his upper garment. The monk replied, "Heat doesn't bother me, but you go ahead and do whatever pleases you."

As it was getting late, they ate some supper, and Wenren asked the monk if he would like to take a bath. The monk declined, so Wenren himself took a bath. Being tired by this time, Wenren flung himself on his bed, and A-si went to the stern to sleep. Only after everybody had fallen asleep and all had become quiet did the monk put out the lamp, take off his clothes, and get

into Wenren's bed. But sleep eluded him as he tossed and turned, sighing all the time. Noticing that Wenren was sound asleep, he quietly sat up and began stroking him with a hand. Wenren happened to wake up at this time. As Wenren stretched and yawned, the monk swiftly withdrew his hand and quietly lay down to sleep. But Wenren had sensed what was going on. He thought, "So this monk is trying to seduce me. He's such a pretty one that his abbot probably doesn't leave him in peace, so he's become an old hand at this business. So why don't I enjoy this young man? Why waste what's to be had for the taking?"

Being in the prime of his youth, Wenren crawled to the other side of bed and lay head to head with the monk. When he stretched out a hand to touch the monk, the latter, all curled up, lay there and didn't say a word. As Wenren made a second attempt, his hands rested on two soft breasts. "This little monk is by no means obese," he thought. "Why does he have such nice breasts?" Then, as he tried to reach down to his buttocks, the monk, as if in fear, quickly turned to lie face up. Still trying to reach down from the front, Wenren gave a start and exclaimed, "My goodness! Tell me the truth! Who are you?"

"Please keep your voice down. I'm a nun, claiming to be a monk because it's awkward for a woman to be traveling alone."

"This only tightens the predestined bond between us! I can't pass you up!" Without another word, he mounted her.

"Please consider that I'm still a virgin. (IC: *Hard to come by!*) Please be gentle."

At the height of his passion, Wenren was oblivious to her pleas. Like a flower bud that had never experienced wind and rain, the nun offered a poor defense against Wenren as he tried to enter her. When she finally lost her virginity, she saw nothing for it but to frown, gnash her teeth, and bear the pain.

When the intimacy was over, Wenren said, "I still feel as if I were in a dream, meeting a fairy maiden without having done anything to deserve it. Please tell me more about yourself and where you live, so that we can see each other more often in the future."

"I'm from the Yang family outside the East Gate of Huzhou. My mother made the mistake of sending me off to Cuifu Nunnery of West Creek. My Buddhist name is Jingguan. There are male visitors at the nunnery, but they're all vulgar men of low class. None of them impress me. In the first month of this year, I was taking a walk by the gate of the nunnery when I saw you standing there. I found your distinguished looks so admirable that

I lost my peace of mind. I never expected to be able to meet you in such circumstances, like a fish finding water. All this turned out the way I've wanted for so long, so I didn't resist. I'm not a loose woman. I don't want you to take this as a one-night stand. I do wish for a lifelong and proper relationship with you."

"Are your parents still alive?"

"My father, Yang So-and-So, passed away long ago. I have only my mother and my brother now. I was on my way to see my mother yesterday when I ran into you. Are you married?"

"Not yet. But now I've met you, nothing less than a fairy maiden, and we're a perfect match in age and appearance. What's more, you're from a renowned Confucian scholar's family, and of the same county, too. How can you languish away in this place? We must work out a long-term plan."

"I'm already yours. I'll never be unfaithful. But everything today happened so quickly that I can't come up with a good plan on the spur of the moment. My nunnery isn't far from the city and is quite cool and quiet. You can stay there and study. We have acolytes who bring in food, so you need not go to any expense, and we'll be able to meet easily. We can then work out something when the opportunity comes up. What do you think?"

"That's a good idea, but I'm afraid the other nuns will object."

"Apart from the abbess, who's a lustful woman in her late thirties, there are only two other nuns, who are about twenty years old. Neither knows what chastity is. I've seen all the men they associate with. None of the men have your looks. So the nuns will surely like you. You can get acquainted with them so that we can do what we want to do when an opportunity presents itself. My only fear is that you'll refuse to stay. You have nothing to fear from them. They'll surely agree to take you in!"

Immensely pleased on hearing this, Wenren said, "A brilliant idea, my fairy maiden! So let's go to the pine grove first thing in the morning and tell my page boy to go back home on the boat, and I'll go with you to your nunnery."

After this conversation, the two again fell into each other's embrace and resumed their union of delight. Truly,

*He had never experienced such joy;
Once he did, all his bones turned cold.
Unsure if all this was real or a dream,
Time and again, he peered around in the dark.*

After their passion abated, the roosters announced the break of dawn. Afraid of being seen, Jingguan hurriedly threw on some clothes and got up. The boatman immediately began to set the boat in motion, and A-si also rose, to help his master wash and comb his hair. After breakfast, they went through the city gate while it was still early.

A-si suggested, "Let's stop the boat here, so that we can ask for directions to Director Huang's residence."

"No, there's no need to stop here," said Wenren. "There are vacant rooms in this young monk's temple. Let's go ashore at the pine grove."

On reaching the pine grove, Wenren said that he was going to the Monastery of Soul's Retreat and engaged a porter to carry all his luggage. Turning to A-si, he continued, "Now, you go back home on this boat. Tell the old lady not to worry about me. I'll be studying at the monastery. After the exam is over, I'll return home by myself, and there's no need to send messengers for me." Having thus dismissed the page boy, he watched the boat make its way back before hiring two sedan-chairs for Jingguan and himself to go to Cuifu Nunnery. The porter followed behind, as instructed.

Soon, they arrived. After the sedan-chair carriers and the porter were paid, Jingguan led Wenren into the nunnery and announced, "This gentleman wants to stay here while preparing for the examinations."

The nuns, all smiles, looked their fill at Wenren in a frenzy of delight. They lavished attention on him, served him tea, cleaned up a nice room, and put his luggage away. (MC: *No need to prepare a separate room.*) After dinner was over and everyone had taken a bath, the abbess, following the usual practice in such situations, was the first one to enjoy the male visitor, after which the other two nuns fought each other for his favor and took turns playing his companion in bed. Jingguan maintained her composure and refrained from joining in their frolics, thus winning the nuns' gratitude. (MC: *She has deeper motives.*) After a month went by in this fashion, Wenren could not stand the strain any longer, so the women fed him ginseng soup, a drink made from *Elsholtzia*, hearts of lotus seeds, and longan, to fortify him. There was nothing they would not do for him, to his great gratification.

Before anyone knew it, the seventh day of the seventh lunar month rolled around, followed by the Ullambhana Festival.⁹ It was a custom for the people of Hangzhou to hold prayer services and set lit lanterns afloat on the river.

On the twelfth day of the month, a prominent family sent a messenger to the nunnery to request a prayer service, a request that the abbess granted. When the other nuns entered her cell, she said, "We'll be holding a prayer

service away from the premises for three days, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth. With Mr. Wenren here, one of us must stay, to keep him company. Won't she be having the best of it?"

Jingguan kept silent as the two other nuns fought each other for the privilege. The abbess said, "A prayer service can't do without me, so I'm out of the picture. It was Jingguan who brought Mr. Wenren here in the first place. You two have had enough fun with him. It's only fair to let Jingguan keep him company this time." (MC: *The abbess is being fair. It's also because of her regard for Mrs. Yang.*)

"Yes, it's fair, Your Reverence," said the two nuns, to Jingguan's inner delight. And so the other nuns went to pack their ritual objects and boxes of sutras. Even the old acolytes joined them on the trip.

After seeing everyone off at the gate, Jingguan went back inside and said to Wenren, "Staying here is no solution in the long run. We need a plan. The exam date will soon be upon you. If you grow enamored of this place, you'll not only fail the exams but also lose your health."

"You think I don't know that? I forced myself to get involved with them only because I can't tear myself away from you. I'm doing this against my wishes!"

"When I first met you, I did want to follow you and extricate myself from the nunnery, but if I disappeared on my way home, the abbess would surely track me down to my mother's home. That's why I couldn't do it. But now, having been back here for so long, I can easily slip out of here with you while no one's around. Because they've all been involved with you, they ought to be afraid of being exposed, and so they won't give chase."

"No, that's not an option. I'm a scholar, and I have my mother to consider. If you and I flee this place and go to my home, my mother will be appalled, and she may not want to accept you. What's more, if the abbess tries to track you down and alerts the police, my career prospects will be doomed. And there's no telling what they'll do to you. This is out of the question. My idea is that if I pass the exams, I'll easily be able to marry you."

"But success on the exams at the provincial level doesn't give you the right to marry a nun. And what if you fail? So that's not a long-term solution either. Since I joined the Buddhist order, I've been copying sutras and writing letters on commission and made about a hundred taels of silver. I can use the money for my travel expenses and find a temporary place to stay. After you succeed on the exams, we can take our time going home. Wouldn't that be good?"

After a moment's reflection, Wenren said, "Yes, that makes sense. I have an aunt whose deceased husband, Mr. Huang, used to be an official in Hangzhou. My aunt is a devout Buddhist. She has a small nunnery on her estate and never fails to make offerings of incense every morning and night. The old nun who takes care of the little nunnery used to be my wet nurse. Let me tell my aunt about you and take you to her nunnery, with my old wet nurse as your companion. Her husband used to be an official. Who would dare ask her probing questions? In the meantime, you can let your hair grow. After I succeed on the exams, we'll be married with all proper ceremony. Won't that be wonderful? Even if I don't succeed, your hair will have grown out, and you can go everywhere freely."

"Good idea," conceded Jingguan. "We have no time to lose. Let's start on our way now! Another three days, and we won't be able to do anything."

Right away, Wenren hastened to his aunt's house. After an exchange of greetings, his aunt said, "I've been waiting for so long for you to come and sit for the exams. Why are you here only now? Do you have a place to stay?"

"Let me tell you something, Aunt: It was while I was looking for a place to stay that I ran into trouble. I need your help now."

"What is it?"

Lapsing into falsehood, he said, "I used to have a Buddhist tutor named Mr. Yang. He died many years ago. His only daughter was a childhood friend of mine. Later, she was abducted by a nun and nothing was heard from her again. When I was looking for a quiet place to stay in the West Creek area, I happened to run into her at Cuifu Nunnery. She's now quite a beauty. She doesn't like her life at the nunnery and wants to be with me wherever I go. There's a predestined marriage bond between us, and she's the daughter of my old teacher, too. So I just can't say no to her. But I'm here as an exam candidate, and I don't want any trouble. I can't very well take her home while her head is still shaved. With the exams approaching soon, I don't have the time to appeal to the authorities for justice for her, and I don't have the money to offer bribes. Aunt, you have a nunnery on your estate, and my old wet nurse is there taking care of the incense. My idea is to let the young lady stay there temporarily. Even if her own nunnery learns about this, it won't be a big deal because she's still in a nunnery, living with women. If no one tracks her down, then I'd like to marry her after the exams are over. Please help me out, Aunt!"

His aunt laughed. "So you found a Chen Miaochange and want help from me!"¹⁰ (IC: *The aunt is an interesting person.*) I don't blame you, since she's your

teacher's daughter. But if you want to marry her, you must not put her in a nunnery, because if you young people want to see each other, I don't want you to sully my nunnery. I have vacant rooms in the house that are nice and quiet. I'll get one ready for her and tell her to let her hair grow. I'll also assign a maidservant to her. You're at liberty to visit her often. At night, if she's lonely, she can have your wet nurse as a companion. That will work out nicely in more ways than one."

"If so, I'll be ever so grateful to you, Aunt, for giving me a new lease on life! I'll go at once to bring her here to greet you."

After he left his aunt and went out through the gate, he hired a sedan-chair and went straight to Cuifu Nunnery. (MC: *The sedan-chair is to hide his identity.*) Once in the nunnery, he relayed his aunt's words to Jingguan, to the latter's immense delight. She immediately began to pack the things she would need.

"After I hide you away and they come back here, I'll continue to visit them from time to time so that they won't suspect me. (IC: *Wonderful.*) My luggage can be left here for now."

"Could it be that you can't bring yourself to sever your ties with them?"

"No! You have my undivided love. I don't love anyone else. But I have to sever ties like a cicada sloughing off its skin, in an unobtrusive way. If they find out beyond any doubt that I'm behind all this with the exam date approaching, what will happen if they bring a lawsuit against me and block me from taking the exams?"

"I usually travel home by myself. If they ask you, you can just say that you were away and have no idea where I went. That way, they'll think I've gone home to visit my mother, so they may not give chase. Later, by the time they learn that I'm not with my mother, your exams will be over and we'll have left this area by another arrangement. You're not a native of this prefecture. They won't be able to find you. Even if they do, you can just deny all their charges."

Having thus made up their minds, Jingguan mounted the sedan-chair. Wenren closed the gate of the nunnery and followed the sedan-chair on foot all the way to his aunt's house.

The aunt liked Jingguan, with her shaved head, fair complexion, peachy cheeks, and soft skin. Delighted, she said, "No wonder my nephew fell in love with you! Now you take a room in the inner part of the house. No unauthorized person will dare intrude. You have nothing to worry about." Turning to Wenren, she continued, "If you lodge here and you're tracked down,

I'm afraid there would be unpleasantness. What's more, you need to be closer to the examination grounds. So you'll have to find another place to stay."

"You're right, Aunt. I'll limit myself to brief visits."

And so, Jingguan settled down in Mrs. Huang's residence. Wenren stayed the night in her room and departed the next morning to find lodgings elsewhere, but we will leave him and come back to the three nuns.

On returning to the nunnery after three days of prayer service, the three nuns found the gate closed but not bolted from within, as it should have been. When they entered the grounds but saw no one, they wondered in alarm, "Where are they?" They were more concerned about Wenren than Jingguan. When they charged into Wenren's room and found his luggage and bookcases intact, they began to relax. (MC: *Just as Wenren had expected.*) But Jingguan was nowhere to be seen, and her room was found to be spotlessly clean. Mystified, they were debating what to do when Wenren entered with unhurried steps. The nuns burst into smiles and exclaimed, "He's here! He's here!"

With one sweep of her arms, the abbess held him tightly and, without sparing a moment to inquire after Jingguan, said laughingly, "The itch is unbearable after a three-day separation. Let's go have some fun in my room." (MC: *The abbess is raring to go.*) Oblivious to the other two sex-crazed nuns, the abbess took Wenren off. With an effort, Wenren played up to her. Only after her passion had abated did she ask, "Wasn't Jingguan with you here? Where did she go?"

"I spent the whole day yesterday in the city. Then it got so late that I stayed the night with a friend, and I've just gotten back. I have no idea where she is."

When the other two nuns saw him, they said, "After you left, Jingguan must have felt so lonely that she went back to Huzhou. She was here enjoying you for two long days. It's our turn now. We'll let her stay there for a while longer before we do anything about her."

They were so occupied with Wenren that they banished Jingguan from their thoughts. Little did they know that Wenren's heart was elsewhere. After muddling through a few more days, he announced that he must find lodgings near the examination grounds. The nuns could not very well stop him from doing that, and so he left with his luggage. Over and over again, the nuns reminded him, "Whenever you have some free time, be sure to come here and stay for a while!"

Wenren readily gave his consent before he took himself off.

After a few more days went by without any news about Jingguan, the abbess began to feel uneasy and sent a messenger to ask Mrs. Yang. On getting the reply that Jingguan had not gone home, the abbess grew alarmed. Afraid that Mrs. Yang would come to the nunnery to look for her daughter, the abbess dared not raise a fuss about it and confined herself to making furtive inquiries. As Wenren also failed to show up after his departure, she began to have some misgivings. She wanted to look him up and subject him to some rigorous questioning but, not knowing where he was, had to put up with the suspense in the hope that he would make an appearance once the exams were over. However, all three sessions of the exams were soon over, but not even a shadow of Wenren showed up as the days passed. In fact, pleased with his performance on the exams, Wenren had gone to his aunt's residence and moved in with Jingguan. Cuifu Nunnery could not have been further from his thoughts.

Bitterly disappointed, the abbess and the two nuns said spitefully, "How can he be so heartless! Maybe he abducted Jingguan. There can't be any other explanation for his absence." They thought of bringing a case against him with the yamen on charges of abduction, but afraid they might have a lot of explaining to do, they gave up the idea lest they get themselves into trouble. (MC: *As Jingguan had predicted.*) They discussed whether to go to the examination grounds to look for him or to his home in Huzhou to confront him. While they were thus talking, unable to make up their minds, which is the way with women, another intriguing incident happened.

In the midst of their conversation, they heard vehement knocks on the gate. The nuns thought, "Could it be Mr. Wenren?" With one accord, they went out and threw the gate open. One large sedan-chair and three or four smaller ones were parked out front, and the servant who had knocked at the gate announced the arrival of a distinguished lady from out of town. With alacrity, the abbess walked up to greet her. As the distinguished lady emerged from the large sedan-chair, her maidservants also stepped out of the smaller ones and guided her into the nunnery. After the guest had sat down and was made comfortable, an exchange of civilities ensued, and tea was served. The lady said to her servants, "Go wait for me in the boat. I'll spend some time here and board the boat in the afternoon." The servants departed.

On entering the abbess's cell, the lady said, "I haven't been here for three years, since my husband died."

"Your Ladyship must be gracing this humble nunnery with your illustrious presence in order to offer incense upon completion of the mourning period," said the abbess.

"Exactly."

"What better time than this to enjoy the sights and sounds of autumn!" said the abbess.

With a sigh, the lady replied, "I'm in no mood to enjoy the autumn."

Catching on to her tone, the abbess said teasingly, "Is it because you're too lonely after you lost your husband?"

The lady rose, closed the door, and said to the abbess, "You've always been in my confidence, so don't think of me as an outsider. I've got something hush-hush to tell you. You were just saying that I felt lonely. Well, I feel restless after only three years, but your abstinence lasts a whole lifetime. How do you deal with it?"

"Who says we observe abstinence? I'm not going to hide anything from you. Thanks to an occasional partner or two, we don't die of boredom."

"Do you have anyone on hand now?"

"Yes, a dashing one, a young scholar, here to take the exams. But he's been away for a couple of days. We're trying to come up with a plan to get him back."

"This can be put on hold. Now, I have a nice job for you. If you put your heart into it, you'll surely be in for a lot of fun."

"What is it?"

"The other day, I went to offer incense at Zhaoqing Monastery and took a room there for the night. There was an extremely beautiful young monk who hadn't yet taken the tonsure. I'll be frank with you. Having abstained for so long, I couldn't help being aroused. As he served me tea, knowing that nothing was taboo at his age, he captured my heart with his clever tongue. I was so carried away that I dismissed all the servants, carried him to my bed, and told him to try his you-know-what on me. It turned out that the boy was quite an expert and even better than adults. All my thoughts are with him, and I just can't do without him. I spent that whole night thinking about how to take him to my home. But being a widow, I'm not supposed to associate with strange men, so as not to spoil my name. And yet, always feeling ill at ease and having to dodge prying eyes aren't my idea of having fun. Here's what I propose to you: Let him take the tonsure here, in your nunnery. With his delicate features, he could easily pass as a nun. (MC: So

she wants an illicit relationship with a monk through the intervention of a nun.) After I go home, you can take him to me, claiming that you two, tutor and disciple, are here to seek my patronage. I'll install you in my private nunnery. Even members of my family will take you to be the tutor of the little nun. That way, I'll be able to enjoy myself to the full, and no one will be any the wiser. (MC: *Very crafty.*) So this is my big job for you. If you take it, you'll be in for some fun as well. Once you have that boy, you'll be able to forget that lover of yours."

"That's indeed a wonderful idea. But if I become part of this, I'm afraid Your Ladyship may become jealous."

"I want your help. Why would I be jealous of you? I'll also let you share my bed so as not to arouse suspicions. Won't that be nice?" (MC: *She does take the long view.*)

"My dear lady," said the abbess, "in that case, I'll do it for you, even if I have to die for it! I have three disciples here, one of whom disappeared some days ago. So by a lucky chance, your boy can replace her, which will work out even better for keeping this a secret. The only problem is, how are you going to get him here?"

"I told him to come here on his own. He promised to be with me without letting the abbot know. He should be here any moment now."

In the midst of their conversation, one of the nuns knocked at the door and then entered to say, "There's a young man with tied-up hair outside, asking for her ladyship."

The lady hastened to say, "Yes, that's him! Bring him in!"

As the young man made his way in, the two nuns, impressed by his good looks, beamed from ear to ear. On seeing him, the lady nodded and told him to enter the cell. As he bowed to the abbess, the latter kept her eyes glued on him. The lady grabbed his hand (MC: *The smugness!*) and said to the abbess, "What did I tell you!"

"My vision got blurry," said the abbess. "And I went limp when I thought I saw Sudhana."¹¹

The lady burst out laughing.

When the abbess went to the kitchen to oversee the preparation of the meal and told the two nuns what had happened, both said, sucking their fingers, "This is unbelievable!"

The abbess continued, "So I'll be leaving with her."

One of the nuns said, "Could you be leaving us behind to enjoy life for yourself?"

"This is what Heaven has bestowed on me. And I don't think you'll have any less fun in this place."

After they spent some time bantering, the abbess returned to her cell, where the lady was holding the young man in her arms and talking. At the sight of the abbess, she quickly took a packet of ten taels of silver out of a small box and, handing it to the abbess, said, "This is my pledge. I'm leaving him here for now and going home on my boat. Within ten days, I'll be expecting the two of you at my home. Don't fail me." After giving a few more words of instruction to the young man, the lady went out into the dining room, ate a simple vegetarian meal, and went off in her sedan-chair.

After seeing her off and closing the gate, the abbess went back inside. To her, the young man was as precious as an illustrious pearl shining in the darkness. She gathered him into her arms, kissed him on the lips, and caressed him with her hands. When the young man found himself aroused and that member of his rose, the abbess hastened to shove her pants down and meet it. After cavorting with him for a while, she said in indescribable delight, "From now on, Her Ladyship and I will be sharing you, but for the next few nights, you're mine." After they were done, she took a razor and shaved his head. On taking a close look, she said, amused, "You look just like Jingguan. Now that you're here, you'll need a Buddhist name. Why not take the name Jingguan?" That night, the young man slept in the abbess's bed, to the frustration of the two young nuns.

The next day, after she had packed, the abbess hired a boat for her journey. She gave these words of instruction to the two nuns: "You stay on. If I like it there, I'll send you a message. If I don't come back, you may feel free to go your separate ways and return home. If Mrs. Yang sends someone to find out about Jingguan, just say that she followed the abbess to another town."

The two nuns could hardly wait to see the abbess go so that they could each return home. They emphatically gave her their promise, saying, "Of course." And so the abbess and the young man boarded the boat together, claiming to be tutor and pupil but becoming husband and wife at night. Before many days had passed, they arrived at the lady's residence and, with the young man posing as a nun, entered the private nunnery and settled down. From time to time, the lady brought the abbess and the disciple into her own bedchamber, where all three spent the nights together in one bed. The nun taught the lady a host of techniques. (MC: *She's an old hand at this business.*) With the two women sharing the young man, they enjoyed their fornication to the fullest. The young man was no match for the two

middle-aged women. A few years later, he fell ill and died. The lady became so depressed that she also died soon thereafter. As for the abbess, the lady's family members, setting themselves against her, accused her of stealing. She was thrown into prison, the stolen goods were recovered from her, and she died there, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let us come back to Cuifu Nunnery. After the abbess's departure, no one brought up Jingguan again, and Jingguan was able to live on Wenren's aunt's estate in peace and quiet. After the list of successful exam candidates was made public, with Wenren's name among the top five, he exultantly went to see his aunt. In private, he also saw Jingguan. Both were filled with joy. Henceforth, after disposing of his business as someone fresh from his success on the exams during the day, he spent his nights with Jingguan on his aunt's estate. (MC: *What happiness!*) Secretly, he sent a messenger to find out about Cuifu Nunnery and learned that the abbess had left, that the two nuns had returned home to secular life, and that the nunnery was uninhabited, though still under padlock. After he relayed this information to Jingguan, she felt that a load had been taken off her mind.

After completing his business, Wenren wanted to return to Huzhou. So he consulted his aunt, saying, "Jingguan's hair is not yet long enough for a wedding. She can continue to stay with you while I go take the national-level exams before we move on to our next course of action."

Jingguan said to him, "You mustn't let even my mother know the truth, because sending me to a nunnery was her idea. She'll wonder why I suddenly returned to secular life. Wait until my hair has grown long enough. If you and I go to her together, there will be nothing she can do."

"These are words of wisdom," said Wenren.

After he took leave of Jingguan, he returned home in glory. When he greeted his mother, he said nothing about Jingguan. At the end of the tenth month, when he was about to take the national-level exams, he went to see his aunt. By this time, Jingguan's hair had reached her shoulders and was long enough for her to wear a bun piece. Wenren offered to take her along on his journey, but his aunt objected, saying, "As I see it, this girl of a gentle nature is quite a good match for you. Since she'll be your lawfully wedded wife, how can you take her here and there before she has acquired proper status? This will be unseemly! (MC: *Very sensible.*) Leave her here with me. When you succeed on the exams and come back in triumph, her hair will be long enough. At that time, I'll declare her to be my adopted daughter. Won't it be nice to hold a proper wedding ceremony?"

After being treated to this sermon, Wenren saw no alternative but to stifle his feelings and say good-bye to Jingguan.

He went to the capital to sit for the exams, and, sure enough, he passed. Having won second-class honors, he was appointed a trainee in the Ministry of Rites. In the registry book of all the successful candidates of that year, he had the words “betrothed to Yang-shi” included in the entry under his name before he applied for permission to go on leave for his wedding ceremony. (MC: *Nothing under the sun can bring greater joy than this.*) By imperial decree, his wedding ceremony was to be complete with red bunting, artificial flowers, presents, and a banquet. After he returned home posthaste, greeted his mother, and told her about his wedding, his mother said, “You’ve never been betrothed. Whom are you marrying?”

“Let me tell you, Mother: When I was in Hangzhou, my aunt betrothed me to her adopted daughter.”

“Why haven’t I been informed?”

“You’ll get to know her soon enough, Mother.”

On a chosen auspicious day, a wedding procession went on a festooned boat to the Huang residence in Hangzhou, complete with red bunting, artificial flowers, and drummers. After Wenren bowed to his aunt and announced that he was there for the wedding ceremony, as directed by the imperial court, his aunt was beside herself with joy. “So I had the right idea after all! And now, look at all this splendor!” First she greeted Jingguan, and, holding hands, the two of them filled each other in on what had happened since they had last seen each other. By this time, Jingguan was attired in lay clothes. Mrs. Huang having shown her many kindnesses, she acknowledged her as her adoptive mother. Mrs. Huang personally dressed her up as a bride and saw her onto the festooned sedan-chair and then the boat. As the auspicious date rolled around while they were en route, they lit the nuptial candles right there on the boat. Truly,

Under the red gauze bed curtains

Sat the bride and the bridegroom.

Under the brocade quilt

Was revealed what both already knew.

On reaching Wenren’s home, both groom and bride bowed to his mother. The bride’s beauty pleased the old lady. Noticing Jingguan’s Huzhou accent, she asked, “Since you just came from Hangzhou, why do you have our local

accent?" Whereupon Wenren gave her a complete account of how Mrs. Yang had made a mistake by sending her daughter to a nunnery and other details, from beginning to end. Only then did his mother understand the situation.

The next day, Wenren and Jingguan went together to her home. As Wenren presented Mrs. Yang and Jingguan's brother with his name cards, referring to himself as "son-in-law" and "brother-in-law" respectively, Mrs. Yang thought he was quite mistaken and refused to take the cards. Jingguan felt obliged to walk over. As she called out, "Mother!" Mrs. Yang gave a start at the sight of a young lady in a bridal headdress and gown. She rose hurriedly to her feet but for the moment failed to realize that the bride was her very own daughter.

"Don't be alarmed," said the daughter. "I'm your daughter, Jingguan of Cuifu Nunnery."

Her mother did recognize her voice, and closer examination of her face convinced the mother of her identity. But with her long hair and her decidedly uncommon attire, a cursory look would not have sufficed to tell who she was. "I haven't seen you for more than a year," said her mother. "And you never sent word. When I heard that the abbess had taken you elsewhere, I was worried sick. Earlier this year, I again sent a servant to make inquiries, but he didn't see even the ghost of a shadow in the nunnery. I miss you so much, but I had no idea what to do. Now tell me, how did you get where you are today?"

After her daughter told her everything, from her chance meeting with Wenren on a boat the year before to her wedding by imperial decree, Mrs. Yang jumped up and down in the exuberance of her joy. Smiling broadly, she told her son to bring his brother-in-law inside. The son, who was school-educated and aware of proper etiquette, hastened to do her bidding and courteously escorted Wenren into Mrs. Yang's presence to stand next to his sister. When accepting the young couple's bows, Mrs. Yang felt as if she were in a dream. She said, "If I'd known earlier that this was in store for you, I wouldn't have bothered to send you to a nunnery!"

The daughter countered, "But if you hadn't done so, I wouldn't be here today in these circumstances."

Right away, they escorted Mrs. Yang to the Wenren family residence to complete the ceremony. The wedding banquet was held amid great fanfare, complete with a band of musicians. The party continued late into the night.

However, Mr. Wenren's career was by no means smooth sailing. With one setback after another, he did not win the gilded waistband that denoted

high rank until he was fifty years old. Yang-shi received a ladyship, and they lived a quiet life to a ripe old age. Once, on meeting an accomplished fortune-teller, Wenren asked why his official career had not gone the way he wanted, and the fortune-teller said, "That's because your youthful indiscretions hurt your credit record in the netherworld." Deeply remorseful about his youthful escapades at Cuifu Nunnery, Wenren often used his lesson to warn people against nunneries. Isn't this a case of "adulterers becoming lawfully wedded couples"? But if there hadn't been a predestined bond between them, how would his wonderful marriage have come about? There is a poem in testimony:

*No marriage is not made in Heaven;
How lamentable that humans turn a deaf ear!
If marriages are left to human connivance,
What credit can go to divine intervention?*

A Pauper Keeps Temporary Watch over Another Man's Money

A Miser Resorts to Tricks When Buying His Nemesis's Son

A poem goes,

All debts must be paid, as shown most clearly

In the record books of the netherworld.

Anything that is not meant to be yours

Will one day be returned to its rightful owner.

All material things have their rightful owners. Things that are not meant for you will be returned, not a penny short, to their rightful owners, whatever tricks you played in order to lay your hands on them. There is an endless supply of stories about the operations of karma in all their variations. I shall now pick one of the more curious stories to serve as a prologue to the story proper.

In Gucheng County [present-day Zhengding County, Hebei] of Jinzhou, there lived a man named Zhang Shanyou. He was a charitably disposed elderly man who spent much of his time chanting the sutras and praying to the Buddha. His wife, Li-shi, however, lacked good sense and liked gaining petty advantages. They were childless and lived in comfortable circumstances. In the same county, there lived a poor man called Zhao Tingyu. In ordinary times, he was free from moral transgressions, but when his mother

died and he had no money for the burial of her remains, he took it into his head to steal from Zhang Shanyou, knowing that the latter had money to spare. (MC: *A filial thief*.) After spending days planning his move, he managed to dig a hole through the wall of Mr. Zhang's house and stole about fifty to sixty taels of silver. After his mother's burial, he thought, "I'm not a bad man by nature. It's just because I'm too poor to afford my mother's burial that I acted against my conscience and did harm to that family. If I can't pay my debt to them in this life, I will in my next incarnation." (MC: *A thread of the story that will surely be picked up later*.)

When he got up the next morning, Zhang Shanyou saw the hole in the wall and rightly surmised that there had been a thief in the house. He took stock of his possessions and realized that about fifty to sixty taels of silver had been taken from his trunks. Being a rich man, Zhang Shaoyou did not quite mind the loss. He put it down to his bad luck and, with a sigh, dismissed the matter from his thoughts. However, Li-shi was filled with resentment. She said, "A lot of things could have been done with that money, or it could have yielded a lot of interest. I can't bear the thought of losing it to a thief!"

She was lost in these unhappy thoughts when, suddenly, a monk came to the door and asked for Mr. Zhang. Zhang Shanyou went out and asked, "What brought you here, Your Reverence?"

The monk replied, "This old monk is from the Wutai Mountain Monastery (MC: *A scapegoat*.), here, down the mountain, to ask for donations for the repair of our damaged monastery. I've been at it for quite a long time now, and I've collected about a hundred taels. I still need more. Some donors have made pledges but not yet honored them. So I still have to go to more places to collect donations, but I can't carry all this silver with me because I might lose it. I need a place to deposit it, but I haven't been able to find one. Along the way, I heard about your reputation as a generous donor to charitable causes, so I came expressly to deposit the money with you. After I collect enough donations elsewhere, I'll return to reclaim the money, and then I'll be on my way."

"Yours is a good cause. Please feel free to leave it with me. It will be perfectly safe here. You can come back to get it any time when you're ready." Then and there, Zhang Shanyou checked the amount of the silver ingot by ingot, and then he went inside and gave the money to his wife for safekeeping. When he reappeared and asked the monk to stay for a meal, the monk said, "I don't want to put you to the trouble. I'd like to go back to my job collecting donations as soon as possible."

"I've given your silver to my wife for safekeeping in the house. (MC: *Shan-you should not have given the money to his wife. He is to suffer the consequences of this mistake.*) In case I'm away when you come back for it, I'll surely make arrangements to make certain that you get it."

The monk took leave of him and went on his way to complete his mission.

Li-shi was ecstatic when she laid her hands on the monk's silver, thinking, "I just lost fifty to sixty taels of silver, and now, here comes a monk offering one hundred taels, more than enough to make up for my loss!" With greed raising its ugly head, she was determined to keep the money.

One day, before going to East Mountain Temple to offer incense and pray for a son, Zhang Shanyou said to his wife, "I'm leaving. You have the money of that monk from Wutai Monastery for safekeeping. If he comes to get it, just give it to him whether I'm home or not. If he needs food, cook him a vegetarian meal. It will be to your credit."

Li-shi said, "I know."

After Zhang Shanyou departed on his trip, the monk came to claim his deposit, having completed his mission. Li-shi said, in a barefaced lie, "Zheng Shanyou isn't at home, and I know nothing about any deposit of money. Your Reverence must have come to the wrong house."

"I gave the money to Mr. Zhang. Then he went inside and put it in your care. How can you say such a thing?"

Li-shi declared, "If I ever saw your money, let blood come out of my eyes!"

"This means you're cheating me out of my money."

"If I cheat you, let me fall to the eighteenth and lowest level of hell!"

These overly vehement oaths convinced the monk that she was determined to keep the money, but he thought it unseemly to argue with a woman. At his wit's end, he joined his palms and said, "Amitabha! (MC: *This appeal to the Buddha is lethal.*) What I deposited in your house is money that I collected from everywhere to repair the monastery. How can you cheat me like this? Now that you've cheated me out of my money in this life, you'll surely return it to me in the next one!" And so he left, filled with grief and indignation.

When Zhang Shanyou returned some time later and asked about the monk's silver, Li-shi said, again lying through her teeth, "That monk came right after you left. I gave the money back to him with both my hands."

"Good! Good! That's one weight off my mind."

Two years later, Li-shi gave birth to a son. Thereafter, their family fortune grew like a leaping flame. After another five years, another son was

born. The older of the two was nicknamed Qiseng and the younger one Fuseng. After they grew up, Qiseng turned out to be very frugal, helping to run the household and working from dawn to dusk, rising early and going to bed late. Stingy by nature, he pinched pennies, hating to part with them, and amassed an impressive family fortune. Strangely enough, the two blood brothers, nourished by the same mother's milk, were a world apart in disposition. Fuseng, the younger one, spent his days drinking, gambling, womanizing, and patronizing the brothels, throwing money away with abandon. Qiseng, watching from the sidelines, was pained by such extravagance because he was the one who had earned the money with the sweat of his brow. Every day, creditors came to the door to demand repayment from Fuseng, who was in the habit of borrowing without the knowledge of his family members. Zhang Shanyou, concerned about his good reputation, would certainly not let anyone press his son for debt repayment. Resignedly, he paid back everything Fuseng owed, much to Qiseng's frustration.

Zhang Shanyou's heart went out to his older son, for he felt that the older one was being shortchanged, working his fingers to the bone while the younger one was spending money like water. So the father decided to divide the family fortune into three equal portions—two for the brothers and one for himself and his wife—so as to let the frugal son prosper and the spendthrift suffer consequences of his own making. Otherwise, the profligate would have brought the good son down with him. Fuseng, one who would never amount to anything, rejoiced at the freedom. The division of what bound the family together could not have suited him more. His portion of the family fortune went the way of

*Snow when hot water is poured on it
And wisps of clouds blown by the wind.*

Before a year was out, all his money was gone. Then he snatched away half his parents' portion. In no time, it was gone, too. After that, he began to pester his brother, who could hardly decline. (MC: *This was inevitable. Better not to have divided the family fortune in the first place.*) Even his brother's money also went down the drain. How could a frugal man like Qiseng take this? His resentment led to an illness, and he became bedridden. Medicine failed to work. As he lay in bed, looking more dead than alive, his father said, "The one who built the family fortune is ill, but the one who ruins the family enjoys good health. The order of the five phases is all wrong!"¹ How he

wished the younger one could take the place of the older one in the sickbed! Speech was beyond him in his grief. Qiseng's illness failed to respond to medication and he died. Zhang Shanyou and his wife were so devastated that even their voices failed them. Qiseng's death did not bother his brother in the slightest because what remained of the deceased one's portion of the family fortune was now his to enjoy. His callousness added to Li-shi's grief over the passing of her older son. She wept nonstop until her eyes bled and she died. (MC: *Bearing out her own words.*) Not at all saddened by the double bereavement, Fuseng spent his time pleasure seeking in the courtesans' quarters even before the mourning period for his mother was over. His debauchery took a toll on his health. He came down with tuberculosis and began to lose his grip on life. Zhang Shanyou grew desperate, but there was nothing he could do. Whether the son would amount to anything no longer meant much to the father because even a prodigal son was better than having no heir. Truly,

*What happens now is all predestined;
You can't escape your fate when your number is up.*

Fuseng's breathing became weaker and weaker. When his time was up, his breathing stopped, like a lamp going out quietly when its oil burns up in the middle of the night.

Even though Zhang Shanyou had never favored Fuseng, the triple bereavement left him torn with gut-wrenching grief. He said to himself, "I wonder what wrong I did to deserve this retribution, leaving me heirless." While feeling aggrieved, he thought, "Those two sons of mine came from my prayers at Mount Tai Temple. Now that King Yama has snatched them away, the God of Mount Tai must know it. I should go to the God of Mount Tai to air my grievances. Maybe the god will summon King Yama and return one of my sons to me, for all I know." It was his agony and the lack of anything to occupy him that gave him such wild ideas. (MC: *Wild indeed!*)

And so he went to the temple and said tearfully, "This old man Zhang Shanyou has done a lifetime of good works. Even my two sons and my wife have done little wrong. (MC: *The mother can hardly be vouched for.*) But King Yama has taken them all, leaving me alone. Please summon King Yama and let him give me an explanation. If I deserve this retribution, I can die without regrets." With that, he prostrated himself on the floor, sobbing. Then he passed out and slipped into a coma.

While he was in this state of torpor, he saw a demon messenger approaching him. "King Yama wants your presence," said the demon.

Zhang Shanyou replied, "I was on the point of going to see King Yama and throw a few questions at him." So he followed the messenger and was led right into King Yama's presence.

"Zhang Shanyou," said King Yama, "why did you complain about me to the East Mountain God?"

"Because my wife and my two sons never did much wrong, but you took them all. I was so grief-stricken that I pleaded to the god to do right by me."

"Do you want to see your two sons?"

"Of course!"

Thereupon, King Yama ordered the demon messenger to bring the two sons to their father. Upon their arrival, Zhang Shanyou was overwhelmed with joy. To Qiseng he said, "My Number One, let me take you home."

"I'm not your Number One," said Qiseng. "I was Zhao Tingyu, who stole more than fifty taels of silver from you, as I should not have done. But having added hundreds of times more money to your family fortune, I've repaid my debt to you, and I'm no longer your flesh and blood."

Having heard these words from his older son, Zhang Shanyou gave up and, turning to Fuseng, said, "In that case, let me take *you* home, Number Two."

Fuseng said, "I'm no Number Two of yours. I was a monk at Wutai Mountain Monastery in an earlier incarnation. You owed me. Now that you've paid me back hundreds of times over, I'm no longer related to you."

Much startled, Zhang Shanyou said, "Why did you say I owed that monk? I wish I could check that with my wife."

Knowing his wish all too well, King Yama said, "Zhang Shanyou, seeing your wife is not a problem." Turning to a demon lictor, he said, "Open the gate of the Underworld and bring Zhang Shanyou's wife Li-shi here!"

The lictor acknowledged the order and went off. Soon, Li-shi was brought into the hall, wearing iron chains and a cangue.

"Mother!" said Zhang Shanyou. "Oh, how you suffer!"

Tearfully, she said, "I shouldn't have cheated the monk from Wutai Mountain Monastery out of his one hundred taels of silver. After I died, I was made to go through the torments of all the eighteen layers of hell. (MC: *Bearing out more of her own words.*) Oh, the misery of it all!"

Zhang Shanyou said, "I thought you gave the silver back to him. I had no idea you played him false. You brought all this on yourself."

"How are you going to save me?" asked Li-shi, tugging at Zhang Shanyou and bursting into tears.

In a rage, King Yama slapped his desk and gave a roar. At this point, Zhang Shanyou woke up with a start and found himself lying at the foot of the altar, but the dream still seemed so real to him that he realized everything had been the work of karma. He stopped crying and went to join the Buddhist order for a life of spiritual devotion.

*'Tis true that no evil deed done in the dark
Escapes the lightning-like eyes of the gods.
With retribution so fair and just,
How can he complain about King Yama?*

Why did I begin with this story about the operations of karma? Because it leads me to the next story, one about a poor man borrowing from a rich man and keeping good watch over the money for many years until he returned it to the owner, intact, unbeknownst to himself. This makes an even more remarkable story. Please give ear!

In the Song dynasty, there lived at the Zhou Family Farmstead of Caonan Village, Caozhou, of Bianliang [present-day Kaifeng, Henan], an untitled scholar by the name of Zhou Rongzu, courtesy name Bocheng. His wife was from a Zhang family. Mr. Zhou had inherited an immense family fortune. His grandfather Zhou Feng, a Buddhist, had built a temple on the estate and read sutras and prayed to the Buddha every day. His father, after taking over management of the estate, was so frugal that he dismantled the temple and used the parts to make repairs on the residence in order to save money on building materials such as wood, stone, brick, and tile. (MC: *His miserliness is the cause of his falling into poverty.*) By the time the repairs were finished, he had fallen ill and was laid up in bed. Everyone attributed his illness to retribution for his lack of belief in the Buddha.

After his father died, Rongzu became heir to the entire estate. A fine scholar, Rongzu wanted to go to the capital to sit for the civil service examinations. He and Zhang-shi had a baby son. Still in swaddling clothes, the boy was given the pet name Changshou. Because his wife was delicate and his son young, he could not bear to leave them behind. (MC: *It wouldn't have made any difference if he had.*) So he consulted his wife and decided to take both of them along on his journey. He put the gold and silver ingots that he

had inherited into a vat and buried the vat at the foot of the fence in his backyard, because he thought the ingots were too cumbersome to carry. He took along only loose pieces of silver and some other portable valuables. With a servant keeping watch over the estate, they set off on their journey.

Our story forks at this point. In Caozhou, there lived a poor man by the name of Jia Ren. With rags on his back and little in his belly, he never knew where his next meal was coming from. Nor did he have a regular line of work. He made a living by hiring himself out as a laborer, carrying earth, building walls, making mud bricks, and carrying water and firewood. At night, he slept in a dilapidated kiln. His hard life won him the sobriquet Pauper Jia. Of an eccentric and obstinate nature, he often said, "Why are some people so rich while I'm so poor? Aren't we all human beings?" But he was a ruthless and vicious man. There is a quatrain that testifies to his circumstances:

*With no house or land to his name,
He slept each night in a kiln at the city's edge.
A human being like everyone else,
Why should he be mired in such poverty?*

Full of bitterness, Jia Ren went every day to Mount Tai Temple when he had a moment to spare and tearfully said to the statues of the gods (MC: *Strange behavior of a strange man.*), "This humble man Jia Ren is here to say a prayer. The way I see it, I'm no less a human being than those rich men riding tall horses, wearing silk and brocade, eating the finest food, and using the finest utensils, and yet I'm in rags, I go hungry, and I have to make a fire to heat the ground I sleep on. Can I be any poorer? If I could be blessed with some modest wealth, I'd donate to monks, build temples and pagodas, repair bridges and roads, and help orphans, widows, the elderly, and the poor. Please have pity on me!" This went on day after day.

How true it is that intense earnestness never fails to touch the heart! The gods were indeed moved by his plaintive pleas. One day, when he was asleep on the veranda after saying his prayer, the Dispenser of Divine Favors called one of Jia Ren's souls to him and asked it why Jia Ren was always filled with resentment against heaven and earth. Thereupon, Jia Ren repeated his usual prayer and kept begging for mercy as if he would never stop. Feeling somewhat sorry for him, the Dispenser of Divine Favors summoned the God of Fortune and told the god to check the amount of Jia Ren's allotted material

possessions. After consulting the books, the God of Fortune gave this report: "In his previous incarnation, the said individual had no respect for heaven and earth, nor was he a dutiful son. He vilified monks, maligned the Buddha, took lives, dumped holy water, and wasted food and is therefore destined to die from cold and hunger in this incarnation." (MC: *Mark this, everyone!*)

Jia Ren took fright and began pleading again, this time even more plaintively than before, "O god! Please take pity on me! If I could be blessed with even a modest amount of food and clothing, I'd surely become a good man. When my parents were alive, I did try my best to provide for them. After they passed away, for some reason, I became poorer by the day. I do offer sacrificial paper money and libations of tea and wine at their grave, and my eyes are still wet with tears. *I am* a filial son."

The Dispenser of Divine Favors said, "Upon an examination of his behavior, we found no record of any good deeds attributable to him, but we did establish the fact that he provided for his parents in spite of his poverty. His resentment toward Heaven and Earth warrants a death from cold and hunger. However, we shall make allowances for what little filial devotion he showed. (MC: *Even a little filial devotion brings good fortune. Mark this!*) As the saying goes, 'Heaven does not give life to any undeserving human being; Earth does not let a nameless blade of grass grow.' Considering the Lord on High's compassion for life, let's see if we can borrow some good fortune from one family or another on his behalf, without diminishing what is due to that family. We can give him an adopted son, so that he can be provided for until his death. This will be a reward for what little filial piety he had."

The God of Fortune said, "I found that the Zhou family of the Zhao Family Farmstead in Caonan, Caozhou, has accumulated moral credit for three generations in succession, but the current head of the family dismantled a Buddhist temple on a whim and is therefore up for some punishment. His family's fortune can be put on loan to Jia for twenty years, to be returned by him with proper respect to the Zhous by the due date. Won't that be nice on both counts?"

"Good plan!" said the Dispenser of Divine Favors. He called Jia Ren to him, acquainted him with the plan, and told him to remember it well, adding, "By the time you become a rich man, your creditor will be waiting eagerly for repayment."

Jia Ren kowtowed and thanked the gods for their benevolence while saying to himself, "I'm a rich man now!" After leaving the temple, he mounted a tall horse and gave it free rein. (MC: *Already acting like a rich man.*) At the sight of a horsewhip, the horse galloped off at the speed of the wind and threw him to the ground. With a loud cry, he woke up and found himself still lying on the veranda. It had all been but a dream. After a moment's reflection, he said to himself, "The gods did say all too clearly that they were going to borrow the good fortune of a certain family and lend it to me for twenty years. So I should be a rich man now. But now that I'm awake, do I see any money? (MC: *Does he also see his creditor?*) Oh well, what you dream about is what you're thinking about. How can I believe in a dream? Yesterday, a rich family told me to find some bricks for a new wall. Let me go and try to find some."

And so he left through the temple gate. How true the saying "Good luck comes with good timing"! It just so happened that Scholar Zhou's servant found himself cash-strapped during his master's prolonged absence. To make things worse, a thief took everything from the house while he was fast asleep the night before, and he found nothing he could sell except the crumbling fence in the backyard. He thought, "It's of no use. Why don't I sell the bricks and try to get by with whatever money I get in return?" So he went out and ran smack into Jia Ren on the street. Knowing this was a man who made a living building walls, he asked Jia if he could find a buyer.

Jia Ren said, "My employer does need mud bricks for a fence. Let me ask him for a price first before I come to get them."

Sure enough, he went to his employer and set a price for each load that he could carry. After leading Jia into the backyard, Scholar Zhou's servant went off, leaving him alone to dig and carry the loads. Having brought his own iron spade, hoe, and baskets, Jia Ren set to work. He had just knocked down one section of the fence when he noticed that the soil sank quickly where a rock had been, as if there was a hole there. After moving the soil aside, he came upon a stone slab. He pried it up and saw a stone trough underneath filled with numerous brick-size ingots of gold and silver surrounded by a rim of small loose pieces. He gave a start, thinking, "So the gods are indeed responsive! My dream has come true. Good gracious! It's my turn to be a rich man now!"

An idea came to him. He moved some of the ingots into his baskets, covered them with soil, and put his shoulder pole through the handles of the

baskets to make one load. Then he covered the rest of the ingots with soil, to be transferred later. Carrying his load, he went straight to the tumble-down kiln that served as his sleeping quarters and hid the ingots there, unbeknownst to god or ghost. Transporting them took a couple of days.

Having suffered grinding poverty, he drew up good plans for using the fabulous amount of money that fortune had bestowed on him. First, he bought a house with the loose pieces of silver, gradually transported his treasure trove from the kiln to the house, and settled down. Then he started a small business to serve as a cover for his wealth. In a few years' time, after the business had expanded, he built a mansion and opened a pawnshop, a noodle workshop, a flour mill, an oil mill, and a winery. His businesses grew like a rising tide. He came to own land, boats, and prodigious quantities of cash. Those who used to call him "Pauper Jia" now addressed him as "Squire." He also took a wife (MC: *Where was this wife borrowed from?*) but remained without issue, male or female. The estates that stretched beyond a crow's range of flight remained heirless. And there was another mystery: In spite of his enormous wealth, he remained a miser, so hard on himself that he begrudged the spending of even half a penny. To ask him for a string of cash was tantamount to pulling a tendon from his body. He was always ready to snatch money from other people's hands, but his heart ached whenever he had to make a payment (MC: *The way rich men are.*), hence, his new nickname, Miser Jia.

He engaged an old scholar, Chen Defu by name, to serve him as an accountant, to be in charge of the ledgers of his pawnshop, and to oversee the accounts receivable and loans. Squire Jia often said to Chen Defu, "I have no one to inherit all my money. I have no children of my own, but could you find me a boy or a girl, either to buy or to adopt? My wife and I will at least have someone to delight our eyes." (MC: *This idea lays the groundwork for paying back his debt.*)

After he repeated these words time and again, Chen Defu said to a wine-shop clerk, "If there's anyone suitable, let me know first." We shall leave them in their search for an heir and come back to Scholar Zhou Rongzu.

After the scholar went to the capital for the examinations, with his wife and son Changshou in tow, fate was not kind to him. He failed the examinations, and this was not all. On returning home, he found his estate all gone, except for one house. When he went to the backyard to check on his buried inheritance, he saw that the wall had collapsed and the soil at its

foot had been removed, leaving nothing but an empty stone trough. With nothing to live on, he sold the house in a drastic move, and all three of them went to Luoyang to stay with relatives. Luck simply ran against him. Truly,

When your time comes, good luck falls into your lap.²

When your time goes, ill luck follows on your heels.³

His relatives had long been away from home. He ended up with nothing but “bright moonlight on his empty boat heading home,” and he drained his travel money to the last penny. On reaching Caonan on his way back, he ran into a late-winter snowstorm that raged for days. With nothing but unlined garments on their backs, all three of them could hardly go on with the journey. There is in testimony a *ci* poem to the tune of “*Zhenggong diao*: Rolling a Colored Silk Ball”:⁴

Who ground jade into powder and sifts it to earth?

Who is cutting ice flowers to feast the eye?

The streets look as if they are carved in jade,

The towers and terraces as if whitewashed.

Han Yu would have frozen at the Languan Pass;⁵

Meng Haoran would have fallen off his donkey's back;⁶

Wang Huizhi would not have reached Dai Kui's door.⁷

All three of them would have succumbed to the cold.

While this family endures no end of torments,

Others offer them no help. The misery!

Zhang-shi said, “It’s impossible to press on in such a snowstorm. Let’s take shelter somewhere for now.”

Scholar Zhou agreed, saying, “All right. Let’s find a wineshop and stay out of the snow.”

And so, husband and wife stopped at the door of a wineshop with their son. The clerk greeted them and asked, “A cup of wine for you, sir?”

Scholar Zhou said, “Woe is me! I have no money for wine.”

“If you aren’t having wine, why are you here?”

“I’m a poor scholar. The three of us are on our way home from a visit to relatives and got caught in the snowstorm. Without enough clothes to ward

off the cold or any food in our stomachs, we came in to find shelter from the snow.”

“That’s fine,” said the clerk. “No one can walk outside and have a roof over his head at the same time.”

“Thank you, brother,” said the scholar. Only then did he tell his wife and son to enter the shop with him. As they kept shivering with cold, the clerk said, “Scholar, how about a cup of wine to get rid of the cold?” (MC: *The inn clerk is a good man.*)

With a sigh, the scholar said, “Didn’t I say that I have no money with me?”

“Poor thing!” said the clerk. “Oh well, why don’t I earn some credit for my record in the next world? I’m going to serve you a cup of wine free of charge.” So saying, he took one of the three cups of wine set in front of the statuettes of the gods of wealth and offered it to the scholar. After downing the wine, the scholar felt much warmer. Having caught the aroma of the wine, his wife also wanted some to dispel the cold, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask for it. While she was talking with her husband, the clerk caught on. He thought, “Why don’t I do another favor and offer her a cup as well?” Holding out another cup of wine, he said, “This one is for the lady.”

The scholar thanked him, took the cup, and handed it to his wife. The boy Changshou, knowing nothing of proper etiquette, cried out that he wanted some, too. Tears fell from the scholar’s eyes as he said, “This gentleman offered drinks to me and your mother out of the goodness of his heart. You don’t get any.”

As the boy burst into wails, the clerk asked why and gave him a cup, too. Turning to the scholar, he said, “You seem to be having a hard time of it. Why don’t you put your little boy up for adoption?”

“I won’t be able to find anyone on the spur of the moment.”

“I’ve got someone for you,” said the clerk. (MC: *Nicely picking up another thread of the story.*) “But you may want to talk to your wife first.”

Turning to his wife, the scholar said, “Wife, did you hear that? This gentleman asked if we’d agree to put our boy up for adoption because we’re so poor. And he does have someone in mind.”

“To be adopted is better than to die of cold or hunger,” said his wife. (MC: *How pitiable!*) “As long as that family can keep him alive, give him to them!”

After the scholar relayed these words to the clerk, the latter said, “You’ll be pleased to know that there’s a very rich man here who’s childless, and he’s

looking to adopt a young child. I'll take you to him, but stay here for now. I need to bring someone over first."

Covering three steps with every two, the clerk sprinted to the house across the street and told Chen Defu what had happened. Chen Defu unhurriedly went to the wineshop and asked the clerk, "Where are they?"

When the clerk introduced him to Scholar Zhou, Chen Defu caught sight of the little boy, Changshou. "There's quite an auspicious air about this boy," commented Chen Defu. Turning to Scholar Zhou, he continued, "Where are you from, sir? And what is your name? Why are you willing to sell your child?"

"I'm a native of this town. My name is Zhou Rongzu. With my family fortune all gone, I'm in such dire straits that I'm putting my own son up for adoption. Might you be interested, sir?"

"No, I'm not, but old Squire Jia is. For all his vast wealth, he has no son or daughter. If he takes your son, the boy will be the only heir to the entire family fortune."

"In that case, please pull this off for me, sir!"

"Follow me," said Chen Defu, whereupon Scholar Zhou told his wife to bring along their boy and join him in following Chen Defu to the Jia residence.

Chen Defu went in first to see Squire Jia. On seeing him, the squire asked, "Any news for me about what I asked you to do—finding a child for me to adopt?" (MC: *He is obsessed with the idea because the gods and the spirits made him so.*)

"Yes, good news, Squire! I've got one for you!"

"Where's the child?"

"Right there at the gate."

"What kind of family is the child from?"

"The father is a poor scholar."

"A scholar? Good! Too bad he's poor."

"Surely you jest, sir! Do you ever see rich men selling their children?"

"Show them in!"

Chen Defu went out to the gate, spoke to Scholar Zhou, and led father and son into the house.

Scholar Zhou exchanged greetings with Squire Jia before telling his son to step up for the squire's scrutiny. Taking a liking to the fresh-faced boy, Jia Ren exclaimed, "A fine boy!" After asking for the scholar's name, he said to Chen Defu, "I'm taking his boy. Tell him to draw up a document."

"What do you want the document to say?" asked Chen Defu.

"Just to say what these documents usually do: Mr. So-and-So, the undersigned, being short of food and clothing, offers his son for adoption by old Squire Jia, a rich man."

Chen Defu said, "'Squire' is enough. Why add 'a rich man'?"

"I'm not a poor man, am I?"

Knowing the ways of the rich, Chen Defu said, humoring him, "All right. Adding 'a rich man' is fine."

"I've got another addition," continued Squire Jia. "Add a phrase at the end, saying that neither party can breach this contract after it's signed. The one who does will pay the party who does not renege a penalty of a thousand strings of cash."

Chen Defu burst into a peal of laughter. "If so, how much will you be paying for the adoption?"

"Never you mind. Just write as I say. How much can he want? With my kind of wealth, what I could flick out with a fingernail of mine will be more than he could consume in a lifetime!"

After Chen Defu relayed these words to Scholar Zhou, the latter resignedly wrote as the squire had dictated, but he stopped at the words "a penalty of a thousand strings of cash" and asked, "If so, how much is he paying for the adoption?"

Chen Defu replied, "How would I know? That was my question, too. He said that with his kind of wealth, how much could you want? What he could flick out with a fingernail of his would be more than you could consume in a lifetime."

"That's true," conceded Scholar Zhou. So he wrote as Jia had dictated and, amazingly enough, left the amount for the adoption blank. He and Chen Defu were both too bookish to be alert to such traps. They took Jia at his word and assumed that Zhou would not be shortchanged. Little did they know that the rich make a practice of ensnaring people and gaining petty advantages. You must never believe their sugared words.

And so Scholar Zhou drew up the document. Chen Defu picked it up and handed it to Squire Jia. The squire led the boy to his wife in the inner section of the house. His wife also took a liking to the boy. At seven years of age at this time, Changshou already understood something of the world. The squire told him, "In the future, if people ask for your surname, say 'My surname is Jia.'"

"No," said Changshou. "My surname is Zhou."

Mrs. Jia put in, "My good son, I'll make you nice clothes tomorrow. If anyone asks for your surname, just say it's Jia."

Changshou insisted, "I'm a Zhou, even if you make me a red gown."
(MC: *An innocent child.*)

The squire was displeased. He did not even bother to go out and dismiss the scholar. At Scholar Zhou's urging, Chen Defu went to remind the squire that the scholar was still there. The squire said, "He can go now but leave the boy here."

Chen Defu said, "How can he go before you pay him for having brought up the boy?"

The squire was determined to brazen it out. Feigning incomprehension, he said, "What payment? Oh, he can pay me any amount."

"Now you're being playful, Squire! He's selling his son precisely because he's dirt-poor. Surely you can't be asking him to pay you!"

"He lets me adopt his son because he can't feed the boy. From now on, I'll be feeding the boy. I'm not demanding payment from him, am I? So how can he turn the tables on me and ask me for adoption money?" (MC: *Is making such devious arguments a part of rich men's nature?*)

Chen Defu said, "He went through no end of hardships bringing up his son. By offering the boy to you, sir, he expects to be paid, so that he can afford his travel expenses. How can you play him false like this?"

"He signed the contract, didn't he? He can't go back on his word now! If he has second thoughts, he'll be breaching the contract, which means he'll owe me a thousand strings of cash as a penalty. Only then can he take his boy back." (MC: *Ingenious!*)

"How can you play people like that? Please do the right thing and pay him his due."

"All right, Chen Defu. In deference to you, I'll give him one string of cash."

"That's much too little for such a nice boy."

"One string is a lot of coins! Even for a rich man like me, spending one string can be as painful as cutting a tendon out of my body. How can a poor man like you talk about it as if it's nothing? Give it to him! Being a scholar, he may not want any money when he sees that his son is in good hands now."
(MC: *Ingenious!*)

"What are you saying!" exclaimed Chen Defu. "No payment, no adoption!" But Chen Defu's protests fell on deaf ears. In resignation, he took the one string of cash for Scholar Zhou.

In the meantime, the scholar was outside consoling his wife and saying, "It's a good thing that this is a very wealthy family. I've already signed a contract. This deal will surely go through. Our little Changshou will be in good hands."

His wife was about to ask him how much they were going to be paid when Chen Defu came out, holding one string of cash.

"Are you telling me that all the hardships I went through raising our boy are worth only one string?" said Mrs. Zhou. "It's not even enough to buy a clay doll!"

Chen Defu went back inside and relayed these words to the squire. Jia Ren replied, "A clay doll doesn't eat. (MC: *Ingenious!*) As they say, 'Don't spend your money on anything that needs to be fed.' He wants to sell his son because he can't afford feeding the boy. Isn't it good enough that I'm willing to take the boy? Why should I pay anything? Since you insist, I'll add one string. No more. If he won't take it, tell him to give me a thousand strings and take back his son, in accordance with the contract." (MC: *The middleman is put on the spot with such a rich man.*)

"If he had a thousand strings, he wouldn't have been willing to sell his son," said Chen Defu.

The squire erupted in fury. "If you have the money, you give it to him! I don't have the money!" (MC: *Another ingenious remark that only a rich man is capable of.*)

With a sigh, Chen Defu said to himself, "I shouldn't have brought him here in the first place. The squire refuses to give more, and the scholar won't be content with only two strings. I'm in a difficult position as the middleman. I've been in his employ for so many years that I'm actually happy that he now has a son. Oh well, let me make a sacrifice and help pull off the deal for both families." (MC: *Chen Defu is a good man.*) Aloud, he said to the squire, "You can deduct two strings from my salary and give the scholar four strings."

"With two strings from you and two strings from me, to whom does the child belong?" asked the squire.

"To you, sir."

Cracking a smile, Jia Ren said, "You're paying half the price, and yet you let me have the child. You're a good man!"

Thus, another two strings were added, and Chen Defu was told to make the entries, complete with annotations, in the account book. Then he went out with the four strings and said to Scholar Zhou, "Being as tightfisted as

he is, Squire Jia refused to give more than two strings. So I had to add two strings, my salary for two months, for you. Now that your son is in good hands, please don't dispute the amount." (MC: *Right*.)

"This doesn't stand to reason!" said the scholar. "You're too kind!"

"I ask only that you remember me, Chen Defu, in the future," said Chen Defu.

The scholar said, "With Squire Jia paying two strings, you, sir, made up half the total amount. You're doing me such a favor. I'll never forget your kindness. Please bring my son out. I'll give him some instructions before we go."

And so Chen Defu brought Changshou out, and the boy and his parents fell on one another's shoulders and cried as if they would never stop. Then Scholar Zhou said, "We sold you because we have no other choice. You'll be free from hunger and cold. They won't shortchange you if you behave well. We'll come and see you whenever we can."

The child could not bear to part from his parents and hung on to them, weeping nonstop. Chen Defu went out and bought some sweets for the boy. Only then was Chen Defu able to mollify the boy and induce him to go into the house as Scholar Zhou and his wife took themselves off.

Having thus bought a son on the cheap by trickery, Squire Jia was greatly pleased with himself and changed the boy's name to Jia Changshou. Knowing that the boy was not unaware of what was going on, Squire Jia forbade people to bring up the child's past, nor did he allow Changshou to have any communication with his parents. In mysterious ways, he kept the boy's past a watertight secret. (MC: *All to no avail*.) In fact, just as in horticultural grafting when one twig is attached to another, he was to unwittingly hand the family fortune back to its rightful owner in the future.

As he grew up, Changshou gradually forgot about his childhood and acknowledged none but Squire Jia as his father. Strangely enough, while his father hated to part with even half a penny, he was a spendthrift, treating silver like dirt, and so he came to be known to all and sundry as "Young Master Money."

Then Mrs. Jia passed away, and Squire Jia was confined to his sickbed. Wishing to go to Mount Tai Temple to offer incense and pray for his father, Changshou asked for one string of cash from his father, but behind his father's back, he and the page boy Xing'er opened the family vault, took out a liberal amount of gold and silver, and went to the temple. It being

the twenty-seventh day of the third month, the eve of the birthday of the God of Mount Tai, the temple was filled with worshippers. As afternoon turned to evening, they picked a nice room on the temple grounds in which to stay the night but found the room already occupied by an elderly couple. Behold:

*Both are sallow, gaunt, and thinly clad.
The man's scholar's cap is weighed down by dust;
The woman's socks are caked with mud.
They must be travelers and away from home.*

You may wonder who they were. In fact, they were none other than Scholar Zhou Rongzu and his wife, who had sold their son. After selling their son in their poverty and failing to get help from anywhere, they led a drifter's existence for about ten years before they begged their way home, hoping to find out from the Jias about how their son was faring. As the birthday of the God of Mount Tai happened to be drawing near when they were passing Taizhou Prefecture, Scholar Zhou figured that his service might be needed by people wishing to write prayers. Bearing in mind the prospect of making a few pennies, he asked the custodian of the temple for help. The custodian found him useful and kept him in the temple for the night. Out of his regard for this impoverished scholar, the custodian assigned a nice, clean room to him. As it turned out, Jia Changshou also liked the room and told Xing'er to drive the old couple out. Flaunting his connection with Changshou like a fox walking in the company of a tiger, Xing'er thundered, "You penniless wretch! Give the room to us and be quick about it!"

"Who are you?" asked Scholar Zhou.

Xing'er said, giving the scholar a slap, "Don't you know who 'Young Master Money' is? Imagine asking who he is!"

"I have the custodian's permission to occupy this room. No 'Young Master Money' can dislodge me!"

Upset that the scholar refused to budge, Changshou ordered Xing'er to hit him. Xing'er was wrestling with the scholar when the latter's loud cries caught the attention of the custodian, who hastened to the scene and shouted, "Who's making trouble here?"

Xing'er said, "Young Master Money of the Jia family wants to take this room."

The custodian said, "Every family has a head, and every temple has a custodian. I assigned this room to the scholar. How can you forcibly take it from him?"

"Young Master Money is flush with cash," said Xing'er. "Here's one string for you for a night in this shabby place."

At the sight of the money, the custodian changed his tune. "All right, I'll tell them to give the room to you." (MC: *Who in this world would not change his tune at the sight of money?*)

As the custodian tried to talk them into changing rooms, Scholar Zhou, for all his resentment, saw nothing for it but to oblige.

The next day, everyone went home after offering incense at the temple. By the time Changshou got home, Squire Jia had died, so Squire Jia Junior inherited the vast wealth, but of this, no more need be said.

After going down Mount Tai, Scholar Zhou headed for the Jia residence in Caonan Village to make inquiries. Having been away for so many years, he felt like a stranger to the roads and alleys. While they were walking slowly, Mrs. Zhou suddenly complained of chest pain. As there happened to be a pharmacy within view, with a placard inscribed with the words "Free Medicine," they rushed to it. Mrs. Zhou was given some medicine, and the pain passed after she took it. As husband and wife went to thank the shop owner, the latter said, "Don't thank me. You need only spread the word about me." Pointing to the placard, he continued, "Remember my name: Chen Defu."

Scholar Zhou nodded and said the name twice. Turning to his wife, he said, "This name sounds familiar. I must have come across it before. Does it ring a bell with you?"

"When we sold our son, wasn't the middleman's name Chen Defu?"

"So it was! Let me ask him." Turning back, he called out, "Mr. Chen Defu! Do you recognize me?"

Taking a good look at the scholar, Defu said, "You do look somewhat familiar."

"You've aged, too, sir. I'm Scholar Zhou, the one who sold my son."

"Do you still remember my two strings of cash?"

"Yes, your kindness has never been absent from my thoughts. I wonder if my son is all right."

"You'll be pleased to know that your son Jia Changshou is quite a fine young man now."

"How is the old squire?"

"He passed away recently."

"A miser he was, if ever there was one!" said Scholar Zhou.

"Now your son is the new squire, quite a far cry from the old one. He's righteous and charitable. The free medicine in this shop was all bought with his money."

"Mr. Chen, would it be possible for us to see him?"

"You two just sit here in my shop for a while. I'll go bring him here."

As soon as he found Jia Changzhou, Chen Defu told him what had happened. Although no one had ever said anything to him about his adoption, Jia Changshou cast his mind back to his childhood now that Chen Defu had brought it up, and a dim recollection of the past came back to him. He rushed to the pharmacy to see his parents. When Chen Defu took him into their presence so that he could make his obeisance to them, Changshou gave a start. "Isn't this the man I had Xing'er beat up in Tai'an? (MC: *Just as the proverb says, 'Out of blows, friendship grows.'*) What's going on?"

Meanwhile, Scholar Zhou said, "Isn't this the man who forcibly took our room in Tai'an?"

"Yes," said his wife. "Young Master Money, or whatever he's called."

"He drove me mad at the time. Who would have imagined that he was my son!"

Changshou said, "I had no idea you were my parents. Please forgive me for my rudeness in the heat of the moment!"

The scholar and his wife were elated to see their son, but they looked a little reserved on making his acquaintance in such an abrupt manner. (MC: *This is only to be expected.*)

Feeling apologetic, Changshou said, "Are you still angry about what happened in Tai'an?" Right away, he told Xing'er to go home and bring a box of gold and silver to him. When the box was delivered, he said to Chen Defu, "I didn't know they were my parents when we met in the temple, and I gave them offense. I'm offering them this box of gold and silver by way of an apology." (MC: *An apology to one's parents can hardly be made with money, but, of course, it's the only thing that the rich deem valuable.*)

When Chen Defu related the message to the scholar, the latter said, "How can I take money from my own son when he wants to apologize?"

Changshou fell to his knees. "I'll feel bad if Father and Mother refuse to take it. I ask for your indulgence and forgiveness."

Moved by these words, Scholar Zhou felt obliged to take the box, but he froze on opening the lid because the silver ingots bore the inscription "Zhou Feng."

"The silver belonged to my family," said Scholar Zhou.

"How do you know that?" asked Chen Defu.

"'Zhou Feng' is my grandfather's name. He had the inscription chiseled onto the ingots. You can see for yourself, sir."

Chen Defu took the box, checked the ingots, and said, "Yes, this is true. But why did your property end up in the Jia residence?"

"Twenty years ago, I took my wife and son to the capital to sit for the examinations. Before we left, I buried my entire inheritance underground, but everything was gone by the time we came back. That's why we became so poor that we had to sell our son."

"Squire Jia used to be dirt-poor. He made a living as a laborer making mud bricks. Then, all of a sudden, he struck it rich. (MC: *They are from the same district. Why does he know so much about Jia's origins but not Zhou's?*) My guess is that he dug out what belonged to you. He had no children of his own, so your son, whom he adopted, has inherited the family fortune. Isn't it Heaven's will that the family fortune has now come back to its rightful owner? No wonder he hated to part with even one penny and never wasted anything. It's all because those things were not his to begin with! He was in fact keeping watch over the property for you!" (MC: *He does have a discerning eye.*)

The scholar and his wife were overcome with emotion. Changshou was also thoroughly amazed.

Scholar Zhou retrieved two ingots of silver from the box and gave them to Chen Defu by way of thanking him for the two strings he had offered them a long time ago. When his repeated objections did not avail, Chen Defu gave up and took the silver. Recalling the kindness of the clerk in the wineshop, Scholar Zhou asked him over and rewarded him with one ingot of silver. The clerk had long since forgotten what he thought was just a trifling thing (MC: *It's only right to repay the kindness.*), and he went away, filled with delight at this all-too-unexpected handsome reward.

Changshou took his parents home so that they could live together. Scholar Zhou returned what was left in the box to his son and told him to donate the silver to poor people who did not have a means of making a living, reminding him not to forget the hardships his parents had gone through for twenty years. He also instructed his son to build a Buddhist temple, as his grandfather

had done, so that he and his wife could cultivate themselves in it. Jia Chang-shou changed his surname back to Zhou. It was for nothing that Jia Ren spent twenty years of his life as a rich man since he hated spending even one penny and the money was not meant for him to enjoy after all. (MC: *If he had been a spendthrift, would that mean the money was rightfully his?*) It can thus be seen that everything has its rightful owner. All plots and schemes are to no avail, as attested by this quatrain:

*Anyone wishing to stand on his own feet
Must not try to deceive heaven and earth.
Rich or poor, it's all a matter of fate;
How laughable the stupid schemes that lead nowhere.*

The Monk of the Eastern Hall Invites Demonic Spirits during a Lapse in Vigilance

The Man in Black Commits Murder in an Abduction Attempt

As the poem says,

*Wandering souls in this vast cosmos
May be confused or misled for various reasons.
The Lord on High in his ingenious ways
Blurs one's vision and muddles one's brains.*

As our story has it, the Lord on High, in his esoteric and ingenious ways, is the mover behind everything in this world of ours, throwing human beings into confusion at every turn. Even in dreamland, the most ridiculous illusions may prove in the end to have rational explanations that are beyond human expectations.

In the Tang dynasty, a Mr. Zhang of Luoyang, on his way to the capital to sit for the civil service examinations, went with his papers to see Niu Sengru, District Defender of Yique [in present-day Henan].¹ En route, Mr. Zhang was caught in a thunder-and-hail storm. As afternoon had darkened into evening and the nearest inn was still a long way off, he sat down under a large tree to rest. When the rain stopped some moments later, he took the

saddle off the horse and slept by the roadside with his page boys in the dim light of the moon. They were so tired that they immediately fell fast asleep.

On waking up a considerable while later, Mr. Zhang saw in his drowsy state a *yaksha*-like being, several tens of feet tall, eating his horse. Frightened out of his senses, he threw himself down into the tall grass, not daring to make a sound. As he lay watching, that being finished off the horse and noisily gobbled up his donkey. Then it grabbed one of his servants, held the man by both feet, and tore him in half. Appalled that the being was now moving on to humans, Mr. Zhang struggled to his feet and ran for his life helter-skelter. The monster gave chase, roaring curses at him. Mr. Zhang kept running ahead frantically without daring to take a look over his shoulder. After he had covered about a *li*, the noise behind him began to subside. He slowed down and saw a large grave, beside which stood a woman. In his panic, he shouted, not caring in the least whom he was addressing, "Help!"

"What's happening?" asked the woman.

After hearing Mr. Zhang's account, the woman said, "This ancient grave here doesn't have anything in it, and there's a hole in the back. You may hide inside. Otherwise, your life will be in danger." (MC: *But who is this woman? Could she be a ghost that resides in the grave?*) With that, she vanished from view. Mr. Zhang found the hole and got in. Once inside that spacious grave, he could hear no sound from outside, and so he thought himself out of danger.

Soon he took a peek through the hole and saw that the moon was shining brighter than before. All of a sudden, his ears caught the sound of human voices talking. Growing afraid again, he hunkered down and stayed still. An object was pushed in through the hole. As the smell of blood assailed his nostrils, he peered intently in the darkness of the grave and saw, by the moonlight that filtered in, that it was a corpse with a head that was almost severed and barely attached to it. He had not yet recovered from the shock when another corpse was pushed in, followed by three or four more in quick succession. Then he heard voices around the grave counting amounts of gold and silver, other valuables, and clothing. Only then did he realize that there was a gang of bandits outside. With bated breath, he remained in his position and listened.

The ringleader spoke up and called out about ten names (MC: *This is Heaven's will.*), distributing items from their loot among the men. There followed a confusion of voices complaining about the unfairness of the distribution, and the clamor did not die out until quite some time later. Believing that there was no one outside now, Mr. Zhang was nonetheless again smitten

with fear as he stared at the dead bodies, and he could not get out of the grave with the corpses blocking his way. There being nothing he could do, he stayed where he was, meaning to wait until dawn before deciding what to do next. He tried to calm himself down by recalling the names that he had heard, but several of them had slipped his memory. He kept repeating the five or six names that he did remember until the sky slowly brightened.

In the village where the robbery had taken place, a group of men got together, carrying all manner of objects that could serve as weapons, and went to hunt down the robbers. On reaching the grave and seeing blood all over it, they gathered around it and began to dig. The bodies of all the murder victims were found inside. And then, when they saw Mr. Zhang, they gave a shout, "Here's one of the robbers!"

As they trussed Mr. Zhang up with rope, the latter said, "I'm an exam candidate! I'm not a robber!"

"If you're not a robber, why are you in this grave?"

Zhang told them everything that had happened the night before, but no one believed him. "He must be one of the robbers who killed and then took the dead bodies here, and he happened to fall into the grave," said one of the men. "Don't believe his lies!"

As the men kicked him and rained blows on him, Mr. Zhang could do nothing but lament his ill fate. Eventually, an older and wiser man spoke up. "Let's not beat him in private like this. Let's take him to the county yamen!"

Thereupon, the group of men marched him to the county yamen. On the way, Mr. Zhang saw his servants with his donkey and his horse, complete with saddles on their backs. Appalled, Zhang exclaimed, "What was it I saw last night? Why are the horse and the donkey and the servants all still alive?"

The servants, seeing their master all tied up and in the custody of a group of men, were also stunned. "We were so tired last night that we dozed off by the roadside, and when we woke up at daybreak and didn't see you, Master, we started looking for you. What a shock it is to see you so humiliated by these people!"

After Zhang repeated his story about last night to the servants, they said, "We slept so well we didn't see anything unusual. How are such strange things possible?"

The villagers said, "Exactly! He was talking such a lot of nonsense! He must be one of the robbers. And those men must be in cahoots with him!" Without showing the least leniency, they marched him to the county yamen.

Mr. Niu was an old acquaintance of Scholar Zhang's. (MC: *If not, he would be put to torture.*) At the sight of the scholar bound and roped by villagers, he said in alarm, "What happened?"

After Mr. Zhang repeated his story, Mr. Niu ordered that he be untied. He also asked the scholar to rise and give him more details about what he had seen the night before. "I still remember several of the robbers' names," Zhang added. "And I also heard clearly the amounts of the loot that they divided among themselves."

Mr. Niu took a writing brush and asked Zhang to write down the names and what he knew about the stolen goods. The police then rounded up all the suspects along with their loot. No guilty person was able to escape justice.

The fact of the matter was that Zhang's illusions about a man-eating *yaksha* had been conjured up by the aggrieved spirits of the murder victims in order to force Mr. Zhang to hunker down in the grave and remember the robbers' names so as to bring them to justice. This is a case of Heaven capturing the robbers through Scholar Zhang (MC: *If this was indeed the will of Heaven, what wrong did Mr. Zhang do to deserve this terrible shock?*), and this is exactly what I meant when I said, "The most ridiculous illusions may prove in the end to have rational explanations."

Now I propose to tell another story about illusions that led to multiple operations of karma that defy comprehension, a story that is even more appalling and laughable than the last one. Truly,

*Where virtue abounds, vice abounds ten times more,
But debts from previous lives must be paid in the end.*

This story also takes place in the Tang dynasty. To the west of Yizhou [the present-day city of Linyi, Shandong], there stands a Mount Gong that towers over the other mountains in the region. There being no human habitation within a thirty-*li* radius of the mountain, two visiting monks in the first year of the Zhenyuan reign period [785–804] liked the mountain for its quiet seclusion. Believing it to be the ideal place for the cultivation of their spirits, they spared no pains in gathering withered and fallen branches all over the mountain and put up a hut amid big trees. The two monks sat inside cross-legged and applied themselves assiduously to the study of the sutras, day and night.

When people in nearby villages heard about this, they gladly pitched in to build houses for them. Within a month, a temple took shape. The two monks

grew even more industrious, and visitors came from far and near to pay their respects to them. Not a day went by without donors coming to offer them meals. The two monks, each occupying one hall, took vows in front of statues of the Buddha to never go down the mountain (MC: *Leading to another big court case.*) but to study the sutras in the temple and attain the fruit of enlightenment. Indeed,

*The temple gate stays closed throughout the day
To rosy clouds, flowing water, and the vast sky.
While red maple leaves fall into the creek,
The monks on the mountain remain asleep.*

Also,

*Beyond the eaves, quivering filaments;
By the brook, floating petals on spring water.
Shunning fame and gain in the mundane world,
They delight in the mist on the mountain.*

More than twenty years went by as they mortified their flesh. One moonlit wintry evening in the Yuanhe reign period [806–20], the two monks were chanting sutras in their own halls when, in the stillness of the empty mountain, faint sobs became audible from below. As the sound of sobbing came nearer and soon reached the temple gate, the monk of the eastern hall was suddenly struck by this thought: (MC: *Trouble is stirred up.*) “I haven’t gone out for so many years in my life of loneliness on this mountain. I wonder what life is like down there? These sobs sound so sad!”

At this point, the sobs stopped. A figure jumped off the fence with a thud and headed in the direction of the western hall. The monk of the eastern hall was alarmed by the figure’s massive build and grotesque form. Not daring to make a sound, he waited in fear for the next thing to happen. As soon as the figure entered the western hall, the chants of the monk there stopped abruptly and were replaced by sounds of a tussle. After a while, there came the frightening chomping sounds of mastication. In a panic, the monk of the eastern hall thought, “With no one else in the temple, I’ll be the next victim. I’d better get out of here!”

In all haste, he opened the gate and ran out helter-skelter. After confining himself indoors for so long, he did not know his way around the area and

just kept going until, drained of energy, he looked back and saw the figure lurching forward with long strides. All the more frightened, the monk frantically ran ahead. Suddenly, he came upon a small creek. He hitched up his cassock and waded across to the other side. His pursuer stopped at the water's edge and shouted, without crossing the creek, "If it were not for this creek, I would have swallowed you, too!"

The monk pressed forward in fear. Not caring where he was going, he just let his legs take him wherever they wished.

Soon, a blinding snowstorm came on, and he could barely see the way ahead. Just when he was at a loss as to what to do, he saw a cowshed. Quickly, he dived in and hid himself from view. It was the middle of the night, and the snowstorm began to subside. All of a sudden, he saw a man clad in black, carrying a sword and a spear, slowly approaching the railings from outside. The monk held his breath and, from his hiding place in the dark, peeped at the man who was out there, exposed to view. The man in black looked all around him expectantly, as if he was waiting for something. A while later, some objects, most likely parcels of clothing or bedsheets, were tossed over a wall. The black-clad man quickly tied them into two bundles. Then, by the light of the snowy moon, the monk clearly saw a young woman emerge over the wall and jump down. (MC: *There is a reason for this.*) With his spear serving as a shoulder pole, the man in black lifted the two bundles and, without waiting to talk with her, walked away. The girl followed behind.

"This is a sticky situation for me," thought the monk. "I'd better get out of here! The man and the girl must be elopers, meeting here at their appointed time. If she is found missing by tomorrow and her folks go out on a search, the footprints in the snow will lead them to me. Won't I, a monk, be inviting charges of sexual misconduct? (MC: *He may have gotten involved if he had stayed put. This is all the work of ghosts and spirits.*) It's far better to get out of here sooner rather than later!" Desperate, and with no idea of which way to go, he just pushed ahead blindly, turning this way and that in confusion.

After covering more than ten *li*, he lost his footing and fell into an abandoned well. Luckily, it was a dry well, quite deep and wide. By the moonlight that came down, he saw, right next to him, a corpse whose head had been severed. Death had occurred only recently, and the body was still warm. The monk was all the more horrified, but unable to climb out, he was at his wit's end.

When it grew light, he looked again and recognized the body to be that of the girl who had scaled the wall the night before. As he wondered what

could have happened, a group of men gathered noisily around the well. Looking down into the well, they exclaimed, "The kidnapper is here!" A man was lowered into the well by rope, and, to the monk's utter horror, once down in the well, the man began to tie him up. He could offer no resistance because his body had been frozen stiff. (MC: *Even if he had been able to struggle, he could not have done anything.*) The man gave him such sharp raps on the head with his knuckles that stars danced before the monk's eyes. Unable to protest his innocence, the monk felt that he was more dead than alive. After the man had bound him up tight, he was pulled out of the well along with the corpse. An old man burst into wails of grief at the sight of the corpse, and when he had cried his fill, he lashed out at the monk: "You bald ass! Where are you from? Why did you kidnap my daughter and kill her in this well?"

"I'm a monk from the eastern hall of Mount Gong Temple. I haven't come down the mountain for twenty years. It was because a monster ate my fellow monk in the temple last night that I ran for my life down the mountain, and I was in a cowshed taking shelter from the snow when I saw a man in black arrive, and then a young woman jumped over the wall and followed him. I didn't want to get involved in any trouble, so I ran away, only to fall into this well and see the corpse. How would I know what happened? I've never come down the mountain, and I'm not acquainted with any woman, not to speak of abducting one. And why would I hate any woman so much as to kill her? Please, everyone, give the matter careful consideration!"

Quite a few of the men in the crowd had seen him before in the temple and knew him to be an eminent monk of moral fortitude. But unable to explain away his presence in a well with a dead woman, they could hardly rise to his defense, and so they marched him to the county yamen, carrying the corpse with them.

The county magistrate asked the men what had made them tie up a monk and carry a corpse into the court. The old man said, "My surname is Ma. I'm a native of this county. The body is that of my daughter. She was eighteen and not yet betrothed. It was only in the last few days that I received two offers of marriage for her. This morning, I didn't see her at home, so I started looking for her and saw her shoeprints in the snow in the backyard. Realizing that she had scaled the wall and gone away, we followed the shoeprints all the way to the well, where the shoeprints gave way to a pool of blood on the ground. Then we looked into the well and saw this monk and my daughter's dead body. He must be the murderer!" (MC: *That he was inside the well is proof that she was not killed by him.*)

The county magistrate told the monk to state his case. The monk said, "I'm an ascetic monk from Mount Gong. I haven't stepped down off the mountain for more than twenty years. Last night, a monster entered the temple and ate my fellow monk. I had no choice but to break my monastic vows and flee for my life down the mountain. Little did I know that I was destined to walk head-on into all this trouble!" After giving a full account of what he had seen last night at the cowshed, how he had run away out of fear of getting involved, and how he had fallen into a well and encountered a corpse, he added, "If Your Honor could send officers to Mount Gong Temple and verify the fact that the monk of the western hall has been eaten by a monster, you'll know that what I'm saying is all true." (MC: *He is all the more mistaken.*)

The magistrate agreed and sent an officer to the temple to investigate and report his findings as soon as possible.

On entering the temple, the officer found the monk of the western hall sitting there, safe and sound, reading a sutra. As the monk rose and greeted the visitor, the latter told him about what the monk of the eastern hall had gone through and continued, "His Reverence said that he fled down the mountain because a monster had come into the temple to eat people. So the county magistrate sent me here to find out the facts, but since Your Reverence is here, safe and sound, what can you tell me about the monster that came last night?"

The monk of the western hall said, "There was no monster. A little before midnight, my fellow monk and I were chanting sutras, he in his hall and I in mine, when he suddenly opened the temple gate and went out. Both of us had taken monastic vows a long time ago, and we haven't stepped out of the temple gate for more than twenty years. I was surprised by his departure. I ran after him, shouting, but he didn't hear me. I kept my vow of not leaving the temple and dared not give further chase. As to what happened to him down the mountain, I haven't got the slightest idea."

When the officer reported his findings, the county magistrate said, "That bald wretch is obviously telling preposterous lies!" At his order, the monk was brought into the courtroom for another session of interrogation, but he stuck to his story. The county magistrate said, "The monk of the western hall is alive and well. There was no monster in your temple! It just so happened that you came down the mountain on the same day that a young woman eloped and was murdered and found in the same well with you. How can

there be such a coincidence in the whole wide world? (MC: *Coincidences do abound in this world, which is why unjust court sentences also abound.*) This is all too clearly a case of murder, and you still try to lie your way out of it!" The magistrate ordered that torture be applied to the monk. "Out with the truth now!" he roared.

The monk said, "I can only pay my debt from a previous incarnation with my death. (MC: *Just what a monk would say.*) I have nothing to confess."

These words further raised the magistrate's ire. He ordered that all kinds of torture be applied to the monk so as to inflict the worst pain on him. (IC: *How unjust!*)

"There's no need for heavier punishment," said the monk. "I confess that I'm the murderer."

At this point, the plaintiff, witnessing how the monk suffered because he did not have anything to confess, said to himself, "My family has never had anything to do with that monk. Why would he abduct my daughter? And even if he did, why didn't he flee with her instead of killing her? And even if he did kill her, he could have escaped. What was he doing in the well? He may be falsely accused." To his credit, he walked up to the magistrate and voiced his thoughts.

"You do have a point," said the magistrate. "But a monk who falls into a well in the middle of the night can't be a decent sort. (IC: *This is also true.*) And he tells such preposterous lies. He must be hiding something. (MC: *With such prejudice and when the story is so fantastic, injustice is hardly avoidable.*) But with the murder weapon missing and no spoils found on him, I can't establish his guilt. I'll just put him in jail to await sentencing. You'll go out and do your own investigation. Your daughter must have left traces of her doings and her secret associations with someone. (IC: *Valid point.*) And there must be objects missing from your house. Check everything carefully, and you'll surely get to the bottom of it all."

Thus instructed, everyone left the court, and the monk went to suffer the hardships of a life in jail, and there we shall leave him.

Instead, let me tell you about Ma, who was a rich man from Yizhou, known to all and sundry as Squire Ma. He had a ravishingly beautiful daughter who was in love with her cousin Mr. Du. In fact, they had been in love since childhood and had secretly vowed to be husband and wife. However, Mr. Du's family was by no means rich. His parents had engaged a matchmaker who brought up the matter several times with the Ma family, but Squire Ma

turned the Dus down each time, finding them too poor, He did not know that his daughter was determined to marry the young man. Communication between the young lovers was the responsibility of the girl's old wet nurse. A woman of loose morals, the nurse was bent on stirring up the girl's desires and egging her on to commit improprieties so that she could wheedle money out of her. (MC: *Many young people are ruined by women with such ideas.*) Therefore, knowing the girl's mind, the nurse offered her services as a go-between and whipped up the lovers' feelings for each other until they were on fire. But there was nothing she could do about the betrothal. When the girl was of marrying age, a couple of other families made marriage offers. Squire Ma chose one and settled the matter.

The girl grew anxious and consulted her nurse, saying, "I love only Cousin Du, but now I'm promised to another family. What's to be done?"

The nurse, as shameless as she was, tried to mollify her by saying, "The Du family did come a few times to make the offer, but your father turned them down. So to marry him the proper way is out of the question. The only way out will be to marry someone else and then see him on the sly." (IC: *What good advice!*)

"Once married, I wouldn't do such a thing. Du is the only one for me. I'm not going to marry anyone else." (IC: *Easily said!*)

"That's not up to you. I have an idea: Act before you're formally betrothed."

"What do you mean by 'act'?"

"I'll go and arrange an appointment for you two. At the appointed hour, you elope with him. Take as much travel money as possible and have some fun in another city or town. By the time your parents find you, the two of you will have been together for quite some time, and a girl from a decent family is not supposed to be torn from her man and married off to another. Nor will other men want her. So this is the only way out."

"Yes, it's a wonderful idea. But be sure he keeps the appointment."

"Just leave it to me," said the nurse.

Squire Ma was fabulously rich. The nurse coveted the girl's trunk after trunk of gold, silver, jewelry, and clothes. With her eye on these items (MC: *Items that will cost her life.*), she was determined not to let outsiders share them with her. She had a son nicknamed "Ox Black." Not the sort to accept his lot, he spent his days in gambling houses and wrestling halls, making friends with good-for-nothings, and sometimes committing theft and other petty crimes. The wet nurse unconscionably promised the girl that she would be contacting Mr. Du, but in fact she quietly told her son to pose as Mr. Du

and take the girl to a place where he was to sell her and make a small fortune. (IC: *How hateful!*)

After they had drawn up their plan, the nurse went to the girl and said, "I've made the appointment with him. Tonight, we'll carry your luggage to the cowshed outside the wall, and then you scale the wall and get out of the house."

The girl asked the nurse to go with her (MC: *A childish request. Poor thing!*), but she declined, saying, "That won't do. If you go alone, they won't be able to find you for some time. But if I also disappear, they'll know that I'm involved and will look for me in my home. Wouldn't that be a disaster?"

Not having talked to Mr. Du face-to-face, the girl took the nurse at her word. As fate would have it, she believed that her wish to be with Du was to be fulfilled. (IC: *Poor thing!*) Truly,

*She put her faith in the moon,
But the moon played her false.*

That evening, the girl and her nurse packed her luggage and tossed the bundles over the wall. Then the girl scaled the wall and jumped, at the time when the monk of the eastern hall was watching from his hiding place. Seeing a black-clad man walking ahead, carrying a load, the girl thought he was Du, thus attired to hide his identity, and followed on his heels. No suspicion crossed her mind. But when they came to the well outside the city, she saw by the light of the moon that it was not Du but a swarthy hulk of a man of vigorous build. Not knowing what was good for her, the girl screamed in terror. The man in black tried to stop her, but in vain. The man thought, "I'm carrying a lot of her stuff. If I take this two-legged thing along and her screams draw attention to me, won't I lose this entire windfall and the chance to sell her? I'd better bump her off." (MC: *Petty people care only about money. How infuriating!*) He drew out his sword and swung it at her neck. How was a delicate girl like her to survive such an act of violence? How sad it is that a fresh flower withered among a rank growth of weeds! But it was partly her own lack of moral integrity that brought her to this tragic end. Verily,

*Gambling leads to robbing and lust to killing:
The ancients were right in all their sayings.
Stay away from gambling and lechery
And live your life in peace and tranquility!*

After the girl died, the black-clad one threw her into the abandoned well and ran away with her possessions, little knowing that a luckless monk would take the rap for him and languish in jail.

Storyteller! If so, isn't this a travesty of justice?

Gentle reader, as they say, "The net of Heaven may be of large mesh, but it lets nothing through." With the passage of time, the law of retribution will begin to work.

Let us retrace our steps and come back to Squire Ma when he realized that his daughter was missing. Without a moment's delay, he put together a search team. As it turned out, his men came upon the monk and spent much time taking the monk to court and packing him off to jail while the Ma residence remained unsearched. On returning home, Squire Ma gave himself up to thinking about the case and came to doubt that the monk had anything to do with it after all. When he went to his daughter's room and found all the trunks and cases empty, he knew that she must have planned her elopement. And yet, there had never been any telltale signs of anything amiss. If it was an elopement with an illicit lover, why was she murdered? It was quite a mystery. After much unproductive thought, he saw nothing for it but to make a list of missing items and post copies of it everywhere. He also offered a reward, for he was determined to get to the bottom of the case.

News of the murder put the nurse on tenterhooks since she was the only one in the know. Angry with her son, she said to herself, "I told him to take the girl away. How could he have done such an evil thing?" When she saw him, she reproached him in a subdued voice and cautioned him emphatically with these words: "Be careful. It's become a case of homicide. This is bad."

After some time went by, Ox Black began to relax. He took out some money and resumed his visits to the gambling houses. To his dismay, he went on a losing streak. In the twinkling of an eye, he lost all the money he had with him. In the excitement of the moment, he did not want to go back home for more money, and watching the games from the sidelines taxed his patience. From his waist, he whipped out a pair of gold-inlaid hairpins (MC: *By the will of Heaven.*) and used it for another go, hoping to put everything right by winning back what he had lost. Alas for his hopes—gone forever were the hairpins! He was obliged to call it quits and swallow his resentment. The hairpins, no longer his, fell into the hands of the dealer Fat Brother Huang, as his cut.

After he went home, Fat Brother Huang's wife saw the hairpins and said, "How did you come by such nice things? Honestly, I hope? Don't get yourself involved in trouble, I tell you!"

Fat Brother said, "Of course I came by them honestly! Ox Black used them as payment."

"Nonsense!" said his wife. "Little Ox is a bachelor with no wife, no children. He can't have such things!"

Suddenly, a rush of memory came back to Fat Brother. "Oh yes! The daughter of the Ma family was murdered, and there's a poster listing all the missing items, most of which are head ornaments. Ox Black is her nurse's son. Could he have stolen these objects?"

"You go to Squire Ma's house tomorrow and redeem the hairpins for money. He'll surely have something to say about them. If they're indeed stolen property, we'll be able to get some reward money. Won't that be nice?" And so they settled on this plan.

The next day, Fat Brother took the hairpins and went to Squire Ma's pawnshop. Running squarely into Squire Ma, who happened to be on his way out, Fat Brother said, "I have something here for you to see, sir. If you recognize it to be yours, I'd like to claim a reward. If not, may I redeem it for some money?"

As Fat Brother Huang showed him the hairpins, Squire Ma recognized them as his daughter's. "Where did you get them?" asked he.

After Fat Brother Huang told him about Ox Black paying his gambling debt with the hairpins, Squire Ma nodded and said, "It's all too clear that he and his mother were in on it together." He asked Fat Brother Huang to stay longer and write him this note: "I testify to the fact that this pair of gold-inlaid hairpins was used by Ox Black to back up a bet made while gambling." Then Squire Ma said to him, "Don't let on about any of this to anyone." He gave Huang half the promised reward, with the balance to be paid after the case was settled. Having done right in coming to make this report, Fat Brother Huang merrily took himself off.

Carrying the pair of hairpins in his sleeve, Squire Ma went to the inner section of the house and said to the nurse, "Tell me, how did the young mistress get out of the house?"

"What a funny question, sir!" said the nurse. "You were at home, and so was I. Nobody knows how she got out. Why should I know? Why ask me?"

Producing the hairpins from his sleeve, Squire Ma said, "If you know nothing, why did these items come out of your house?"

The sight of the hairpins made the nurse so nervous that the color drained from her face because she knew that her son was at fault. Her heart pounding violently, she said, stammering, "They could have been dropped by the roadside, and someone picked them up."

Noticing how the color came and went on her face, Squire Ma was convinced of her guilt, but he did not let on. Instead, he sent for Ox Black and had mother and son trussed up and taken to the county yamen. Ox Black jumped up and down, yelling, "What have I done that you tie me up?"

Squire Ma replied, "You've been accused of murder. Don't waste your time yelling. Save it for your explanation to the magistrate!"

The county magistrate opened his court session right away. Submitting Fat Brother Huang's note and the pair of hairpins to the magistrate, Squire Ma said, "Here are some of the stolen goods and testimony. Please establish the true facts of the case, Your Honor."

After examining the hairpins and the note, the magistrate asked, "How is this Ox Black related to your family?"

"He's the son of my daughter's old nurse."

The magistrate said with a nod, "Yes, I see the connection." He called Ox Black to him and asked, "Where did you get the hairpins?"

At a loss for words, Ox Black tried to shift the blame to his mother by saying that his mother had given them to him.

Thereupon, the magistrate ordered that the nurse be brought to him under guard. "This case of seduction and murder can be traced to you," announced the magistrate. "And I want the truth from you!" He ordered sharply that she be put under torture.

Unable to bear the pain, she confessed, but only partially: "The young mistress was very close to Young Master Du. That evening, she arranged to elope with Master Du, scaled the wall, and jumped. That much I know, but I know nothing about what happened after she jumped." (MC: *Evil women harm people to this extent.*)

Turning to Squire Ma, the magistrate asked, "Do you know of any Mr. Du?"

"Yes. Mr. Du is a nephew of mine. He did make a marriage offer several times, but I turned him down because of his family's poverty. I had no knowledge of any secret communication."

The magistrate then summoned Young Master Du. The young man, for all his secret trysts with his beloved, had not the slightest idea of what had happened, although news about the girl's flight from home and her murder did reach him, much to his inward chagrin.

"How did you make the elopement appointment with Miss Ma, an appointment that led to her death?" asked the magistrate.

"We're cousins. We did exchange letters frequently, but there was no appointment for elopement. Who delivered the message? Are there witnesses?"

And so the magistrate had the nurse brought to face him. The nurse could provide no further information beyond the young man's liaison with the young mistress. As for the elopement appointment, since Mr. Du was entirely innocent, she did not prevail.

Having heard about the missing items, Mr. Du spoke up again in his own defense. "Your Honor, if you could look into the whereabouts of the stolen goods, you'll know that I'm not involved in any way."

The magistrate gave himself up to thought: "This young man Du seems too frail and delicate to be a murderer, and that Ox Something is too uncouth to be a clandestine lover. Someone must have pretended to be Du." (MC: *This magistrate does have a sharp mind, and yet he did the monk an injustice. This goes to show that the monk's karmic sins caught up with him.*) Both Ox Black and the old nurse were put under torture. In resignation, the old woman confessed that, out of greed for the girl's money, she had instructed her son to pass himself off as Du and meet the girl at the appointed hour but that she was ignorant of what happened later.

However, Ox Black continued to profess his innocence and said, pointing to Mr. Du, "Since he's the one the girl was supposed to meet, this whole thing had nothing to do with me."

Suddenly, the magistrate recalled the monk's confession. "Didn't the monk say the other day that he had seen a man in black taking the girl away that night? Let me have him brought in to identify the man, and everything will be clear." So he ordered that the monk of the eastern hall be brought to court.

Upon the monk's arrival, the magistrate said, "You said that when you were in the cowshed that night, you saw a man in black stealing some things and taking the girl away. If you see this man now, will you be able to recognize him?"

"It was a snowy night with the moonlight as bright as day, and I've been practicing meditation for so long that I'm keen of eye. If I see him, of course I'll be able to recognize him."

The magistrate called Mr. Du forth and asked the monk, "Is this him?"

"No. That man was of a strong build. Definitely not this soft and scholarly type."

Ox Black was then called up. Pointing to him, the magistrate asked again, "Is this him?"

"Yes!"

With a scornful smile, the magistrate addressed Ox Black as follows: "Your mother spoke the truth after all. If you're not the murderer, who is? And some of the stolen goods are right here. What more do you have to say for yourself? It's too bad the monk was beaten and stayed in jail for a while in your stead!"

The monk said, "What I've gone through is all predestined. I have no complaints. Luckily, the Buddha's Heaven is near, and Your Honor in your divine wisdom has established my innocence."

The magistrate ordered that the squeezer be applied to Ox Black and said, "You could have fled with the girl. Why did you have to kill her?"

At this point, Ox Black gave up and confessed: "At the beginning, she thought I was Mr. Du. By the time we arrived at the well, she realized I wasn't him. She screamed, so I killed her."

"Why did you carry a knife at that late hour?" asked the magistrate.

"I always carry sharp tools with me on my frequent visits to the wrestling halls. What's more, when I do things at night, I need to guard against being jumped in the dark."

"I just knew that Mr. Du had not done this," the magistrate commented.

After all the facts of the case had been established, the nurse was beaten to death. (MC: *Death is not enough to pay for their sins.*) Ox Black, charged with rape and murder, was to be executed after all the stolen goods were recovered, Mr. Du and the monk were both released. Everyone left the court, but of this, no more.

The monk of the eastern hall, after being beaten and jailed for crimes that he never committed, returned to his temple and engaged the monk of the western hall in a long conversation. The monk of the western hall said, "Nothing happened that night when we were both at our studies. Why did you see all those things that led to so many trials and tribulations?"

"I have no idea," said the monk of the eastern hall. After returning to his own cell, he plunged into thought and concluded that all the shocks and misery he had experienced were attributable to inadequacies in his cultivation of his spirit. He made his confessions to the statue of the Buddha and prayed that he would be enlightened as to the cause of what he had gone through. After sitting still for three days and three nights on his prayer mat, he suddenly saw the light when he attained the state of Void. The truth was

that Miss Ma had been a concubine of his in their previous incarnations. In a moment of unprovoked suspicion and jealousy, he beat her and locked her up, thus committing an injustice. In his current life as a monk, his sin could have been expunged through his assiduous spiritual cultivation, but the sobs he heard that night saddened him and disturbed his peace of mind. As a consequence, earthly temptations arose to torment him with gruesome sights and sounds and force him into the cycles of retribution (MC: *Those who practice spiritual cultivation, be warned!*), from which he was not released until he repaid his debts by going through the same travails. After he gained an understanding of this cycle of cause and effect through his meditations, he committed himself unflinchingly to his faith and, like the monk of the western hall, never went down the mountain again. Later, he achieved nirvana while sitting in a lotus position with joined palms. There is a poem in testimony:

*No life is free from the bond of karma;
Only the enlightened understand the Void.
If no mundane thought raises its head,
Debts from previous lives vanish of their own accord.*

Qutu Zhongren Cruelly Kills Other Creatures

The Yunzhou Prefect Helps His Nephew in the Netherworld

As the poem says,

*All creatures have life;
They share the fear of death.
Why do people eat meat
When the karmic debt incurred is so great?*

Our story makes the point that all living creatures owe their lives to heaven and earth. They all breathe, and they are all endowed with voice and consciousness. Although humans are of a different order, all beings share the same love of life and fear of death and the same desire to requite kindness with kindness and malice with malice. But humans, with their greater mental capacity, resort to strategy in exercising control over animals and birds, driving cattle, harnessing horses, raising hawks, and training dogs for the hunt. Still not satisfied, they kill and maim goodness knows how many lives so as to satisfy their palates. Lacking the prowess to fight off humans, animals and birds perish under the butchers' cleavers, and when confronted with death, they will wildly flap their wings or frantically cry out and try to hide from view. They definitely are not insentient beings meant to feed the mouth.

And yet, the gluttons, the killers, and pedantic scholars say, “Since the Lord on High gives life to other creatures in order to feed human beings, it is no sin to consume them.” (MC: *It is no surprise to hear this from gluttons and killers. It is the pedantic scholars who are especially infuriating. Their near truths greatly obscure the real truth.*) I wonder if the Lord on High said this to them face-to-face or if they cooked it up in their own heads. If, as they claim, it is Heaven’s will that humans should prey on other creatures, let me ask this: Since tigers and leopards eat humans, does it follow that Heaven gives life to humans in order to feed tigers and leopards? Since mosquitoes suck human blood, does it follow that Heaven gives life to humans in order to sustain the lives of mosquitoes? If tigers, leopards, and mosquitoes could talk and write, they would surely be adopting the same rhetoric, and I wonder if humans would accept such logic. (IC: *What argument can be better than this?*) Since the earliest times, those of high moral standing have exhorted people not to kill but to free captive living creatures. So much has been said on this subject that I can limit myself to the above straightforward and poignant arguments to raise a smile from you readers. I will let you be the judge of their validity. According to the Buddhist theory of retribution with its six paths of reincarnation, all living beings are related and involved in cycles of retribution and killing.¹ There are so many such stories to tell that I could go on for years and still not finish the list. Let me pick one about animals that are just as afraid of death as humans are. Even those with hearts made of the hardest flint will be moved to compassion.

In the Song dynasty, there was a town called Huangchi in Taiping Prefecture [present-day Dangtu County, Anhui]. Villages within a ten-*li* radius of the town were inhabited mostly by rascals who slaughtered oxen and dogs with abandon, bringing no credit to their ancestors. In the tenth year of the Chunxi reign period [1174–89], Wang Shuduan and his cousin Sheng Zidong were on their way to Ningguo Prefecture [its seat is the present-day city of Xuanzhou, Anhui] when they stopped at this place for a rest. At the sight of five water buffaloes tied up in a yard, Sheng Zidong said to Wang Shuduan, pointing to the second one, “That one will die tomorrow.”

“How can you tell?” asked Shuduan.

“The other four are eating hay, but this one is doing nothing but shedding tears. There must be a reason for it.”

They then went to a teashop. While having tea, they asked the shop owner, “To which family does that second water buffalo belong?”

"It was bought by Commissioner Zhao (IC: *A member of the royal Zhao clan.*), to be slaughtered tomorrow morning."

Turning to Shuduan, Zidong said, "What did I tell you!"

When they went again the next day, only four water buffaloes remained. After taking a closer look, they found that the fourth one, like the one the day before, was also shedding tears and refusing to eat hay. Seeing the two of them approaching, it got down on its front knees, looking as if it was appealing for their help. (MC: *A case of crying out when you meet someone who understands you.*) Upon inquiry, a waiter told them, "A patron came here this morning and bought three of them, leaving this one to be slaughtered soon."

Zidong said with a sigh, "Animals do know what's going to happen to them!" Following his advice, Shuduan located the owner and bought the water buffalo from him for a high price. He then released it to a nearby village, where it was to live out its natural span of life.

From this one incident alone, we can see that animals are just as intelligent as humans and know their hour of death, and they can also be so distraught as to pray for help. Why do humans ruthlessly kill the living for the transient pleasure of their taste buds? Do they assume that they will not stand accused in the netherworld? They must realize that killing is the worst crime in the eyes of the judges of the netherworld, and the guilty ones are made to face every one of their victims. However, few humans ever come back from death to tell of their experiences because, once dead, they pay their debts, one by one. Therefore, people of this world remain ignorant of the truth and find such stories unbelievable. Well, this humble storyteller now proposes to tell a story, a highly believable one, about a man who was raised from the dead to tell his story. Truly,

In the cycle of a life for a life,

Retribution will hardly ever end.

Confucians eat not when hearing sounds of killing;

Gentlemen cannot bear the sight of cadavers. (MC: Pedantic scholars

dismiss arguments against killing animals as heterodox. But what about Confucius, who fished with no net but only a line and never shot at roosting birds, and Mencius, who could not bear to watch any killing or to eat meat? Were they heterodox, too?)

In the Kaiyuan reign period [713–41] of the Tang dynasty, there lived in Wen County, a man named Qutu Zhongren. His father, once a prefectural

official, had let this only son of his run wild ever since childhood. With no interest in books, Zhongren spent all his time gambling and hunting. When his father died, he was left with several tens of servants, an estate worth several million taels of silver, and multiple farmsteads and houses. Zhongren indulged in sexual debauchery, drank and gambled, and spent money as fast as hot water thawing snow. In just a few years, he lost the entire family fortune and could no longer support the servants. Male and female, they all went their separate ways. Of his real estate, only the farmstead in Wen County remained, but gradually the surrounding land was also sold off. As time went by, even the houses were dismantled and sold, piece by piece. (MC: *So low did he sink.*) Only one structure still stood intact amid the ruins of the manor. In his poverty, he had nothing with which to eke out a living.

Zhongren did have physical strength, if nothing else. He had one remaining servant called Moheduo, from an ethnic tribe, who also had enough strength to battle a hundred men. Master and servant, being two of a kind, put their heads together to work out ways of using their physical strength for illicit gain. Zhongren was not interested in robbing, killing, or committing arson. What he was interested in was eating beef and horsemeat. (MC: *A scoundrel of unusual endowment and ideas.*) He did not have the cash to buy any, and so he came up with the idea of going out with Moheduo to steal.

Every evening, the two of them went fifty *li* away. If they encountered an ox, they would hold it by its horns, turn it over, and carry it on their shoulders all the way home. If they saw a horse or a mule, they would slip a noose over its neck and carry it on their backs. When they arrived home and threw them to the ground, they would all be dead. They would then store the meat in large vats buried under the hall. The skin and bones were tossed into the pit behind the house or burned. Initially, they had wanted only to satisfy their stomachs, but as their stockpile grew, Zhongren told Moheduo to take the meat to the market in town and exchange it for rice and cash. Flush with their easy success day after day, they looked upon their operation as a regular means of making a living. Since the animals were brought in over a great distance and were disposed of quickly, no suspicions about them ever arose, and nothing happened to give them away.

Zhongren loved to kill. During the day, when he had nothing to do, he would think up plans for killing animals with the bows and arrows, nets, pitchforks, and slingshots that filled his room, and he never returned empty-handed from his hunting trips. He never saw an animal or bird—be it a deer, a rabbit, an eagle, or a sparrow—without wanting to come up with a way of

eating it. On his return home, he bore them on his back or his shoulders, carried them by hand, or dragged them with his feet. One corner of his house was always filled with animals and birds. The two men also thought up devious ways of eating them. Instead of finishing off any surviving animal or bird with one plunge of the knife or one blow of the cudgel, they came up with diabolical ways of killing it—by gouging out its liver, pulling out its tendons, cutting its tongue, or draining its blood—alleging that the meat of a cadaver was no longer tender and fresh. Whenever they caught a soft-shell turtle, they bound its four feet with rope, put it under a blazing sun, and placed salty wine next to its head. When thirst compelled the turtle to drink it, the two men would begin to cook the drunken turtle, whose meat would therefore be extra delicious. (MC: *Committing appalling sins for the sake of a few mouthfuls of food.*) If it was a donkey, they would truss it up right there in the house, place a vat of lime water in front of it, and light fires all around the donkey. When the donkey drank from the vat to alleviate its thirst, it would instantly lose control of its bowels and be completely cleansed of all filthy matter. Then they put a jar of wine seasoned with salt and pepper in front of the donkey. The overpowering heat would make the donkey drink whatever liquid was within reach. Thus, before it died, its hide and flesh were already cooked and its insides already seasoned.

One day, they caught a porcupine whose bristles posed a challenge to any cook, but Zhongren said to Moheduo, “We’re not going to give it up, are we?” And he worked out a plan. They added salt to a ball of clay, kneaded the clay until the salt was evenly mixed into it, wrapped the porcupine in the clay, and put it on the stove. When it was well done, he stripped off the clay, and the porcupine’s skin and quills would come off with the clay, leaving a ball of well-cooked meat, delicious with the added seasoning. Such were the things those two men were capable of, as attested by this quatrain:

*They never ceased catching animals and birds;
They reeked with the stench of blood.
Innovative chefs they were,
Conjuring up devious ways of cooking.*

Now, on with our story: Zhongren had an uncle, Zhang An by name, who had been a vice prefect of Yunzhou. When Zhongren first fell into poverty, he wanted to wait until the young man had gone through some hardships before taking him into his own home and exhorting him to mend his ways.

Later on, observing that the young man's actions became less and less humane, he offered admonitions every so often, but to no avail. Zhongren being his brother-in-law's only son, Vice Prefect Zhang took his well-being very much to heart, but since the wayward young man was not amenable to reason, the vice prefect gave up trying. Later, after the vice prefect died, no more admonitions fell on the young man's ear, so he let himself go and steeped himself in vice.

More than ten years went by in like manner. One day, Moheduo the servant died of illness. With no one to help him now, Zhongren hired his old wet nurse to watch the house while he continued to do what he had always done. More than a month later, he was at home one evening, munching on beef, when two men in black barged in, slipped a noose around him, and dragged him away. Being strong of body, Zhongren tried to struggle free, but strangely enough, his strength left him. (MC: *At a time when he would do anything not to go.*) Meekly, he let himself be dragged along. Indeed,

*With their talons they split the ground;
Able to rise on clouds, they flew above the clouds.
If they lacked the skill to penetrate sky and earth,
How could they wipe out that scourge?*

Zhongren asked the men in black, "Where are you taking me?"

"A servant of yours implicated you. Your presence is required to confront him in court."

Not knowing what this was about, Zhongren followed them into a large compound with more than ten rooms, two for each of the six judges. Zhongren's case was to be heard in the two westernmost rooms. The judge had not yet made his appearance, so the men in black told Zhongren to stand and wait. A moment later, the judge arrived. Upon a close look, Zhongren cried, "Aya! Imagine meeting you here!"

You may ask, who was that judge? Well, he was none other than Zhang An, vice prefect of Yunzhou and Zhongren's uncle. (MC: *Why does such a depraved sinner have such luck? Because his allotted life span has not yet expired.*)

Also startled, the vice prefect asked, "Why are you here?" The vice prefect told him to ascend the dais and said to him, "This does not bode well for you. Your allotted span of life hasn't expired, so you must be here to confront someone in court. With all the evils you've done and the thousands and thousands of lives you've taken, you have legions of enemies. Now that you're here, I wonder what I can do to help you."

Only then did Zhongren realize that this was a court in the netherworld. Recalling all his doings, he began to be seized with fear. He kowtowed and said, "I ignored your admonitions and abandoned myself to vice, not believing in justice in the netherworld. Now that I'm here, please help me, Uncle, for the sake of our kinship."

Judge Zhang said, "Don't panic. Wait until I consult the other judges." To the other judges he said, "My wife's nephew Qutu Zhongren is guilty of numerous sins and is here today to face his servant Moheduo in court. However, since his allotted span of life hasn't expired, I intend to release him and bring him back when the time is right. And yet, since he's already here, I'm afraid the aggrieved souls of his victims will refuse to let him go. As a favor to me, would you agree to set him free?" (MC: *Favors are also done in the netherworld.*)

"We should consult a legal expert," said the other judges.

Thereupon, Judge Zhang had a ghost lictor summon a legal expert. As a man in green was brought in, Judge Zhang said, "Is there any way to free a sinner whose span of life has not yet expired?"

The legal expert asked for the details of the case, and Judge Zhang told him about Zhongren. The expert said, "So Zhongren must be here because he's implicated in Moheduo's case. It's true that his life span has not expired, but he has too many enemies. If they're to be brought in to confront him, I'm afraid they'll ignore all protests and devour him, and these are all lives that have to be repaid. This court is unable to stop such acts of retribution. I think there's no justification for letting him return to life."

Judge Zhang said, "Zhongren is a relative of mine, and he's not supposed to die at this time. That's why I wish to help him. If his number was up, I wouldn't have cared, because he brought this all on himself. Do you have any idea how to solve this problem?"

After a moment's reflection, the legal expert said, "I do have an idea, but the aggrieved souls of his victims must agree to it. Otherwise, there's nothing I can do."

"What's your idea?" asked Judge Zhang.

"All of his victims must be given their lives back and allowed to reincarnate. Your Honor can bring them to court and fool them by saying, 'Qutu Zhongren is in this court because he's implicated in the Moheduo case. You have the option of eating him up before your reincarnation. But by doing so, you'll be committing a sin, and thus you'll be reincarnated as what you were before, oxen or horses. And Zhongren will be reincarnated as a human being

and continue to prey on you. That way, there will be no end to the cycles of retribution. It has been verified that Zhongren is not to die at this time and is to be returned to the mortal world for a while. Now, if we make him do good works for your benefit so that you can all be reincarnated not as animals anymore but as human beings, free from slaughter, wouldn't that be wonderful?' (MC: *Such trickery is also used in the netherworld. Why?*) The animals will surely be glad to comply in order to be reincarnated as human beings. Then Your Honor can make him pay his debt in some minor way before releasing him. But if the animals refuse to take this advice, there's nothing I can do."

"I'll do as you suggest," said Judge Zhang.

The legal expert locked Zhongren up in the anteroom before summoning all the creatures Zhongren had slaughtered to court. All one hundred *mu* of land belonging to the court were instantly packed to capacity. Behold:

*Cattle and horses come in herds;
Chickens and geese come in lines.
Hundreds of beasts brandish their claws and bare their fangs;
Thousands of birds spread their wings.
Who says they are less endowed?
They know who bears them ill will.
Say not that their nature is different from ours;
They seek revenge with even greater urgency.
Some walk, some fly,
Crowding what is hardly the imperial garden.
They cry, they howl,
On what is surely not a paradise on earth.*

The tens of thousands of slaughtered cattle, horses, donkeys, mules, pigs, sheep, river deer, deer, pheasants, rabbits, porcupines, and birds asked in a chorus of human voices, "Why are we summoned here?"

The judge said, "Qutu Zhongren is here."

Before he could finish what he was going to say, every one of the animals and birds exploded with rage. Flapping their wings and stomping their feet, they roared, "That murderous scoundrel! It's payback time!"

In their indignation, the animals and birds doubled in size. (MC: *Even if they were not twice their usual size, how could Zhongren's flesh be enough for them to eat?*) The pigs and the sheep grew as large as horses and oxen, the horses

and oxen reached the size of rhinoceroses and elephants. All waited eagerly for Zhongren to come out so that they could sink their teeth into him. But after the legal expert delivered his speech at the judge's bidding, the animals and birds were so pleased on learning about their reincarnation as humans as a result of Zhongren's good works that they shrank back to their normal sizes. When the judge ordered that they leave the court for now, they obediently vacated the premises.

Only then did the legal expert lead Zhongren out of the anteroom. The expert announced to the judge, "Now is the time for him to pay back a small fraction of his debt." Right away, two prison wardens came up, carrying a leather bag and two of those blood-drawing presses. After the legal expert stuffed Zhongren into the leather bag, the prison wardens began lowering the presses on it, inflicting unbearable pain on Zhongren. Blood spurted from the holes of the bag like the spray that comes out of a watering can. Then the wardens threw away their cudgels, picked up the bag, and walked around the hall, letting the blood accumulate on the ground. Soon, the blood rose to a height of three feet and reached the level of the dais. (MC: *How can he have so much blood in him?*) That done, the wardens tossed the bag with Zhongren in it back into the anteroom and locked the room up tightly. The animals and birds were again summoned and told, "Zhongren's blood has been drawn out and is ready for your consumption."

Growing to several times their normal size in their anger, the animals and birds cursed, "Scoundrel! Murderer! Now it's our turn to drink your blood!" They fell all over themselves trying to get at his blood. In the commotion, with every one of them slurping and cursing, the three-foot-high pool of blood vanished in a trice. Still unsatiated, they licked the ground until the soil showed.

After they stopped, the legal expert said, "Now you've been paid back in a small way. Moheduo is dead and is at your mercy. Qutu Zhongren is to be set free today to do good works for your benefit so that you'll all be reincarnated as human beings."

Delighted, the animals and birds shrank back to their natural sizes and dispersed.

Only then did the judge let Zhongren out of the bag. Now that he was able to stand on his feet, Zhongren ached all over. Judge Zhang said to him, "Having paid back some of your debt, you may return to life now. Since you've seen what retribution is like, you must try hard to do good works."

"I'm so much obliged to you, Uncle, for shielding me and getting me through this crisis! If I can return to life, I'll thoroughly mend my ways, and

I wouldn't dare increase my evil karma. But what can I do to make my good works expunge all my past monstrous crimes?"

The judge replied, "Your crimes are too heinous to be expunged by ordinary good works. To do that, you must use your blood as ink with which to copy all the sutras. (MC: *Does he have any blood left in him?*) Otherwise, if you're brought here again, there will be nothing I can do to save you."

As Zhongren voiced his thanks and promised to do his uncle's bidding, his uncle continued, "You must also spread the word about this. It will be to your credit if your story about retribution makes people repent." Having said that, he ordered the two men in black to escort Zhongren home. Again he admonished, "Do not be tempted by whatever you see on the way. Ignore my admonishment at your own peril." Turning to the men in black, he went on, "See that he returns home safely. He was so steeped in vice that something may happen to him along the way."

"We'll surely do our best, Your Honor!"

And so Zhongren followed the men in black, and they set out on their journey.

After traveling for several *li*, they came to a bustling place that had every appearance of a wineshop in the human world. Behold:

*A thatched house in front of a village,
A bamboo fence in the backyard.
The vats of village wine spread aroma in the air;
The mellow brew filled earthen bowls to the brim.
The hempen clothes on the rack
 were left earlier by villagers;
The characters on the shop sign
 were written by drunken schoolteachers. (MC: Do ghost schoolteachers
 in the underworld also inscribe shop signs?)
Liu Ling, knowing the taste, would moor his boat here;²
Li Bai, smelling the aroma, would get off his horse.³
There are no inns on the road to the Yellow Springs;⁴
Surprisingly, here stands a wineshop midway.*

Hungry and thirsty after such a long walk, Zhongren drooled when he saw it was a wineshop. On reaching its door, he saw musicians inside, some playing wind instruments and some singing. There were also men noisily playing finger-guessing games in a drinking bout around a table laden with plates of

fatty meat, fresh fish, and chunks of chicken and duck meat. Zhongren found himself seized by his old cravings. His urge to enter and sit down for a hearty meal drove all his uncle's admonitions from his mind. As he tugged at the two men in black, asking them to join him, they said, "Don't go in! If you do, it will be a mistake that you'll regret." But Zhongren turned a deaf ear. Unable to stop him, the men in black said, "If you insist, we'll have to wait here for you."

In large strides, Zhongren went in. He picked a table and sat down. As a waiter busily set out dishes to go with the wine, Zhongren saw to his horror that one was a bowl of human eyes and the other a bowl of large latrine maggots. Realizing that this was by no means a decent wineshop, he quickly rose and was about to go when the waiter offered him a bowl of wine and said, "Drink this before you go."

Not knowing any better, Zhongren reached for the bowl. But when he put the bowl under his nose, he was hit by a horrible stench. The bowl was in fact filled with the rotten flesh of a cadaver. He was about to put the bowl down when an ox-headed demon suddenly emerged from under the stove and, carrying a steel pitchfork in its hand, roared, "Eat it! Now!" Quickly, the waiter snatched the bowl and forced its contents down Zhongren's throat. Zhongren could not do otherwise than swallow the flesh in spite of the stench before he hastened to the door.

The ox-headed demon gave chase, followed by quite a few demons of grotesque appearance, all of them shouting, "Don't let him get away!"

In this desperate moment, Zhongren saw the two men in black rush over from where they were standing. Shielding Zhongren, they thundered, "None of your insolence! This man has just been released by the court." As they led Zhongren away, supporting him under his arms, the demons stopped in compliance with their order and took themselves off.

The men in black said reproachfully to Zhongren, "Didn't we tell you not to go in? You turned a deaf ear, only to be given such a shock. What did the judge say to you? He'll blame us for not doing our job."

"I thought it was a regular wineshop. How was I to know it would turn out like that?"

"It was your sins that blurred your vision."

"Why do you say that?"

"That bowl of flesh you ate is by far not enough to repay the debt you incurred by eating drunken turtles and donkeys."

Stricken by remorse, Zhongren continued to follow the men in black. As he looked around, he felt he had lost his bearings amid a vast expanse of

misty clouds. Shortly thereafter, he saw the sunny sky again and thought he must be back in the mortal world, in what looked just like Wen County. As he entered his own house with the men in black, he saw himself lying rigid in bed, with his old nurse sitting by his side, keeping vigil.

As the men in black pushed Zhongren's soul back into his body, he regained consciousness and woke up. The men in black had vanished, but he heard his old nurse cry, "You've come back to life, Young Master! I almost died from all the worrying!"

"How long was I dead?"

"You were eating your meal here when you suddenly died. It's been a whole day and night. I didn't dare move you because your chest was still warm to the touch. And now you've indeed come back to life. This is wonderful!"

"What a day and night this has been! I got to see what the underworld is like."

This being a topic of great interest to the old woman, she asked, "What did you see there?"

"It turned out that I wasn't supposed to die at this time. It was just that Moheduo ran into those he had killed before he died, and so I was summoned to bear witness. I, too, had taken so many lives that I was almost denied a chance to return to life. Luckily, the judge in my case happened to be my Uncle Zhang. He insisted that my allotted span of life had not expired and went out of his way to bring about my release."

As he told her everything, the old nurse kept chanting "Amitabha" with joined palms. After he finished, she asked, "So what happened to Moheduo?"

"His life span expired, and he's so heavily indebted that, after my departure, he'll have to pay for every life he took. Goodness knows how much misery he'll have to go through!"

"Did you see him?"

"The judge was so partial to me that I wasn't asked to face off against him in court. So I didn't see him. I only heard his name mentioned."

"It's been a whole day and night. You must be hungry. There's still some beef left. I'll bring it to you." (MC: *The beef is just like the leftover wine in Chun-yu's dream and the yellow millet in Mr. Lu's.*)⁵

"I'm going to follow my uncle's order and use my blood as ink for copying the sutras. I've already sworn off things like beef."

"That's good!" With that, she went to cook some porridge for Zhongren. He got out of bed, and when he looked in the mirror as he did his hair and washed, he let out a groan. His face was as sallow as wax because so much

blood had been drawn out of him in the underworld to feed the animals and birds.

Zhongren hired a person to clean his house. Then, with all due respect, he acquired several volumes of sutras, lit incense, and began to intone them. When the color gradually came back to his cheeks after two months of recuperation, he drew blood from his arms and set about copying the sutras, volume by volume. To visitors who asked him why he was doing this, he gave an account of his experience, making their hair stand on end. As donations came in to fund his project, he labored at his copying with greater diligence. His emaciated and haggard look was ample proof of his experience. Pointing to the vats in the room and the pit in the backyard, he said to visitors, “I’m keeping these as evidence of my past sins. They also serve as a warning.” Understanding that this was a true story, many of the visitors decided to free captive living creatures and refrain from killing. (MC: *Truly wonderful! Surpasses copying sutras.*)

In the spring of the twenty-third year of the Kaiyuan reign period, Yu Xian, magistrate of Tongguan, was passing through Wen County when he saw, in a humble house by the roadside, a man nearing sixty years of age writing with his blood as if it were ink. When Magistrate Yu asked to see what he had written, the man produced five hundred to six hundred volumes of the sutras he had copied. In amazement, Magistrate Yu asked him how he was able to have such staunch will power, whereupon Zhongren supplied a full account of everything that had happened. Magistrate Yu sighed in admiration of this remarkable man and made a donation out of his salary before he left. He then spread the word far and wide. Later, Zhongren attained the fruit of enlightenment and died in blissful peace. This is a case of “putting down the butcher’s knife and becoming a Buddha on the spot.” (MC: *Vile sinners, take note!*) As the following Buddhist poem says,

*The living creatures of this mortal world
Vary little in mental faculties.
All are sentient beings;
All possess Buddha nature.
Do not inflict pain on other creatures
In order to please your palate.
My stomach full, I reek with the smell of meat;
They may be dead and gone, but their pain endures.
The resentment, however slight,*

*Will not go away and leave no trace.
Therefore, in the cycles of reincarnation,
Acts of killing never come to a halt.
May everyone stay compassionate,
Acting this way everywhere!
Improper desires worsen your punishment;
Lessening craving saves lives.
In the twinkling of an eye,
Decisions of life or death are made.
When you pay for your sins,
You will regret your lack of good works.
Why not do good deeds freely
While you are still alive? (MC: How true!)
By redeeming others, you redeem yourself;
This is the way to look at things.*

To Stake His Claim on the Family Fortune, a Jealous Son-in-Law Plots against the Rightful Heir

To Continue the Bloodline, a Filial Daughter Hides Her Brother

As one poem puts it,

*Children are given by Heaven above;
This is naturally beyond human control.
To produce something from nothing
Is a novelty and wonder to both ear and eye.*

Our story takes place in the Yuan dynasty. There lived in the capital of the empire a Commander Li. A third-grade official, he enjoyed an immense family fortune, but he remained childless when he was already in his fifties. On hearing about a fortune-teller who had set up shop to the east of the Supreme Military Council and whose predictions of woe and weal were invariably borne out, the commander went to have his fortune told. The fortune-teller's shop was filled with well-dressed patrons waiting in line. When it was his turn, Commander Li said to the fortune-teller, "You need not say anything about my career and my life span. More important is whether I'll have a son."

After working on his natal chart for a few moments, the fortune-teller broke into a smile and said, "Sir, don't you already have a son? Why play this trick on me?"

"But, honestly, I don't have a son, which is exactly why I'm here. How can I be playing any trick?"

Counting off on his fingers, the fortune-teller said, "Your son was born when you were forty years old. You are now fifty-six, and you insist that you don't have a son. Aren't you playing a trick on me?"

With one insisting that he did not have a son and the other insisting that he did, onlookers remarked in surprise, "What's going on?"

"I can't be mistaken," declared the fortune-teller. "I advise this gentleman to give the matter some good thought." (MC: *This fortune-teller stands firm and unyielding.*)

The commander lapsed into a thoughtful silence before he spoke up again, clapping his hands. "Yes! That's it! When I was forty, one of my maidservants got pregnant, but I had to travel on a mission to Shangdu, the summer capital. By the time I returned home, my wife had already sold off that maidservant. I have no idea where she is now. Since you insist that a son was born to me when I was forty, that baby must be mine."

"I'm right after all! You're not fated to be heirless. Your son will be returned to you."

The commander thankfully paid the fortune-teller and bade him farewell.

At this point, another patron, an officer also by the name of Li, invited Commander Li into a teashop. After they sat down, Officer Li said, "I just heard the conversation between you, sir, and the fortune-teller. May I ask you a question?"

"Please go ahead," said the commander.

"I'm a native of Nanyang. I had no son until, fifteen years ago, I bought a maidservant who was pregnant. Right after I took her home, my wife conceived. So two boys were born, about two months apart. Both are now fifteen.¹ Having heard what you said, I wonder if the maidservant's son is yours."

The commander asked for the maidservant's age and a description of her appearance, and the answers convinced him that they were talking about the same person. (MC: *Who would have known that this visit to the fortune-teller was fated to get him a son?*) And so the two men exchanged names and addresses and took leave of each other with promises to see each other again.

After returning home, the commander told his wife about what had happened. Mrs. Li had done what she did at the time in a fit of jealousy, but now

that her husband remained heirless, she was not without feelings of remorse and sorrow. How she wished what her husband told her was true! The next day, Commander Li invited Officer Li home. Since they shared the same surname, they acknowledged each other as members of the same clan, and a sumptuous feast was laid out in honor of the guest. They then set a date for the commander to see his son.

Officer Li returned to Nanyang first. After obtaining leave, Commander Li went to Officer Li's residence, laden with gifts for the officer, his wife, and his concubines. (MC: *Any gift for the boy's birth mother?*) After the guest had sat down and made himself comfortable, Officer Li said, "I found out after I returned home that the maidservant had indeed been in your employ." Forthwith, he told his two sons to come out and greet the guest.

Two youngsters, age fifteen, entered the hall, wearing the same clothes and carrying themselves in the same way. Not knowing which one was his son, Commander Li appealed to Officer Li for enlightenment. Officer Li said, smiling, "Use your own judgment! You don't need me to tell you!"

After close scrutiny, the commander picked the right one. After all, father and son were bound by ties of blood. He stepped forward and hugged one of the boys, saying, "This one is my son."

Officer Li smiled and said, "Yes, exactly!"

As father and son wept in each other's embrace, there was not a dry eye in the room. Officer Li set out a feast to congratulate Commander Li, and the party did not break up until everyone was happily drunk.

The next day, Commander Li reciprocated by hosting a feast in Officer Li's house. During the feast, Officer Li said to the commander, "Now that I've returned your son to you, how can I tear the boy away from his mother? Shall I return her to you as well?" (MC: *Officer Li is a righteous man.*)

Overjoyed at this unexpected turn of events, Commander Li thanked Officer Li profusely and returned home with mother and son in tow. Later, the boy inherited the family fortune and privileges, and also rose to be a third-grade official, and the two families maintained uninterrupted relations.

It can thus be seen that whether or not one has children is a matter decreed by one's fate. Commander Li thought he was heirless, but a fortune-teller figured out the truth, and a reunion came about in the end. Clearly, what is in your fate will be yours, whatever happens. Why did I tell that story? Because it leads to my next one, in which a childless rich man also turned out to be a father whose son had not been known to him. Later, father and son were brought together, to their immense joy. It is a story rich in details of the

sweetness and sorrows of family relationships. Lend me your ears as I take my time telling the story. Truly,

*It's blood ties that bind people together;
Those without such ties do not warm to each other.
Vines that attach themselves to other plants
Remain aliens after all.
Libations are poured by one's flesh and blood only,
And yet jealous wives do away with heirs.
The cause that gives rise to such a case:
Debts incurred in a previous life.*

As our story has it, women are a jealous lot. They would rather die than buy concubines or maidservants for their heirless husbands. Even if a few of them are persuaded to let their husbands take on other women, they do so reluctantly, with resentment and bitterness. Even if a son is born, such a woman would still not accept him as her own, even though he is her husband's flesh and blood and even though she is acknowledged as the boy's principal mother. As the saying goes, "The belly, just like a mountain, can set people worlds apart." There are also vicious women who will not be happy until they do away with the heirs. After the daughter marries, the mother goes out of her way to acknowledge the son-in-law as heir, even though he bears another surname and is all too clearly from another clan. She is so partial to him that she treats him better than she does a son of her own husband's brother. Little does she know that her daughter, albeit her flesh and blood, becomes a member of another family once she is married. As for the son-in-law, never of a single heart and mind with the mother-in-law from day one, he turns to his own pursuits the first chance he gets. But it is only natural that, in terms of degrees of consanguinity, the son-in-law pales in comparison with the brother's son and the brother's son does not measure up to one's own son. As for sons born of previous wives or of concubines or out of wedlock, they rightfully belong to the husband's clan after all, being the husband's own flesh and blood, and are therefore much better than those who are not clan members. It defies reason why such women fail to see the truth of it all.

Our story proper tells that in the Yuan dynasty, there lived in Dongping Prefecture [in Shandong], a rich man named Liu Congshan. Sixty years of age when our story unfolds, he was called "Squire Liu" by all and sundry. His

wife, Li-shi, was fifty-eight years old. In spite of their fabulous wealth, they had no son and only one daughter, nicknamed Sister Yin, whose live-in husband, Zhang Lang, was thirty years old, three years older than Sister Yin. Zhang Lang was a mercenary-minded and grasping man hungry for even the pettiest gains. It was because Squire Liu had no son to inherit all the wealth that he engaged a matchmaker and became Squire Liu's live-in son-in-law, basking in the thought that the family fortune would all be his eventually. (MC: *A typical villain.*)

As it turned out, Squire Liu held on tightly to his money without sharing any of it with the son-in-law. Squire Liu had his own ideas. First, he had a nephew, the son of his brother Liu Congdao and sister-in-law Ning-shi, who had both died. The nephew, pet name Yinsun, was now a well-read and sensible young man of twenty-five. Because his parents had died when he was still a child and the family fortune was all gone, he depended on his uncle for a living. Squire Liu treated him as his very own, but his wife, out of partiality toward her daughter and son-in-law and the grudges she had against her sister-in-law while the latter was alive, bore Yinsun ill will and looked on him as a thorn in her eye. Luckily for him, Squire Liu secretly looked out for Yinsun, but with his wife and son-in-law in his way, there was only so much he could do for the young man, and for this reason, Squire Liu always felt sorry for his nephew. Secondly, the squire had a maidservant called Little Plum. Impressed with her dedicated service, Mrs. Liu told her to wait on her husband. As a consequence, the squire made her his concubine and got her pregnant. At this point in our story, the squire was hoping for a son. With these two considerations, Squire Liu was disinclined to hand over the family fortune to his son-in-law.

However, that rascal Zhang Lang racked his brains for ways of sowing dissension between his mother-in-law and Yinsun, causing daily quarrels between them. Yinsun was driven beyond the limits of his endurance, and so, Squire Liu, also finding the enmity in the air too much to bear, privately gave Yinsun some money so that he could find another place to stay and make a living on his own. Yinsun did find a rundown house, but being a bookish young man, he had no idea how to make a living other than to subsist on what his uncle had given him. All too obviously, Zhang Lang had succeeded in driving him out. Zhang Lang's greatest fear was that Little Plum would give birth to a son or a daughter. If a daughter, he would still be entitled to half the inheritance, but if a boy, nothing would be left for him. So he consulted his wife, Sister Yin, on ways of harming Little Plum.

Sister Yin, however, was a filial daughter, but being a woman without much sense, she loathed the thought of having to share her inheritance with her cousin Yinsun, for she was the daughter after all. And yet she found delight in the prospect of having a little brother. Moreover, noticing how eagerly her father was looking forward to the birth of the baby, she truly wished for her father's happiness. (MC: *She is a rare find among women.*) Aware that her husband did not mean well and that her mother, not knowing better, had always shielded Zhang Lang, she was afraid she would not be able to ensure Little Plum's safe delivery. So she spent much of her time thinking about the matter.

It so happened that Zhang Lang, glowing with triumph after getting Yinsun driven out, let on to her about his intention to do harm to Little Plum. Sister Yin thought, "It's an easy win when two or three people gang up against one. I can't let them deprive my father of an heir out of jealousy. If I don't get involved and think of ways to protect Little Plum, I'll be a traitor to my father and earn myself eternal infamy. (MC: *She sees the larger picture.*) But if my husband knows I won't join them, he may act behind my back. I might as well turn his trick against him and help Little Plum out on the quiet." (MC: *Those willing to help are the best.*)

You may ask, how did she turn Zhang Lang's trick against him? Well, Sister Yin had an aunt who was her father's cousin. The aunt, living in East Village with her husband, was very close to Sister Yin. Now Sister Yin wanted to send Little Plum to her aunt's home so that she could give birth there and have her aunt take care of the baby. Consulting Little Plum, she said, "My husband drove Young Master Yinsun out, meaning to have the entire family fortune to himself. He's very jealous of the baby you're carrying, and my mother is so partial to him. You should watch your moves, Auntie."

"It's so kind of you to say so. I know you do this out of regard for your father, and I'm very grateful. But what can I do, being all alone? I'll have to count on you."

"I do want to help you, but when it comes to money matters, even husband and wife may not trust each other. (MC: *Very insightful.*) I have no way of knowing if he does something underhanded or not."

Her eyes tearing up, Little Plum said, "What's to be done then? Maybe I should tell the squire about this. I'll see what he can do for me." (IC: *Stupid girl!*)

"In his old age, there's only so much he can do for you. What's more, if everything comes out into the open, there will be a loss of face for everyone

and more bad blood. The responsibility for all of it will be too much for you to bear. Now I'd like to talk with you about an idea I have."

"What good idea have you got?"

"My aunt who lives in East Village is very close to me. My idea is for you to live with her and give birth at her home, so that she can take care of you and the baby after you give birth. I'll pay for your food, clothes, and other expenses. I'll tell my mother and my husband that you went off in anger. They won't try to track you down because they'll be only too happy to see you gone. When my husband has shelved his plan to harm you, when my mother comes around a little, and when your child is a little older, I'll look for a chance to tell my father everything. By then, the time will be right to bring you back, and they won't be able to do anything to you. (MC: *She does take the long view.*) This is the only surefire plan."

"You're so kind! I won't ever be able to repay you!"

"I just don't want to see my father heirless and you put in harm's way. I had no choice but to consult you behind my mother's and husband's backs. If you have a son and your luck changes for the better, don't forget what I've done for you!"

"Your kindness is stamped on my memory. I'll never forget it."

And so they came to an agreement and waited for an opportunity to put Sister Yin's plan into action.

One day, the squire wanted to go to his farm to supervise the harvesting. With Little Plum pregnant, he was afraid that his son-in-law would be jealous and that his daughter would take her husband's part, and so he thought he might as well hand the family fortune over to them. Afraid that his wife might also make things difficult for Little Plum, he called his wife to him and said, "Mother, do you know anything about brewing wine in a borrowed jar?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you borrow a jar from someone and brew your own wine in it, you'd return the empty jar to its owner after your wine is done. So the jar is simply something on temporary loan. (MC: *The woman doesn't want to borrow the jar to begin with! What does she care if there is wine or not?*) When Little Plum gives birth, I'll look on the boy or girl as yours. Little Plum can then be sold. You decide what you want to do with her. I'm interested only in what's in her belly. Isn't this a case of brewing wine in a borrowed jar?"

On hearing this, Mrs. Liu said obligingly, "I get what you mean. I'll take good care of her while you're away at the farm. Don't worry!"

Squire Liu had Zhang Lang bring him all the loan receipts from his debtors that had accumulated over the years and told Little Plum to light a lamp. As he tossed the documents into the flame, Zhang Lang reached into the flame to snatch them but cried out in pain as the fire burned his fingers. (IC: *Wonderful! Wonderful!*) The squire commented with a laugh, "No pain, no money!"

Mrs. Liu said, "The loans are part of the family fortune that you saved over many years. Why burn the documents?"

"Maybe I would have had a son if I didn't have so much cursed money. Now that a baby is on the way, things wouldn't have come to this and I wouldn't be an object of calculation if I didn't have those strings of cash. I've been thinking: What's so good about money? Why rack my brains making designs on other people's money? (MC: *Words of the wise.*) Far better if I accumulate some hidden merit and burn up a few of those papers. We have no use for so much money anyway. Maybe Heaven will take pity on me and bless me with a son so as not to cut off my bloodline." That said, he went off to the farm.

Zhang Lang took those words to be a veiled attack on him. Even more resentful, he said to himself, "He all too obviously suspects me of plotting against Little Plum. Since anything good that I do will go unappreciated anyway (MC: *This is how the wicked act: they first blame others for everything.*), why don't I go into action in his absence? That way, the problem won't come back to haunt me in the future."

So he took his wife's counsel, thus inadvertently alerting her to the urgency of the matter. In fact, she had just confided everything to her aunt in East Village and had told Little Plum to go there for shelter. To her husband, she said artfully, "That girl must have guessed that we're up to something. I told her this morning to buy some yarn, and she hasn't come back yet. She must have taken the opportunity to give us the slip. What are we going to do?"

"It's nothing out of the ordinary for a maidservant to give her master the slip. That's actually a good riddance that will make our lives easier."

"But Father will be upset when he hears of this."

"We didn't beat her, yell at her, or give her offense, did we?" said Zhang Lang. "Father can't blame us if she sneaked off on her own. Let's tell Mother about this and talk it over together." And so husband and wife went to inform Mrs. Liu about this new development.

"The two of you are taking this too lightly," said Mrs. Liu. "At your father's age, he's pleased to no end that there's a glimmer of hope for a son, and he's

waiting at the farm for good news. And now this happens! Don't tell me you did something you shouldn't have done! (MC: *Mrs. Liu does still have a spark of conscience in her. She is not beyond all remedy. It's just that she dotes too much on her daughter and son-in-law.*)

Sister Yin was quick to add, "She left of her own accord very early this morning. We had nothing to do with it."

In spite of her apprehensions, Mrs. Liu was eager to believe that nothing was amiss, for the sake of her daughter and son-in-law. To her, the news also came as a relief, so it never crossed her mind to look into the matter. Afraid that the squire would be upset and grow suspicious, the three of them hastened to the farm to inform him of the situation.

The sight of all three of them confused Squire Liu. He thought that they must be there with glad tidings about the birth of his son. But on hearing their report, he was petrified with astonishment. He thought, "They may have made things difficult for her and driven her out. Too bad the baby is gone with her." With a sigh, he said aloud, "The way things are in this family, even if a son is born, the baby wouldn't manage to survive. It's just as well that Little Plum found a good place to go. Why put the lives of mother and child in danger?" His eyes misting over, he swallowed his anger and lamented his fate. (MC: *Poor man!*) And then he thought, "They trick me like this out of designs on my money. Why should I hang on to it for them to enjoy? I have no male heir anyway. I might just as well give some of the money away."

Filled with resentment, he put up large posters announcing that he would be making cash donations to the poor and needy the very next day at Kaiyuan Temple. Zhang Lang's heart sank, but he dared not contradict his father-in-law when the old man was in such a foul mood. The next day, he could not do otherwise than take a liberal amount of money and go to Kaiyuan Temple with the other members of the family to give it away.

On reaching the temple, they saw a stream of paupers arriving. Behold:

*With arms around one another's' shoulders,
They come with hands in slings and heads wrapped in cloth.
Those who can't walk move on their behinds, wrapped in blankets;
Those who can't talk rattle their bells;
Bumping into each other,
They take others' staffs by mistake and raise a clamor;
With their hands on the wall for support,
They still fall into the sewers and exchange insults.*

*Some have the lively company of children;
Some come by their forlorn selves with no spouse.
Money donated now may come back in disguise;
Just do it today, whatever tomorrow brings!*

Squire Liu announced that each adult would get one thousand coins and each child five hundred. Among the beggars was a Liu the Ninth who had a child with him. He said to the beggar chief, "If I take my son along, I'll get a thousand only. But if my boy goes up by himself, that means I get an extra five hundred. You can be a witness and help me out. When the money is mine, I'll share it with you and buy a few drinks." So he and his son went up separately as two applicants.

Zhang Lang asked, "Is the child alone?"

The beggar chief, off to one side, said, "Yes, he's by himself."

After the child received his entitlement of five hundred coins, Liu the Ninth took them. When the chief came to demand his cut, Liu said, "The boy is mine. Why should I share it with you? Go get a son of your own!"

The chief rejoined, "Didn't we agree on the deal? How can you take more than your share? You think you can throw your weight around just because you have a son?" As the two men came to blows, Squire Liu asked what had happened and, on being told the details, asked Zhang Lang to pacify them.

As it turned out, Liu the Ninth didn't know better. He burst into curses against the beggar chief, calling him a sonless man who would bring an end to his family line (MC: *Touching a very raw nerve. Wonderful detail.*), saying, "I got the money because I have a son. What concern is it of yours, you who will die without a son?"

Zhang Lang, his face ablaze, was not able to stop him. Hearing the curses all too clearly, Squire Liu broke into violent sobs and said, "Such is the misery of those of us who have no sons!" As he wept, his wife and daughter also broke down in tears of grief. Zhang Lang was at a loss as to what to do.

After the commotion was over, a man who had been at the end of the line walked up to the squire and his wife and bowed. You may wonder, who was this man? It was none other than Liu Yinsun.

"Why are you here?" asked Squire Liu.

"Uncle, Aunt, I have used up the money you gave me. I heard that you were giving out money here today, so I came to borrow some."

Feeling uncomfortable in the presence of his wife, although she said nothing, Squire Liu said, choosing his words carefully, "Why didn't you

use the money I gave you to start a business? How could you have spent all of it?"

"All I'm capable of doing is reading a little. I don't know the first thing about starting a business, and my daily expenses ate away at my pile of cash until all the money was gone."

The squire flared up. "You're just another good-for-nothing! I don't have the kind of money that could keep you well supplied!"

As the furious squire made as if to hit him, Mrs. Liu false-heartedly intervened, and Sister Yin and her husband said to Yinsun, "Father is so angry! Go away now!"

But Yinsun refused to budge and kept asking for money. Brandishing his cane, Squire Liu ran him out of the temple. Believing him to be genuinely angry, his family members made no attempt to mollify him. With Yinsun walking in front and Squire Liu giving chase, they covered about half a *li* when a mystified Yinsun wondered, "Why is Uncle behaving so strangely today?" (MC: *Old man Liu is indeed behaving strangely.*)

Only when there was no one else in sight did Squire Liu call out, "Yinsun!"

As Yinsun fell to his knees, the squire said tearfully, caressing him, "My child! Because I have no son, I have to put up with a lot of nonsense from people. You're the only male heir with blood ties to me. Your aunt may not know better, but she's a kind person, deep down. It's just that she's biased at this time and doesn't see the right way. She just doesn't realize that blood is thicker than water. But Zhang Lang is no decent sort. Someday he'll distance himself from us. I'll try to talk your aunt around. Just be sure to visit the family graveyard on festivals. In one or two years' time, I'll make you a really rich man. Now, I have two ingots of silver in my boot. They know nothing about this. I pretended to run you out of the temple in order to give the money to you. Take it and make it last for a while. And don't forget what I said!"

Yinsun promised and went off. Squire Liu returned to the temple, put his things together, and went home.

Zhang Lang was upset by his father-in-law's largesse, but he believed that henceforth, with no more disbursements, the family fortune would be all his. Glowing with complacency, he gave himself license to establish the Zhang clan's authority in the Liu household and began to ignore his parents-in-law as if they were no longer master and mistress of the house (MC: *A petty rogue.*) Squire Liu found his behavior offensive. Even Mrs. Liu, who had always been partial to him, also grew a little resentful. Sister Yin, to her

credit, did her best to smooth things over between them, but the stubborn man, bent on having his own way, did not care in the least about their feelings. Since married women are used to obeying their husbands, Sister Yin gradually shifted to her husband's way of thinking with the passage of time. This change was imperceptible to her but not to those with a discerning eye.

On Clear and Bright Festival [around April 5], all families went to their family graveyards to pay respects to their ancestors. Having taken charge of the Liu family property, Zhang Lang, as expected, was the one to make arrangements for the trip. (MC: *When his position is not justified, his actions are questionable.*) Zhang Lang picked up a load of sacrificial food offerings and set out with his wife, before his parents-in-law. In previous years, they used to go first to the Liu family's graveyard and then to the Zhang family's, but now Zhang Lang decided on his own to visit the Zhang family graveyard first. (MC: *He does this out of selfish motives but also by the will of Heaven.*)

Sister Yin asked, "Why don't we follow our usual practice and visit my family's graveyard first? We'll wait until my parents have paid their respects before going to your family's."

"You're married to me, which means that you'll be buried in the Zhang family graveyard after death. It follows that the proper decorum is for you to visit the Zhang family graveyard first."

Yielding to his insistence, Sister Yin obliged him, but of them, no more for now.

Mr. and Mrs. Liu left the house after the younger couple. On the way, Squire Liu commented to his wife, "They should have been there for a while now."

"Yes. Zhang Lang must have laid everything out nicely and is waiting for us with our daughter."

On reaching the graveyard, they saw no one around. Amid the silence, they noticed a layer of fresh soil, ashes of burned paper coins, and some wet stains from libations on the ground. Knowing that his nephew must have been there, Squire Liu said deliberately, "Who has been here to pay respects to our ancestors?" Turning to his wife, he continued, "How very strange! Our daughter and son-in-law aren't here yet, so who could have come? It can't be anyone outside the Liu clan, can it?"

After waiting for some time without seeing Zhang Lang and their daughter, Squire Liu lost his patience. "Let the two of us bow to the graves first. There's no telling when they'll show up."

After making their bows, the squire asked his wife, "After we die, where would you like to have us buried?"

Pointing to a high hilltop, Mrs. Liu said, "The trees up there are shaped like umbrellas. That will be a nice burial spot."

With a sigh, the squire said, "You and I don't have that kind of luck." Pointing down at a waterlogged piece of land with the worst feng shui features, he continued, "That's where you and I will end up."

"We're not short of money," said Mrs. Liu. "Why can't we pick a good burial spot? Why a waterlogged piece of land with the worst feng shui?"

"That high hilltop has an auspicious aura about it. It's for those with sons, so that their family lines will prosper. You and I have no son, so who would yield such a spot to us? Our bones are good enough only for that waterlogged piece of land. Since we have no offspring anyway, why would we need a nice burial spot?"

"Who says we don't have offspring? What about our daughter and son-in-law? (IC: *Extremely stupid!*)

"Oh, I forgot. While waiting for them, let's have a little chat. Let me ask you: What's my family name?"

"Who doesn't know you're a Liu? Why even ask?"

"So I'm a Liu. What's your family name?"

"Li."

"Why is a Li in a Liu household?"

"What a funny question! Am I not your wife?"

"Do people call you 'Mrs. Liu' or 'Mrs. Li'?"

"As the saying goes, 'Marry a rooster, follow the rooster. Marry a dog, follow the dog.' All of me—my bones, my flesh—belongs to the Liu family. How can I be called 'Mrs. Li'!"

"Oh, even your bones belong to the Liu family. So, what's our daughter's family name?" (MC: *With his teasing tone and his probing questions, he could be an effective preacher.*)

"Also Liu."

"What about our son-in-law?"

"Zhang."

"So, after our daughter dies, will she be buried in the Liu family graveyard or the Zhang family graveyard?"

"The Zhang family graveyard, of course." At this point, Mrs. Liu found herself stung by a pang of sadness.

Seeing that his wife was beginning to catch on, the squire said, "There you go again! How can you say they're the offspring of the Liu family? Isn't our family line coming to an end?"

Mrs. Liu burst out crying. "How did you arrive at this conclusion? Yes, we who have no male offspring are wretched indeed!"

"Mother! Now you're talking! Even if we don't have a son, any kinsman bearing the Liu family name will have some connection with us. Alive, he'll bow at the Liu family graveyard and, after his death, be buried in the same graveyard. A daughter, once she joins another family, stops having anything to do with us!"

Her husband having put things in such explicit terms, a light dawned for Mrs. Liu. And what with her son-in-law's high-and-mighty airs and the young couple's absence at the graveyard, she began to feel irritated.

In the midst of their conversation, Yinsun came to the graveyard to pick up his shovel. As he bowed to his uncle and aunt, Mrs. Liu asked, feeling much closer to him than usual, "What brought you here?"

"I'm here to add some soil to the graves."

Turning to her husband, Mrs. Liu said, "A kinsman is after all a kinsman. (MC: *This is Heaven speaking.*) Now even Yinsun has visited the graveyard and added soil, but they still haven't shown up."

Squire Liu said, deliberately provoking Yinsun, "Why didn't you carry a load of sacrificial food offerings and make it a proper visit? Why such shabbiness?"

"As poor as I am, I begged for three cups of wine and one piece of paper from others and brought them here as a token of my regard."

"Mother! Did you hear that? The one carrying a nice load of offerings is still dragging his feet because he's no offspring of ours!"

Mrs. Liu was deeply embarrassed.

Squire Liu asked Yinsun, "See that huge manor that stretches beyond the flight range of a crow? Why don't you go to their graveyard, which is adorned with stone goats and tigers? Why come here?"

Mrs. Liu answered instead, "How do we know to what family that graveyard belongs? He's an offspring of the Liu family. Why should he go to any other graveyard than the Lius'?"

"Mother!" exclaimed Squire Liu. "Now you know that Yinsun is a Liu. Didn't you say that our daughter and son-in-law were offspring of the Liu clan?"

"I was mistaken. From now on, Yinsun will live with us as one family. Don't bear a grudge against me for what I did before."

"I wouldn't dream of doing that!" said Yinsun.

Mrs. Liu went on, "I'll take care of your food and clothing."

Squire Liu told Yinsun to bow his thanks to Mrs. Liu. Yinsun bowed deeply and said, "Aunt, please take good care of me out of regard for the Liu family line." Mrs. Liu's tears fell thick and fast. (MC: *These tears do not come easily.*)

In the midst of the sadness, Zhang Lang and Sister Yin arrived. When Mr. and Mrs. Liu asked the reason for their lateness, Zhang replied, "We went to the Zhang family graveyard first. That's why we're late."

"Why didn't you come here first?" asked Mrs. Liu. "You kept us waiting for so long!"

"I'm a Zhang. Of course the Zhang family comes first in matters relating to rituals like this."

"What about Sister Yin?" asked Mrs. Liu.

"She's a member of the Zhang clan by marriage," said Zhang Lang.

These remarks could not have corresponded better with what she had just heard from her husband. Her eyes popping wide, her jaw hanging open, her face darkening, she said in a rage, "Since you're the Zhang clan's son and daughter-in-law, why should you be the ones to control the Liu family's money?" With a quick swipe of her hand, she wrested the key box from her daughter's hands and said, "From now on, the Zhangs and the Lius part ways." Handing the box to Yinsun, she continued, "From now on, a Liu will be running the Liu household." (MC: *Her righteous courage comes spontaneously. Bravo!*) Even her husband was surprised by her sudden decisiveness.

Zhang Lang and Sister Yin, used to being pampered by the old lady, wondered where all this anger was coming from and were very much put out, thinking, "What happened to turn Mother against us?" Little did they know that Father had completely changed Mother's mind.

As Zhang Lang fired off instructions for laying out the offerings (IC: *He still doesn't know better.*), Mr. and Mrs. Liu said in a fit of rage, "Ancestors of the Liu clan do not eat leftover food from the Zhangs. We'll come back another day for a proper offering!" They parted in bitterness.

After returning home, Zhang Lang said resentfully to Sister Yin, "Who would have guessed that going to my family's graveyard first would lead to such an outburst? What's worse, Yinsun now has control of the family property. How are we going to swallow the humiliation? And it was Mother who did this. This is even more of a mystery!"

Sister Yin said, "My parents take Yinsun to be the only flesh and blood of the Liu family. That's what led to this mess. When you were planning to

harm Little Plum, she sensed something and slipped away. If she had stayed put and given birth to a son, Yinsun would not have been able to rise so high. I wouldn't have minded if it had been my own brother. But to yield everything to Yinsun—I just can't accept that!"

"We've made an enemy of him, and now that he manages the household, we'll have to take our cue from him in everything. What's to be done? We'd better appeal to Mother."

Sister Yin objected, "It was Mother's idea in the first place. How will she come around? I have an idea that will prevent Yinsun from becoming head of the household."

"What is it?"

Sister Yin refused to let on, saying only, "You'll know soon enough. There's no need to ask for details."

The next day, with Mrs. Liu's ready consent, Squire Liu hosted a party and handed over management of the family fortune to Yinsun in the presence of neighbors. On learning the news, Sister Yin sent her husband away on an errand, lest he feel awkward. In the meantime, she dispatched a messenger to her aunt in East Village to bring Little Plum back. The fact was that Little Plum had given birth there to a son who was already three years old. Sister Yin had been secretly sending clothes and food to mother and son and visiting them, without the knowledge of her parents and her husband, fearing that her husband might think up other evil ideas. Also, she had wanted the boy to be a little older before letting her parents know the truth. But now, resenting Yinsun's rise in status, she saw no better alternative than to bring mother and son out of hiding and to her own house. (MC: *She is just a woman after all.*)

The next day, she went to see her father and said to him, "It's one thing if you don't take your son-in-law to be your son, but quite another if you reject even your own daughter."

"When did I ever reject you? It's just that Yinsun's blood is thicker."

"I'm your own flesh and blood. Why is his blood thicker?"

"You're now a member of the Zhang clan, but he's a member of our Liu clan."

"His Liu blood shouldn't necessarily entitle him to the family property."

"The family fortune is his, unless there's someone else with closer blood ties to me, but there isn't, is there?"

Breaking into a smile, Sister Yin said, "Maybe there is."

Believing she was just being contrarian in her bitterness, her parents did not give that remark a second thought.

Sister Yin took herself off, only to reenter the central room of the house with Little Plum and the little boy in tow. "Here comes one with closer blood ties to you than Yinsun!" she announced.

On seeing Little Plum, Mr. and Mrs. Liu were astounded. "Where have you been all this time? We thought you'd fled from this house."

Little Plum said, "I didn't. I've been taking care of the baby."

"What baby?" asked the squire.

Pointing to the boy, Little Plum said, "You're looking at him!"

In joyful surprise, the squire said, "Could this be the child you gave birth to? What happened? Am I dreaming?"

Little Plum said, "Just ask your daughter, and everything will be clear."

With her parents urging her to tell them what had happened, Sister Yin said, "This will surprise you, Father. Let me tell you everything from the beginning. When Auntie Little Plum was about six months pregnant, Zhang Lang planned to do harm to her out of jealousy. The way I looked at it, at Father's age, the family line would come to an end if something happened to Little Plum. So I talked with her and sent her to Aunt's house in East Village, and that's where she gave birth to this child. For the past three years, Aunt has been taking care of mother and son, with me providing them with food and clothing. I was waiting for him to grow a little older before coming out with the truth, but now that Father believes Yinsun is his only heir, I decided to bring the little boy home. Doesn't he have closer blood ties with you than Yinsun, if your daughter doesn't?"

Little Plum put in, "This is all thanks to Young Mistress. (MC: *Little Plum is the best witness.*) If she hadn't done all this, this child wouldn't be here!"

Feeling as if he had just awoken from a wine-induced dream, Squire Liu was filled with gratitude toward his daughter. At Little Plum's urging, the little boy kept calling him "Daddy." His heart melting the moment the boy began, he said to his wife, "Indeed, your own flesh and blood is closer to you than anyone else. (MC: *It just so happens that his daughter does the right thing and looks out for the interests of the Liu family rather than the Zhangs. But this world abounds in daughters who conspire with their husbands in order to lay hands on their fathers' money.*) Our daughter, a Liu, sides with the Lius after all and refused to let Zhang Lang do harm to her little brother. Now that I have a son born to me so late in life, I won't be heirless, and I won't have to be buried

in that miserable waterlogged spot. I owe all this to my loyal daughter. This old man is not one who lets acts of kindness go unreciprocated. I have an idea: I'll divide the family fortune into three portions—one for our daughter, one for my nephew, and one for my son, to be managed separately by each of them, so as to maintain harmony in the family.”

Later that very day, he sent for Zhang Lang, led Yinsun and the little boy out to greet the neighbors and other relatives, and laid out a feast to mark the occasion of the division of the family fortune. The party did not break up until they had all thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Henceforth, Mrs. Liu took the little boy under her wing and cherished him wholeheartedly. As for Squire Liu and Little Plum, their love for the boy could be taken for granted. Sister Yin and Yinsun did their best to protect the boy, one working from inside the family and one from the outside. There was nothing Zhang Lang could do, however jealous he was. The boy grew up peacefully, a result attributable to Squire Liu's many good deeds. In the end, he gained an heir, and his kindness to his own flesh and blood was repaid. This case illustrates that the closer the degree of kinship, the warmer the bond. There is a quatrain in testimony:

*Why would sons-in-law have other designs?
Greed is what estranges kith and kin.
Had the filial daughter not cared,
Would the Liu family line have come to an end?*

Heavenly Preceptors, with Their Theatrics, Claim to Subdue Drought Demons

A County Magistrate, in His Sincerity, Prays for Sweet Rain from Heaven

As the poem says,

*In olden times, there were wondrous shamans
Able to call demons to their service.
They saw weal and woe to come;
They explained yin and yang in words of wisdom.
They not only appealed to lords and dukes
But at times also impressed the emperors.
Their successors, alas, bear no resemblance to them;
Those of the new breed are nothing more than crude villagers.
They talk nothing but nonsense,
But they win the hearts of the populace.
Day in and day out, they practice their cults,
Slaughtering animals with abandon.
If only Ximen Bao could come back to life
And have them thrown into the river!¹*

This story is about shamanism, which dates from the earliest dawn of history. Practitioners of shamanism, both male and female, were called “lower gods” during the Han dynasty and “ghost-seers” during the Tang dynasty.

They were able to enlist the service of ghosts and spirits and foretell weal and woe. Their advice for their clients on preparing for boons and guarding against perils seldom failed to work. Therefore, they gained the trust of lords and dukes, and their service was even required by the imperial palace from time to time. With skills passed on from generation to generation, they were real masters whose accomplishments were by no means fictitious.

However, the way things are with our world, any genuine achievement inevitably gives inspiration to impostors. Men and women who know nothing claim to have spiritual connections to ghosts and spirits and blab nonsense about yin and yang. Even though they accomplish nothing, they make a big splash in the villages with their theatrics. There has never been a lack of such frauds. By this day and age, the authentic art of shamanism has been lost. People of our time are left with lowlifes who call themselves priests and priestesses, claiming to be able to summon gods and ghosts, but who in fact do nothing but beguile the vacant-headed. Chanting gibberish, they pretend that gods are speaking through their mouths, but unable to disentangle themselves from their rustic ways, they come out with vulgar words of their own coinage, trying to pass them off as Mandarin. Members of the upper classes are tickled into repressed laughter, but benighted villagers take them to be bona fide, divinely inspired priests and believe deeply in them. Can there be any divinely inspired priests over the length and breadth of the empire who are unable to speak Mandarin? (MC: *If in heaven there are fairies who are illiterate, it follows that on earth there are priests who do not speak Mandarin.*)

There is another infuriating thing about such priests: Whenever their services are required for the sick, they would begin by saying that the illness is beyond a cure, but when the patients are reduced to begging them and desperately making all sorts of vows, they extort payment from the patients' families even if they have to pawn the clothes on their backs and kill animals. Even so, the tearful family members of the sick are still afraid that the wonder-working priests will reject them. When the patients' conditions worsen and the sacrificial and incense offerings fail to work, the families, rather than blaming the priests and suspecting them of incompetence, reproach themselves for not having done their best to please the priests and, if anything, grow more fervent in making their offerings. Goodness only knows how much money is extorted and how many lives are taken. What the patients get in return for feeding and enriching the deceitful priests is

nothing but a great deal of improvised nonsense. The law of the land does contain harsh provisions banning witchcraft and sorcery, but there is at least the implied acknowledgment of “sorcery” as a profession. And yet, the witches and sorcerers of our day run amok, doing things that hardly qualify as “craft.” Nevertheless, their shenanigans, embraced by the benighted, are the order of the day. With no cure for this intractable problem, stories about such cases can only serve to raise a laugh from the wise and the sensible.

In Suzhou, there lived a poor man, Mr. Xia. Envious of the prosperous sorcerers and witches, he apprenticed himself to a tutor, hoping to acquire some real skills. As it turned out, however, he learned nothing to justify the tuition other than some glib rhetoric and a repertoire of secret formulas passed on from generation to generation. After practicing until he could reel them off with ease, he set up his own shop. He had a neighbor, Scholar Fan Ruyu, who was fond of teasing people. Convinced of Mr. Xia’s ineptness, he decided to help the man make a fool of himself at his first public performance. So he said to Xia, tongue in cheek, “The first time you show your divine prowess, you must accomplish something really out of the ordinary to impress the audience. As your neighbor, I feel obliged to help you take everyone’s breath away.”

“What good idea do you have?”

“Tomorrow, when you appear before the audience, I’ll hold a piece of a cake in my fist and ask you to guess what it is I’m holding. You’ll guess correctly on the first try, I’ll burst out in praise of you, and everyone will be impressed.”

“I’m a lucky man indeed if you could be so helpful to me!” said Xia the wizard.

The next day, people came in droves from far and near to see the new wizard summon gods and spirits. When Xia was onstage, gesticulating wildly and making a spectacle of himself, Scholar Fan approached him, holding something in his fist, and asked, “If you can guess what I have in my fist, you’re a real master.”

Smiling cheerfully, Xia announced, “It’s a piece of cake.”

In mock deference, Scholar Fan bowed deeply and exclaimed, “You’re right! How wonderful!” With that, he shoved the object at Xia’s lips. Believing it was cake, Xia readily opened his mouth. To his dismay, it was not cake. It was smelly and hard. He would have spit out the foul-tasting stuff, but afraid that he would thus be exposed as a fraud, he knitted his brow, braced himself, and swallowed.

Scholar Fan waited until Xia had finished eating before crying out, "The great master has just eaten dried dog droppings!" (MC: *He is fond of playing pranks on people.*)

Members of the audience had been somewhat skeptical when they noticed how painfully Xia had swallowed. At Scholar Fan's announcement, they realized that Xia had been made fun of. Bursting into peals of laughter, they dispersed and went their separate ways. Word of this debacle spread, and Xia's business never prospered.

Scholar Fan did the right thing in unmasking the fraud for what he was. The ignorant were ready to embrace the deception, but Mr. Fan, to his credit as a scholar, exposed the hocus-pocus. Otherwise, the audience would have fallen for the trickery.

The story about Scholar Fan in fact pales in comparison to that of a humble man in the Song dynasty who also did not believe in witchcraft and sorcery and reduced two sorcerers to figures of fun.

By the sea, next to Gold Mountain Temple in Huating [in present-day Shanghai], stood a shrine to General Huo Qubing [140–117 BCE] of the Han dynasty. According to local legend, the shrine was built when King Qian Liu [852–932] ruled the Wu and Yue regions after General Huo's spirit raised a ghost army to aid King Qian.² On a festive day in the last year of the Chunxi reign period [1174–89], a wizard of the temple assembled people of the county and, with much theatrics, claimed that General Huo had attached his spirit to him and that everyone who prayed to him was to be richly blessed. The local people believed his story and fell all over themselves in the rush to go to the temple, but there was one disbeliever. Shen Hui by name, he was an able servant of Judge Qian of the Court of Judicial Review. As he made facetious and insulting remarks about the wizard, his friends grew afraid that he might offend the deities and exhorted him with many kindly words not to be so disrespectful. The wizard said to him, "The general is wrathful and will soon be bringing calamities on you."

Defiantly, Shen Hui argued, "Good fortune or ill is decreed by Heaven. How would some general be able to push me around? Even if the general has a spirit, he wouldn't attach it to the body of a stupid rustic like you to dispense good or bad fortune." (MC: *A servant capable of such remarks is like the servant of He Fanghui.*)³

In the midst of this exchange, Shen Hui suddenly collapsed and, drooling, slipped into a coma. Some who had gone with him to the temple ran to

his home to report to his family. His wife rushed to the temple, and on seeing the state he was in, she felt certain that her husband had offended the deities. As she bowed to the wizard, asking for mercy, the wizard put on more airs and announced, "It's now too late to repent and apologize. The general is boiling mad. He has seized your husband's soul and taken it to Fengdu, capital of the netherworld. He'll be dead anytime now. It's too late to try to save him."

Shen Hui remained in a coma, which could not have pleased the wizard more, and the latter was only too happy to overstate the danger in order to frighten her. Smitten by panic, Mrs. Shen did not know what to do except bow to the statues of the gods and plead with the wizard, but the wizard only launched into a harsher harangue. As she stroked her husband's body, weeping, the crowd of onlookers swelled. "The gods are merciless!" they warned one another. "They are not to be made fun of!" In the meantime, the wizard grew more zestful in his shenanigans, savoring his victory.

In front of everyone's eyes, Shen Hui jumped up from the floor. Believing that it was the work of the powerful spirit of the dead, everyone dodged away in alarm. Shen Hui leaped out from among the crowd, seized the wizard, slapped him a few times, and said, "This is what you get for your preposterous lies! Now calm down! How did you manage to see me go to Fengdu, capital of the netherworld?"

His wife asked, "But what happened to you a moment ago?"

Bursting into hearty laughter, Shen Hui replied, "With so many people putting their faith in him, I purposefully put on that show, just to have some fun with him. What a fine 'divine being' he is!" (MC: *What a delight! How wonderful! A really able servant!*)

Mortified, the wizard slunk out of the temple and went into hiding. The crowd dispersed, and from that time onward, the wizard never regained his popularity.

Gentle reader, judging from the above two stories alone, can you find any reason to believe in wizards and sorcerers anymore? Hence the conclusion: Intelligent people who are upright in character do not fall for such frauds. Only the unenlightened and the empty-headed do.

This humble storyteller now proposes to tell a story about how an encounter between a sorcerer with a flair for the dramatic and an uncompromising gentleman led to highly satisfying results. It is a story even more

remarkable than the one about Ximen Bao throwing the sorceress into the water. Verily,

*Tricksters prey on the gullible;
Victims of scams, beware!
Those believed to be deities on earth
Are fit only to eat dried dog droppings.*

As our story goes, during the Huichang reign period [841–46] under Emperor Wu of the Tang dynasty, there was a Di Weiqian, magistrate of Jinyang County and a descendant of the eminent minister Di Renjie, Duke of Liang, who had helped Emperor Zhong regain his rightful place on the Tang throne. An incorruptible official of great moral integrity, Magistrate Di did everything the proper way. He had no fear of the powerful. Even his superiors went out of their way to humor him. On his watch, there was no need to bolt the doors at night throughout Jinyang County and no one pocketed anything that had been lost on the road. Every family was grateful to him, and there were none who did not sing his praises. Unfortunately, natural disasters hit the Jinyang region one after another. In spite of all he did as such a good official, a drought descended on the region and lasted from spring to summer. For four to five months, not a drop of rain fell. Behold:

*The parched earth cracks;
Well bottoms gather dust.
What appear to be wisps of smoke
Are in fact shimmering shafts of sunlight.
What feels like breaths of wind
Are in fact columns of steaming heat.
Well pulleys work nonstop,
But all that comes up is half a spoonful of mud.
Waterwheels and bailing buckets stand around,
But no water is to be had.
For all the homage paid to the Dragon King,
Who makes rain over the lakes and seas,
Families now find themselves desperate,
With nothing but the wind to fill their stomachs.
Under the blazing red sun,
No dark clouds are seen over the land.*

The drought was so severe that all over the hundreds of *li* of land in Jin-yang County, the fields were parched, the hills were scorched, the tributaries and springs had dried up, the grass and trees withered, and the crop seedlings died. Gripped by anxiety, the county magistrate dismissed his attendants and guards and walked barefoot to and fro in the temple of the city god, praying as he did so, but nothing worked. He fasted and ordered that the slaughtering of animals be banned, incense be offered every day, and prayers be said throughout the night in open air. (MC: *When a drought strikes during a good official's term of office, it is time to wipe out all sorcerers and witches and commend the official's outstanding governance.*) Everything that was supposed to be done during a drought was done.

Here our story takes another tack for a while. In the same prefecture lived a good-for-nothing scoundrel called Guo Saipu. Fascinated with sorcery from an early age, he partnered with a witch from Bingzhou [later Taiyuan Prefecture, in Shanxi]. Known to the public as apprentices to the same master, they were in fact husband and wife. With the two of them teaming up, one leading and the other following, they used their gift of the gab to dupe the locals. Egged on from the outside by the man and from inside the ladies' boudoirs by the woman, one family after another, even officials' families, hired them to dispel disasters, cure illnesses, improve marital relations, and, in the cases of jealous wives and concubines, put curses on one another. (MC: *Such is the fertile ground in which the abominable practice can prosper!*) In short, their various exploits turned the entire Taiyuan Prefecture topsyturvy. The army supervising commissioner of the prefecture was a eunuch and, like all eunuchs, had great faith in sorcery. When the commissioner was about to make a trip to the capital, Guo Saipu and his female companion wanted to go with the commissioner to try their luck because the imperial court took such unorthodox practices seriously at the time. The commissioner, meaning to raise their status, decided to take them along.

And so they arrived in the capital, a city where a motley assortment of people made their home. It was an ideal place for lawbreakers to hide and for all manner of heresies to flourish. As the two of them distributed charms and cast spells to cure illnesses and exorcise demons, news about whatever little success they happened to achieve spread far and wide by word of mouth. (MC: *They must know a thing or two to be able to impress people like this.*) The word was that they were miracle workers, indeed, nothing short of two divine beings now gracing the capital with their presence. To those who asked to see them, they repeated the grand overstatements in circulation

about themselves and boasted about their divine prowess in the most graphic terms. With the two trying to outdo each other in eloquence, anyone with a modicum of faith in ghosts and spirits—even men of intelligence and good character—would walk willingly into their trap, the only exceptions being men of high principle who were not susceptible to cajolery.

What with their spreading fame and the commissioner's glorification of them to all the offices of the Palace Domestic Service, the two of them began to associate frequently with the eunuchs, and the witch gained access to the living quarters of the imperial consorts, who amply rewarded her. At the eunuchs' urging, the emperor granted both of them the title Heavenly Preceptor. (MC: *So much for the Tang government!*) In fact, the Daoist arts were hugely popular during the Tang dynasty, and granting priests purple robes and the Heavenly Preceptor title was hardly a rarity. The recipients of such favors were not assigned positions in government offices, nor did the title carry much weight other than that it impressed local communities. Having gained this title, Guo Saipu thought it time to go back to his home village and impress the locals. And so he returned to Taiyuan with the witch. There, everyone, of all ages and social classes, respectfully addressed them as "Heavenly Preceptor." Putting on portentous airs, they were now in vastly different circumstances than before their trip to the capital.

Let us return to the severe drought in Jinyang. In desperation, Magistrate Di had posters put up: "The county yamen will substantially reward anyone—official, clerk, soldier, or civilian—who can call up rain clouds."

As soon as the posters were up, a group of elders led some followers to the county yamen and said to the magistrate, "Heavenly Preceptor Guo of this prefecture has magic skills that are known even in the capital, and the emperor has bestowed favors on him. If he could be invited to our county temple to pray for rain, our problem will be solved as easily as turning over a hand. Our only worry is that, with his exalted status, he won't deign to accept an invitation from the likes of us. It falls to you, sir, to invite him, in all sincerity, to come and save the people. Only then will the people of this county get a new lease on life."

Magistrate Di said, "If his skills do work, I'll of course humble myself and beg him to come. I'm only afraid that the likes of him are the treacherous sort who build up reputations for themselves without doing anything to deserve them. If he indeed gained fame under false pretenses and puts on high-and-mighty airs, inviting him here will only cause trouble rather than do us any good. (MC: *He is right.*) It would be better to look for real masters of the

Daoist arts in our own locality. Who's to say that none can be found? Those who do come forward in response to our call will surely be much better than one with a hollow reputation. I haven't ventured to pay him my respects because I didn't want to set a bad precedent."

One of the elders insisted, "You're right, Your Honor, but there can't be any fame without substance. You can't very well turn away the celebrated Heavenly Preceptors endorsed by the court and admired by the populace and look farther afield for some other master. It will be a case of 'Ignoring the bronze bell right in front of you and going to the smelter to start from scratch.' If you're worried about the funding, the villagers are ready to pay assessments. If Your Honor can invite the Heavenly Preceptors here, it will be an act of boundless kindness."

"If that's what you're determined to do," said the magistrate, "I have nothing more to worry about."

Right away, the magistrate ordered that artificial flowers and bolts of silk be prepared. He then wrote a letter of invitation and sent an able clerk to deliver it on his behalf. After the clerk was led into Guo Saipu's presence and stated the purpose of his visit, the Heavenly Preceptor arrogantly asked, "So you want a prayer for rain?"

The visitors kowtowed and said, "Yes, exactly."

Smiling, the Heavenly Preceptor said, "A drought is a manifestation of Heavenly will. It must be Heaven's punishment for the grave sins committed by the people in these parts and the immorality of corrupt county officials. My job is to enforce justice on behalf of Heaven. How could I go against the will of Heaven and pray for rain on your behalf?" (MC: *Finding an excuse in advance for his failure to invoke rain.*)

The visitors again kowtowed and said, "Our county magistrate is a very clean and incorrupt official. It pains his heart to witness heaven's punishment for the local people's sins, which is why, in admiration of your fame, he extends an invitation to you and offers these gifts, oh mighty one, begging you to go to our county and pray for rain. Please don't decline. The entire local population will be ever so grateful to you."

Breaking into another smile, the Heavenly Preceptor said, "I'm not one to lightly accept any invitation from a tiny county like yours." Over and over again, he declined the invitation.

After the official returned and reported as much to the county magistrate, the village elders and others burst out crying and pleaded, "Now that the Heavenly Preceptor refuses to come, we're all doomed to die. Your Honor,

please extend another invitation and make sure that he comes here!" (MC: *The benighted are hopeless.*)

In resignation, the county magistrate added more gifts, picked another clerk, and wrote a letter of invitation in a more earnest tone, as well as a letter to the military governor of the prefecture suggesting that an invitation from the governor would surely work. Moved by the county magistrate's sincerity, the military governor decided to personally pay the Heavenly Preceptor a visit and plead with him.

The governor's visit made the Heavenly Preceptor feel obliged to accept the invitation, whereupon the delegation from the county burst into earth-shaking cries of joy. They would have offered themselves in order to attain this result. The Heavenly Preceptor ordered that two sedan-chairs be prepared—one for a male passenger and the other for a female passenger—so that the witch could go with him. The county magistrate's representative and the village elders eagerly obeyed and hired two fancy sedan-chairs, one for him and one for the witch. As the two lavishly decorated sedan-chairs were carried along, complete with incense burners, brightly lit candles, banners, and canopies, the procession looked as if it was grand enough for two living Buddhas.

Upon its arrival on the border of Jinyang County, Magistrate Di went forward to salute the distinguished guests. After the two Heavenly Preceptors stepped out of the sedan-chairs and exchanged greetings with the magistrate, the latter put artificial flowers, red bunting, and pieces of colorful fabric on them and asked each of them to mount a horse. With the magistrate leading the horses and a band of percussion musicians at the head of the procession, the two guests were taken to the temple. (MC: *Such undeserved respect would ruin what little fortune might have been allotted to a good-for-nothing scoundrel and a village woman. How could they not fail?*)

After a sumptuous feast was served, the two guests were taken to nice rooms in the inner section of the temple, along with their luggage. The magistrate bade them good-bye and departed, to await the demonstration of their prowess the next day. Of him, no more for now.

Once they were left alone, Guo Saipu said to the witch, "The people of this county are sincere in their wish for us to pray for rain, and they've shown us such ceremony. We couldn't have done otherwise. Now everyone in this county, from officials to villagers, is desperately hoping for rain. If, by a stroke of luck, it rains after we put on our show, everything will be all

right. But if we're not so fortunate, how are we going to get these people off our hands?"

The witch said, "Haven't you been playing these tricks for years now? Don't you know better than to worry about such a trifle? Tomorrow, let's set the rain date far into the future. An extended dry spell will surely be followed by some rain. Even if it's just a few drops, the credit goes to us. In case it still doesn't rain, let's just lay the blame on them for one thing or another. When their patience runs out, we'll throw a tantrum and insist on leaving. By that time, they'll feel sorry for having ruffled our feathers and failing to keep us, and they'll be in too much of a frenzy to badmouth us." (MC: *The witch is even more of a crafty scoundrel.*)

"Good idea!" conceded Guo. "They have such respect for us that I don't think they'll see through us. (MC: *This is what emboldens him.*) Let's just brazen it out." And so they settled on what to do.

The next day, the county magistrate went to the temple for the prayer service. Guo ordered that a small altar be set up in the temple. In front of the statue of the city god, the two sorcerers put their tongues to work, jabbering strings of balderdash. Then they mounted the altar, with Guo banging the tablets and the witch beating a nine-ring leather drum. After burning quite a few charms, Guo looked all around from his elevated position and saw faint signs of clouds in a northeasterly direction. He thought, "As the saying goes, 'A north wind goes before a summer rain.' Maybe rain is coming in a few days. Let me announce this in order to win their appreciation."

So he stepped down from the altar and announced to the magistrate, "I sent my charms up to the Upper Realm to request rain, and the Lord on High has replied, saying that as long as you're all profoundly sincere, rain will come in three days."

When this announcement was spread around, tens of thousands of the people of the region jumped up and down for joy. Officials and commoners from all around the county gathered together to wait for the rain.

Three days went by amid eager expectations, but it was obvious to everyone that the weather was drier than ever.

*With the sun blazing overhead
And not a puff of cloud in the sky,
Happy locusts ride on the waves of heat;
Fish and turtles fidget in hot-water ponds.*

*The air is hardly stirred by any breeze;
The flags and banners stay straight and stiff.
Without even a drop of rain,
Wails of grief fill the air.*

The county magistrate and several villagers approached the Heavenly Preceptors and said to them, "The three days are over. Why is there still no sign of rain?"

Guo replied, "Droughts do not occur without reason, and the reason in this case is the immoral conduct of the county magistrate. That's why the Lord on High still does nothing, but I'm going to pray hard for you again."

Feeling apologetic on hearing this remark about his supposedly immoral conduct, the magistrate said, "Any retribution should be visited on me, and me alone, for my faults. Why plunge so many people into this misery? Please do intercede for the people! I'd rather sacrifice any luck I have in exchange for rain, to relieve the misery of the people. I'll be ever so grateful to you."

Guo said, "A drought is the work of the drought demons. I'll pray for rain while I hunt them down. I guarantee that you'll see rain in seven days." (MC: *Coming up with another money-extorting idea.*)

"There is indeed mention of drought demons in *The Book of Songs* and *The Book of History*," said the magistrate. "But how are you going to hunt them down?"

"They must be in some village. You just leave the search to me."

"How nice if they can indeed be found so that rain will follow! I leave it to you."

Thereupon, Guo told the witch to go to the villages and search for the drought demons. Whenever she saw a woman far along in pregnancy, she would declare that the woman was carrying a drought demon and therefore must take medicine for an abortion. Panic began to spread through the villages. Since a woman was not denied access to any home, the witch inserted herself into the inner quarters of every house. As a result, no family could hide a pregnancy from her. Rich families saw no alternative but to buy her silence with money so as to avoid scandal. Thus greatly enriched, the witch brought a few poverty-stricken women to the county yamen and, accusing them of being mothers of drought demons, poured water over them. Knowing all too well that this was nothing but nonsense, the county magistrate nevertheless chose not to give voice to his anger and instead humored her in

every way. The seven-day deadline came and went, but not a drop of rain fell in response to all the shenanigans, as this poem attests:

*Drought demons in human fetuses?
This was surely nothing but a scam.
The magistrate was to dispense with the usual practice
And bring thunderbolts cracking overhead.*

More than ten days elapsed in like manner. Heaven did not cooperate. If there had been even a light sprinkle of rain, the two sorcerers would have taken credit for it and, flaunting their prowess, proudly accepted their rewards. However, as it was, there was not even a thunderclap to herald the coming of rain. Feeling quite awkward, the two defended themselves by saying, “This area is simply not meant to have rain. It serves no purpose for us to remain here.” (MC: *A clever excuse.*)

As they began to put their things together in preparation for their return home, the benighted villagers cried out frantically, “No rain comes while the Heavenly Preceptors are here. After they’re gone, there will be even less chance of rain! (MC: *The benighted will always remain benighted.*) Can it be that the people in these parts are doomed to die?”

They went in droves to see the county magistrate and pleaded with him to keep the Heavenly Preceptors. Being an official who cared deeply about the people, the county magistrate followed their wishes and implored the sorcerers to stay. (MC: *If the magistrate had pleaded because he had been as benighted as the villagers, there would be nothing remarkable about him. The fact that he knew the Heavenly Preceptors were frauds yet stooped in submission to them on behalf of the people sets him apart as a worthy man.*) He said, “Since Your Reverences already took the trouble of coming here for the sake of the local population, I beg you to make an extra effort and pray for a response from heaven so as to bring relief to the affected population. You must not go and let all your efforts come to naught.”

With the magistrate politely pleading and the villagers desperately begging him, Guo was at a loss for words. He thought, “If I don’t put on a stern face, how am I going to shake these people off?” His face darkening, he lashed out at the magistrate, “You’re an incompetent official ignorant of the way of Heaven. It’s your incompetence that dooms this area to destruction. When it’s just not the right time for rain, what’s the use of keeping me here?”

The magistrate did not think it proper to answer back. Instead, he said, "Heaven will surely punish me for my sins. I wouldn't dare impose on you further. But since Your Reverences have taken the trouble to come here, we have at least the obligation to set out a thank-you banquet tomorrow. So please do us the honor of staying for one more night."

Only then did the Heavenly Preceptor's expression soften. "But tomorrow will definitely be our last day here," said he.

The magistrate took leave of him and, on returning to the county yamen, assembled the yamen employees and said to them, "As for these crafty characters, I know only too well that their theatrics will get us nowhere but the ignorant, gullible villagers would blame me for not submitting to their will and therefore blocking the rain. Now, I've shown the utmost humility to them and pleaded with them with the utmost sincerity. Indeed, there were no lengths to which I wouldn't go. This is the best I can manage. Instead of blaming themselves for their heretic ways, he hurled insults at me. As a humble official thus humiliated by a sorcerer, I can hardly hold my head up again in my future career. Tomorrow, you must all support me when I give you instructions as to what to do. I'll be solely responsible for whatever happens. Don't hesitate or act too slowly."

The magistrate, in his dignity and authority, had always impressed everyone at the yamen with his benevolent rule. How could anyone disobey him? They all acknowledged the order before they dispersed.

Before the yamen gate was opened the next morning, word came that the Heavenly Preceptors were busily preparing their horses for their return journey and urging the yamen to get ready to send them off. (MC: *Retreat is the best strategy*.) The administrative assistant asked the magistrate, "Is the send-off banquet to be set in the yamen or in the temple? I need to start preparations well in advance so I won't have to rush things."

The magistrate responded, with an icy smile, "Why would we need to rush things?"

He told the employees to follow him into the temple to bid farewell to the Heavenly Preceptors. The followers were skeptical, thinking, "Nothing has been done to prepare the banquet. How are we going to bid farewell to them?"

In the meantime, in the temple, Heavenly Preceptor Guo was also wondering whether the farewell banquet was to be set out in the county yamen or the temple. Without a sign of anything astir, the Heavenly Preceptor was losing patience. Breaking out in a fury, he said, "With such a disrespectful man as the county magistrate, how will there be any rain?"

In the twinkling of an eye, the magistrate arrived at the temple. Giving him a withering look, Guo cried out, with the witch giving vocal support, "We're ready to go. Why hold us up like this for no good reason? Why don't you get on quickly with the send-off banquet?"

The magistrate's face hardened. "You've got your nerve, you scoundrels!" he roared. "You sorcerers have been playing your tricks long enough! Now that you've delivered yourselves into my hands, today is the day you die! How dare you even talk about returning? Officers! Seize those two!"

Would any yamen employee refuse to carry out his order? They thundered their acknowledgment and, with the speed of an eagle snatching a sparrow, clapped iron chains around the necks of the two sorcerers and overpowered them.

Turning to the statue of the city god, the magistrate said, "Those two filthy sorcerers have been playing tricks on ignorant people and blaspheming the gods. I hereby ask for permission to eliminate them on behalf of the gods." He ordered that the two culprits be made to kneel before the statue of the city god and said, "I'll send you off now!" (MC: *This exciting moment calls for torrential rain.*)

Both culprits were given thirty strokes of the whip on the back. Their skin split, their flesh ripped, and their blood splashed across the floor. Then they were trussed up and dumped into the pond in front of the temple. How bizarre that Guo Saipu and the witch of Bingzhou, after a lifetime of evil doings, died such violent deaths on this day!

The unyielding magistrate held his ground;

The sorcerers were proved to be frauds.

The gods ignored them when they were beaten;

Water jars that stay by the well break by the well.

All turned pale as they witnessed County Magistrate Di kill two Heavenly Preceptors within such a short space of time. An older and wiser county employee went up to the magistrate and said, "Your Honor did the right thing in eliminating the two swindlers. However, the title Heavenly Preceptor was bestowed by the imperial court. What's to be done if reproaches come from the upper authorities and the imperial court?"

The magistrate replied, "Although those two had no roots, they knew how to maneuver their way into power. To keep them would be to perpetuate the bad blood and fall victim to them. With the two of them dead and

gone, it will be as if the fleabanes are blown away and the stalks are broken. No kith or kin of theirs will rise to defend them. Even if the imperial court holds me accountable for the unauthorized executions, the worst-case scenario will be my dismissal from office. Nothing more than that." Everyone present humbly voiced agreement in admiration of his courage. (MC: *It's more than courage. It's great insight.*)

The magistrate then said to himself, "Now that I've gotten rid of the Heavenly Preceptors, ignorant people will lay the blame at my door and accuse me of offending the gods if rain still doesn't fall. I do believe in spiritual connections between mortal beings and the gods. It's just that those ridiculous and vulgar characters were in no position to move the gods to pity. If a respectable county magistrate pleads to the gods on behalf of the people, his sincerity will surely be appreciated." So thinking, he kowtowed to the statues of the gods and prayed piously, "I've eliminated those scoundrels with their dirty tricks, lies, and blasphemies against the gods. If the gods don't grant rain to black magicians, they must be reserving their favors for the upright and the virtuous. If there's still no response forthcoming, I can only conclude that the gods have failed to distinguish between the good and the evil. If indeed I'm to blame for my misdeeds, the responsibility rests with me alone. The local population should be spared such severe punishment. With these kowtows to ye gods, I, Weiqian, vow from the bottom of my heart that I'll expose myself to the scorching sun on top of the hill behind the temple and stand there without rest until it rains, even if I die from the heat." (MC: *This is the same spirit showed by the Foolish Old Man who tried to remove the mountains and the Jingwei bird that tried to fill up the sea with pebbles.*) Having said that, he kowtowed again and departed.

The hill behind the temple was about a hundred feet high. The magistrate lost no time in ordering that a mat be prepared and incense lit. He then donned his official's headgear and robe and stood on the mat, holding his memorandum tablet in hand. (IC: *Quite a sight!*) He ordered his followers to leave him and await further instructions.

When they heard about what the magistrate had done, people throughout the county were appalled. Some said, "How could he have killed the Heavenly Preceptors? The Heavenly Preceptors can't have died. The magistrate's violent act will surely lead to extraordinary disasters. What's to be done?" Others said, "The magistrate is standing on the hill behind the temple to pray to Heaven."

As the news spread, everyone rushed to the spot to view the sight. As a wall of humanity took shape, the strangest thing happened. Indeed, it was a

case of sincerity bringing about a spiritual connection. When the magistrate had just reached the top of the hill, the sun was beating down in all its fury, searing the sand and stones, but as soon as he gained a firm foothold, a black cloud the size of a carriage canopy appeared over his head, completely blocking the sun all around him. Gradually, more dark clouds moved in to merge with the first one. After several thunderclaps, a heavy rain came down in sheets. Behold:

*A thousand hills disappear from view;
Everything is shrouded in a thick haze.
The splashing drops of rain fly about
Like dragons dancing in the air.
The wind howls wildly in fury
Like ten thousand horses galloping from afar.
Streaks of lightning flicker across the sky;
Thunderclaps growl like drumbeats.
The pelting rain enraptures the farmers;
The roar of thunder strikes fear into evil hearts.*

The rain lasted for more than two hours, until the ditches overflowed and the fields were waterlogged. Everyone clapped and whooped for joy, grateful for the pains the magistrate had taken for them. Thousands of people climbed up and escorted the magistrate down the hill, shielding him from the rain with their own clothes. All along the way, bedraggled women, children, and the elderly kowtowed to him and sang his praises. Feeling a little apologetic, Magistrate Di said, “Please don’t do this! This is all the work of Heaven. I had nothing to do with it!”

The more benighted among the crowd, knowing nothing about the importance of sincerity in the spiritual connection with Heaven, transferred their pious worship of the Heavenly Preceptors to the magistrate after learning that he had killed the Heavenly Preceptors and invoked rain, showing greater divine prowess than the Heavenly Preceptors. (MC: *That is why the ancient sages invoke the gods in their preaching.*)

After arriving at the county yamen, the magistrate told the crowd to disperse. Then he collected data on the volume of rainfall in all the communities of the county and gave the report to higher authorities.

In the meantime, the military governor of the prefecture had heard that the county magistrate had killed the sorcerers and faulted him for his

recklessness. Since the sorcerers had been invited with proper etiquette, they certainly did not deserve death, even if they failed to bring rain. Wasn't the magistrate guilty of killing the innocent just because their prayers for rain had been ineffective? However, by the time the report, with its data on the bountiful rainfall, was delivered, letters from people in the county came pouring in, extolling the magistrate's many virtues, including his standing under the merciless sun while he prayed for rain. It was only then that the military governor realized, sighing deeply in admiration, that the magistrate was a man of honor with extraordinary achievements to his credit. The governor had a mind to commend him, but afraid that the imperial court would reproach him for the beating deaths of the two sorcerers, he felt obliged to write a memorial to the court to state the facts. The gist of his memorial is as follows:

Sorcerer Guo and his accomplice used black magic to hoodwink the public. Whatever titles were bestowed on them had been obtained under false pretenses. They were guilty of blasphemies against the gods, harming the people, and bullying the county magistrate. The magistrate did not go too far when he eliminated the two sorcerers for the benefit of the public. With enough strength to eliminate the evil, and enough sincerity to move Heaven, Magistrate Di achieved extraordinary results by exposing himself to the harshness of the elements in order to bring on rain. Such a capable official serving the imperial court deserves the highest honors.

At that time, military governors of strategically positioned outlying prefectures were very powerful, so the imperial court deemed it prudent not to contradict the governor's recommendation. Moreover, Guo Saipu and his accomplice had been undocumented riffraff in the first place. After they flaunted their ill-gotten imperial favor in the capital for a time and left for the countryside, they were gradually forgotten. As they had no supporters or close friends in the capital to be concerned about them, no one felt sorry about their deaths. The killing of two Heavenly Preceptors was thus looked on as nothing more than the killing of two commoners, just as Magistrate Di had predicted.

Jinyang being the northern capital of the empire at the time, the fame of Magistrate Di quickly spread through the court and beyond. Everyone admired his moral character. Before long, an imperial decree was issued in recognition of his virtues:

Di Weiqian, a good county magistrate, a loyal subject, and an outstanding descendant of Lord Di Renjie, prayed at the Jinyang Temple and eliminated sorcerers the way Ximen Bao had done in Ye County, in order to relieve the drought that inflicted misery on the local populace. By stationing himself on a hilltop under the harsh sun, he was doing no less than letting himself die from the heat. In praying for rain clouds, he did not hesitate to put himself in harm's way in the manner of King Tang, whereupon the drought abated and sweet rain fell.⁴ Since Heaven was moved by his piety, how can We neglect to commend him for his virtues? Mr. Di is hereby awarded a vermilion robe and a copper official seal. This commendation is issued for the purpose of making his reputation last and his extraordinary achievements widely known.

An award of five hundred thousand cash was forthwith granted to the magistrate by way of acknowledging his merit. Henceforth, Magistrate Di gained fame as an official of the Tang dynasty. Later, after he was promoted and left the county, the local people built a shrine dedicated to him, out of gratitude for him, although he was still alive. The shrine has never been short of worshippers, and prayers for sunshine or rain have never failed to be effective. (MC: *How does it compare to those shrines dedicated to people still living today?*) All this is attributable to the magistrate's moral integrity. It can thus be seen that good defeats evil after all. Goodness only knows when the souls of those sorcerers with their theatrics will find redemption after their drowning deaths! Those who worship sorcerers are advised to read and reread this story. There is a poem in testimony:

*All say sorcerers work wonders.
Why did these two not rise again from the water?
Consider how rain came in this story,
And you will see that sincerity is divine.*

On the Huayin Trail, Li Meets One Extraordinary Man

The Jiangling Commander Opens Three Mysterious Envelopes

A poem says,

*Everything in life is predestined;
Nothing, least of all fame, should be sought if it is not your fate.
Any number of heroes stayed in oblivion
Because no one directed them to the right way.*

As they say, of all things in life, success or failure on the civil service examinations is the most mysterious secret and the least predictable. As the ancients put it, “One may have the talent but not the luck.” However gifted you are in literary composition, if fate is against you, you will lose to a child or a vegetable peddler on the exams. A case in point: In the Tang dynasty, poetic talent was an important qualification for service as a government official, and yet, of Li Bai [701–762], Du Fu [712–770], Wang Wei [701–761], and Meng Haoran [689–740], poets of eternal fame, Li and Du failed the exams at the national level and Meng Haoran never even won appointment to an official post. Wang Wei was the only one who passed the exams, and it was all thanks to Prince Qi, who introduced him to the Ninth Princess. Delighted with his new song “Yulunpao,” the princess put him at the top of the list of recommended candidates. Those who did not cultivate the favor of

higher-ups had no assurance of success. If such was the case with those four giants, how much more so would it be for other people? As for inferior poems that have been consigned to oblivion, a great deal of them were authored by those who passed the examinations. Gentle reader, wouldn't you agree that there is no justification for such a state of affairs? Hence the following two lines:

*There have never been rules for grading papers;
Just watch to see if that man in red gives you the nod.¹*

Storyteller, the way you put it, there is no need to labor at one's studies since everything is determined by fate.

Gentle reader, that is not the way to look at things. As another saying goes, "It is for man to strive and for Heaven to decide." Luck goes to those who try. It is common sense that those who work hard succeed more easily in the long run. Hence the saying "Heaven helps those who help themselves." After all, in most cases, where water flows, a channel is formed. However, ghosts and spirits do wreak havoc on the civil service examinations. For the lucky ones, good timing goes with good fortune. For the luckless, everything can go terribly wrong. Isn't this a scary thought? This humble storyteller now proposes to relate a few anecdotes about the examinations by way of a prologue to our story proper.

[Anecdote 1:] A candidate destined to pass the exams runs into someone who lends a helping hand. In the Huguang region [present-day Hubei and Hunan], there lived a Scholar He, a provincial graduate who had passed the civil service examinations at the provincial level. While in the capital to sit for the national-level examinations, he chanced to step into a wineshop, where he saw a group of men wearing black robes and large hats drinking inside. They talked in language that was half-elegant and half-vulgar, and they looked pseudo-cultured touched with a roguish air. (MC: *A true-to-life portrayal of minor government officials*.) Scholar He took a table and began to drink by himself. Assuming that he was feeling lonely, those men asked him to join their table. Scholar He accepted the invitation and, in an accommodating way, joined them in their merrymaking. Delighted that the scholar put on no airs and was accessible and easy to get along with, the men enjoyed the time spent with him. After the meal was over, they all went their separate ways.

A few days later, when walking down the streets of Chang'an, Scholar He saw a drunken man lying by the roadside, his clothes and hat soiled and grimy. (MC: *A common sight on the streets of Chang'an.*) Upon a closer look, Scholar He recognized him as one of the men with whom he had shared a table in the wineshop the other day. Being of a kindly disposition, the scholar was saddened by the man's sorry state and went to raise him up. Coming out of his drunken stupor, the man opened his eyes and, at the sight of Scholar He helping him up, tapped the scholar's arm and said with a laugh, "Sir, you're in luck!" With that, he took out of his sleeve a sash that was wrapped around a small envelope the size of two fingers. "Go to your lodging and read it," said he to Scholar He.

Not knowing what he meant by that, Scholar He slipped the sash into his sleeve and went back to the inn where he was lodging. There were quite a few fellow exam candidates stopping at the same inn. Thinking that there was no secret involved, Scholar He unconcernedly opened the envelope in front of the others. Lo and behold! It was a list of fourteen essay topics, six on the Four Books and eight on the Five Classics.² His fellow lodgers asked him, "Where did you get this?"

After telling them about his encounter with a group of men in a wine-shop the other day and with one of them on the street some moments earlier, Scholar He went on to say, "This was given to me by that man. I have no idea how he got hold of it."

"This must be a scam. Don't believe him!" (MC: *Those who choose not to believe the man are too lazy to write so many essays in advance.*)

Of all the lodgers present, only a Mr. An thought, "So what if it's a scam? It would be a good thing if we could prepare the essays in advance." And so, by mutual agreement, he and Scholar He each wrote one essay per topic. Then they searched the bookshops for fine essays on these topics and, using them as a reference, polished their own works.

As it turned out, seven of the fourteen topics appeared on the examination. Since He and An had written their essays in advance, both passed. As a matter of fact, the drunkard was secretary to the chief examiner, and he had copied the topics—half of which were alternates—from the chief examiner's office. Delighted that Scholar He was helping him sit up in his drunken state, he had offered the list to the scholar. As chance had it, Mr. An also benefited. As for those fellow lodgers who didn't believe in the list, they passed up the opportunity, as their fates dictated.

*The drunkard was but a mortal,
But the revelation was made by divine will.
Those who believed and those who did not
Henceforth went their vastly different ways.*

[Anecdote 2:] A candidate destined to pass the exams runs into a ghost who lends a helping hand. A scholar from Xinghua County, Yangzhou Prefecture, went to Yingtian [present-day Nanjing] to sit for the examinations at the provincial level. He slept straight through the first day of the examinations. By the time a warden woke him, a whole day had gone by. In a panic, he went to the outhouse and saw that another exam candidate was already there.

The candidate asked our scholar from Xinghua, “Have you finished your essays?”

“No. I slept through the session and didn’t write a single word. I suddenly felt the urge to go and couldn’t hold it any longer’, so here I am!”

“Well, I’ve finished my essays and have written them down on scratch paper. I’m too sick to go back to my booth to copy them onto the exam paper. Since you haven’t written yours, I’ll give you mine. If you pass, you can give me a hundred taels of silver by way of thanks.”

Our candidate from Xinghua was beside himself with joy. The sick candidate handed a large sheet of scratch paper to him, on which, sure enough, were seven complete essays. The sick candidate said, “I’m So-and-So from the Yingtian Prefectural School, but I live in a remote village. I have a nephew who makes a living in Yingtian as a firewood dealer. If you go see him, he’ll take you to my home.”

Thus advised, the scholar from Xinghua took the paper to his own booth on the examination grounds and made a clean copy of the draft, thus completing the required writing assignments. After all three sessions of the examinations were over and his name appeared on the list of successful candidates, he immediately took one hundred taels of silver and went to see the firewood dealer to get his uncle’s address. The dealer said, “I do have an uncle who sat for the last round of exams, but he died of dysentery on the exam grounds. (MC: *Can someone in the throes of dysentery come up with fine essays? This goes to show that those who pass the exams may not be the finest scholars.*) I certainly don’t have another uncle who sat for this year’s exams.”

Our Xinghua candidate was appalled. He realized that it was a ghost who had helped him. He had the dealer take him to the dead man’s home

and offered his impoverished family the promised hundred taels of silver. A hundred taels of silver being something beyond their wildest dreams, the entire family rejoiced, and the scholar found solace in the thought that his money had bought him a place on the list of successful candidates.

*His literary talent did not die with him;
The ghost from the last exam helped a newcomer.*

[Anecdote 3:] A candidate destined to pass the exams gets help from a deity through a human hand. In Ningbo, two young men were studying in the Asoka Temple by Lake Mirror, one frivolous but clever and the other dull but sincere. The dull one was a Buddhist. Every morning and evening, he offered incense at the foot of the statue of the Buddha and prayed that the Buddha would show him the seven topics of the examination essays. (IC: *What a fool!*) Witnessing his ceaseless kowtows, the clever one laughed at his foolishness and decided to play a prank on him. He thought up seven topics, used a lit incense stick to burn the characters into a large piece of paper, and hid the paper under the altar. The next morning, the dull one saw it when he prayed to the Buddha and was greatly impressed that the Buddha had indeed transmitted the secret to him in such a wondrous way. He collected all available good essays on these topics from all over town, including essays written by outstanding classmates as homework, produced seven nice essays, and committed them to memory. The clever one, rightly surmising from these activities that the dull one was taking the topics seriously, secretly laughed at his being “tricked by a ghost.” (MC: *Secretly laughing at him is quite justifiable.*) Who would have thought that these seven topics would turn out to be exactly the ones given out at the examination! Without a single pause, the dull one completed the essays and passed. Didn’t the Buddha hand the topics to him through the help of that frivolous but clever one?

*The dull one prayed in all sincerity;
The clever one was put to good use.
The ghosts and the deities
Brilliantly play their little tricks.*

[Anecdote 4:] A candidate who was destined to pass the examinations is helped by his own spirit. One examination day in Huguang, one of the examiners was grading the papers on the examination grounds when he felt

tired and dozed off. While in this drowsy state, he heard a sigh right by his ear, followed by the comment, "Such grinding poverty! Oh, to be lifted from poverty!" He woke up with a start and, after a moment of reflection, concluded that some candidate who was destined to pass must have been playing a prank on him. He listened more intently and realized that the voice was coming from one of the boxes that contained exam papers. Each time he took a paper from it, the voice whispered into his ear, "No, not this one." And so it went until he came to the last paper. "This is it!" said the voice. The examiner read it and found that the essays were indeed well written. As soon as he gave the candidate a passing mark, the voice stopped. After the results of the examinations were announced, the candidate went to see the examiner.

"Did you have any extraordinary experiences after the exams?" asked the examiner.

"No."

"But something quite strange happened during the exams. Do you have any pet phrases that you keep repeating?"

"I'm so poor that each time I finish a writing assignment by my window, I cry, 'Such grinding poverty! Oh, to be lifted from poverty!' (MC: *But most other such manifestations of spirits don't work. Why?*) These are the only things I often repeat over and over."

When the examiner told him about what he had heard while grading the papers, both marveled at the mystery. Even the candidate himself could not figure out what could have happened. Wasn't that a manifestation of his spirit and his tenaciousness?

*Sincerity opens all doors;
Courage moves the deities.*

[Anecdote 5:] A candidate who was destined to pass the exams is helped by spiritual beings and two mortals who happen to work in cooperation. In the Zhejiang region, there lived a well-learned scholar who had, from his early youth, sat for the examinations quite a few times, but he failed each time. His last attempt was made when he was already well along in years and no longer counting on success. Since there was this chance to take the exams, he wanted to convince himself that at least he had tried. On the eve of the first day of the examinations, he had a dream in which a man said to him, "You'll surely pass this year's exams, but you must not write even one

character on the exam paper. If you do, you'll fail. Just hand in a blank sheet of paper."

When he woke up, the scholar said to himself, "What a strange dream! This is unbelievable!" And so he thought nothing of it.

After he went to the examination grounds and received the examination paper, he was about to set his thoughts to paper when he heard that voice again, saying, "No! You must not write anything!"

"How very strange!" he said to himself. As he gave thought to the topics, he felt hot in the head, and no words came to mind. In frustration, he thought, "This must mean that I'm going to fail again." Gloomily, he drifted off to sleep.

Whom should he see at this point but his grandfather and his father! They told him, "Be sure not to write even one character! We'll guarantee your success on the exam." (MC: *This is to say that anything committed to paper means failure.*)

On waking up, he sighed and said to himself, "What's going on? With dreams and ghosts tormenting me like this, it's impossible for me to produce anything worthy. Why should I go on feeling miserable? I might just as well give up, hand in the blank sheet of paper, and clear out of the place!"

After he left the examination grounds, he assumed that his name would top the list of candidates to be denied admission to the second session of the exams. And yet, when the gate of the examination grounds was opened and the list of failing candidates was posted, he did not see his name on it, although it was a long list, with descriptions of all manner of reasons for failing: incompleteness, missing sheets of examination paper, deviation from the topics, and so on. There was no mention of blank sheets of exam paper. Indulging in a roar of laughter, he said, "The examination sealers and graders must have lost their mental faculties!"³

After another two days went by without anything being amiss, he followed other candidates to the examination grounds for the second session, just to have some fun, since his name was not on that list and no one was any the wiser. The moment he picked up his writing brush, the voice in his ear started up again. Cheerfully, he said in response, "You need not say another word. Since I handed in a blank paper at the first session, what's the good of writing anything at the second session? No one can be that stupid in the whole wide world." He made a show of occupying himself with the exam, and after a decent amount of time went by, he handed in his blank paper and exited the grounds, thinking that he would not be spared this time.

To his surprise, his name was again absent from the long list of failing candidates at the second session. And again, he followed other candidates to the examination grounds for the third session and, needless to say, again handed in a blank paper. Now that he had gone through all three sessions of the exams, his friends flocked to him to ask for his advice on literary composition. He could only laugh into his sleeve and refrained from coming out with the truth.

When the successful candidates' names were announced, amazingly enough, his name was high on the list. (MC: *The height of absurdity*.) With no idea of what could have happened, he thought he was in a dream. The pomp and circumstance of the banquet in honor of the successful candidates filled him with delight at this unsought good fortune. When he was given back his examination papers, he saw that the papers for all three sessions were filled with beautiful essays. He stood transfixed, his eyes unblinking, his mouth hanging open. He was totally at sea.

What had happened was that the two examination sealers responsible for checking the identities of candidates were county magistrates with *jinshi* degrees. Both had passed the national-level examinations at a young age and were men of fine sensibilities. Resentful that they were not assigned as graders, they itched to show off their literary prowess at the sight of the essay topics and wanted to write something just to see if they could still pass. The only problem was that there were no blank sheets of exam paper available that bore the government stamp. Some candidates handed in their papers without finishing their essays, but the partially filled papers were of no use to the two examiners. Imagine their joy when they laid hands on the completely blank sheets of paper! They committed the examinee's name to memory and began to compose one essay after another, consulting each other and polishing each other's work until they were satisfied. Then, following standard procedure, they sealed the corner of the exam paper where the candidate's name was entered and sent it to be copied out. This happened at all three sessions of the examinations. Sure enough, our candidate, who didn't write a word, passed. Secretly, the two examiners brimmed with smugness and, marveling at our candidate's good luck, sent for him and asked him why he had left the examination papers blank. After he told them about his dreams and the voice in his ear, the two examiners observed, "So, what we took to be our impromptu writings were in fact inspired by divine will for your sake."

Overwhelmed with gratitude, our candidate became the two examiners' friend and disciple.

*When a Mr. Zhang takes wine,
A Mr. Li yields to its influence.
When you are destined to pass the exams,
Even one word is superfluous.*

The above anecdotes are all about candidates destined to pass. As for those who are not so destined, there is also an infinite variety of strange anecdotes.

[Anecdote 6:] A candidate who is not destined to pass falls victim to a prank that a divine being plays on him. In the Kuiwei year [1583] of the Wanli reign period [1573–1619], there was a provincial graduate, Guan Jiugao, who, before the examinations at the national level, dreamed that a divine being showed him seven essay topics. After waking up, he was still able to recall every character. The next morning, he sought out model essays in circulation and memorized the best ones. Once on the examination grounds, he was thrown into raptures when he saw that the seven topics given were exactly the ones he had seen in his dream. Writing as fast as his brush pen could go, he regurgitated what he had memorized without pausing even once for reflection. (MC: *Since he was copying old essays, there was naturally a bad smell to them. Let this be a warning to plagiarizers!*) He thought that, with help from a divine being, his success was a foregone conclusion.

As it turned out, however, the chief examiner that year happened to detest the stereotyped writings in fashion and had sought out all such essays in circulation that were relevant to the seven topics. He kept the collected essays in his inner office and compared them against the examination papers he was grading. Whenever he came upon papers that matched the existing essays, he failed the candidates. Therefore, Mr. Guan failed the exam and opted to accept an official appointment as a mere provincial graduate. If he had not dreamed of the seven topics, he would have written the essays on his own, probably with happier results. Wasn't the divine being playing a prank on him?

*Dreams are omens; this one spelled disaster.
Divine beings delight in playing pranks.*

[Anecdote 7:] A candidate who is destined to fail passes the exam by resorting to forceful measures, but he is punished by divine beings in the end. In Shanyin of Zhejiang, there was a scholar named Zhuge Yiming who applied himself industriously to his studies in the mountains and did not even return home for New Year celebrations. On New Year's Day of the Gengwu year [1570] of the Longqing reign period [1567–72], he rose before dawn and, after washing himself and combing his hair, went to pray at the local temple. On his way there, he encountered a procession of men, with criers shouting to clear the way. He thought, "This is certainly a rare occurrence in these mountains!" So he stepped aside to watch. Musicians playing wind and percussion instruments were followed by a horse laden with an object. A gold-armored divine being brought up the rear. Realizing that it was a divine being from the netherworld, Yiming walked up and asked respectfully, "Mighty god, what is it that goes before you?"

"The board inscribed with the list of successful candidates at this year's provincial-level exams."

"I'm Scholar Zhuge Yiming. Is my name on the list?"

"No. But your name is on the list of successful candidates for the next round of exams." (IC: *Good enough.*)

"But my family is so poor. I can't afford to wait. (IC: *Another impatient and luckless one.*) Could you move my name forward to this year's list?"

"That would be difficult. But our meeting here means there's a predestined bond between us, so I'll try to do it for you. If you do pass, you must burn a lot of sacrificial money so that I can bribe high and low to make sure that there will be no setbacks. Otherwise, I'll be held accountable."

Yiming promised. When the list of successful candidates was publicized, Yiming's name was the last one, topped by a vermilion seal. What had happened was that the list was already complete when one examiner approached the chief examiner, strongly recommending Yiming's paper. He was so emotional that the chief examiner, against his better judgment, deleted the last name and replaced it with Yiming's name. This was the work of that divine being behind the scenes. (MC: *That person is innocent. It's the candidate and the cheating deity who are infuriating.*)

Yiming was so elated that, in his rush to attend the celebration banquet, he forgot to offer sacrificial money. On returning from the banquet, he saw a ghost with disheveled hair crying in front of his horse and saying, "You got me in trouble!"

Recognizing him to be the gold-armored deity, Yiming said apologetically, "I hope it's not too late for me to burn sacrificial money to save you."

"It is late, but you can try."

Yiming forthwith bought some sacrificial money and burned it.

When the time for the national-level examinations rolled around, the deity came to tell him, "I can help you pass. Here are the seven essay topics."

Yiming prepared in advance before entering the examination grounds. Sure enough, to his immense delight, the seven topics were the correct ones. Before the second session began, Yiming was about to enter the grounds when the deity appeared again to offer him the topics.

"It's too late," said Yiming.

"Just put the crib sheet in your head scarf. I'll cover you," said the deity.

Yiming did as he was told, but as soon as he found himself in the presence of the proctor, the crib note fell from his head scarf even before he was subjected to a body search. He was charged with cheating and was immediately put in a cangue and pilloried in public, and he was disqualified for all future examinations. The deity had come to take revenge on him. (MC: *Why is the deity so vengeful? It's because the deity had suffered severe punishment in the netherworld for having helped Zhuge pass the exams three years ahead of time.*) It can thus be seen that if you are not destined to pass, you must not force it, not even when you are destined to pass later.

*One too eager to win success
Ends up losing what he already has.
Be it humans or ghosts,
All involved will be in for punishment.*

Gentle reader, these anecdotes serve to show that success in the examinations is predestined. Do not ever attempt to seek the impossible. Hence,

*Speak not of fate when studying by the window;
Talent may not mean success on the exams.*

The average person is so inundated with talk about destiny that his head swirls. This humble storyteller now proceeds to our story proper, one about a man whose exam success and allotted span of life were all revealed to him.

In the Tang dynasty, there was a Mr. Li who was deputy regional commander of Jiangling. Early in his youth, before he passed the civil service

examinations, he went from Luoyang to Chang'an to sit for the exams at the national level. When passing Huayin Trail, he stopped to lodge at an inn. There, he saw a white-clad lodger whose refined looks and graceful deportment set him apart from the others in spite of the humbleness of his clothing. The inn was teeming with people, but no one was paying any attention to him. Mr. Li, with his agile mind and abundant intelligence, took notice and thought, "This is by no means an ordinary man." (MC: *Even an immortal can feel he has met an intimate friend when a mere mortal singles him out from the vulgar.*) He moved his seat closer to the man and engaged him in conversation. His eloquence and ready answers to Li's questions won him even greater respect from Li. They drank together by the same stove and found great pleasure in each other's company.

The next day, they set out on their journey together. On reaching Zhaoying [near Huayin, Shaanxi], Mr. Li said, "Out of admiration for your otherworldly qualities, I'd like to swear brotherhood with you. If you don't scorn my lowliness, please tell me your name and your age so that I know how to address you."

The man in white replied, "I have no name or age. (IC: *How extraordinary!*) You may call me 'Older Brother' and treat me like one."

Mr. Li complied and swore brotherhood with him. That evening, the man in white said to Li, "I'm a hermit on Mount Hua, out on a casual pleasure trip. I'm grateful to you for your friendship. I have an engagement that obliges me to go into the city tomorrow morning. May I be excused?"

"I'm a lucky man to be able to make your acquaintance. Now that we have to say good-bye suddenly, do you have any advice to enlighten me?"

"Is it your future you want to know?"

With repeated bows, Mr. Li said, "If I could know what will happen in the future, I'd be able to avoid pitfalls and not grope around in the dark. Yes, such is my wish."

"But divine mysteries are not supposed to be revealed to mortal ears. I'll seal three envelopes for you. What is written in them will be borne out later."

"I pleaded for enlightenment because it would be wonderful to know about the future. But if I wait for things to happen and to be borne out later by the contents of the envelopes, what good will that do?"

"That's not the way to look at it. Fame and fortune may be a matter of destiny, but I, with my prophetic powers, can point you toward the right path. If you open the envelopes at the right time, you'll find them useful in securing fame and fortune for you."

Thus advised, Mr. Li gladly asked for the envelopes. The man in white took three sheets of paper and a writing brush pen and wrote something by moonlight. Then he folded the sheets and stuffed them into three envelopes, one each. Handing them to Li, he said, "These three envelopes contain information about all the important events in your life. There's an order to the envelopes, each with a secret message. In times of emergency, open them one by one in the right order and they'll begin to work. Do as I say, and you stand to gain, but in the absence of an emergency, opening them will not do you any good. Remember this well!"

With another bow, Mr. Li took the envelopes and stored them carefully in a box. The next day, they bade each other farewell and went their separate ways.

Mr. Li went to Chang'an and sat for the national-level examinations but failed. Li's now deceased father had been the magistrate of Songzi and his family fortune had been quite ample, but on his way to the capital to seek a promotion, carrying his money with him, he died of illness at an inn, and the family was reduced to poverty. Grieving over his father's death and the family's straitened circumstances, Mr. Li was determined that he would return home only after he passed the exams so that he could rebuild the family fortune. He took an extra amount of travel money with him and tenaciously held on to his lodging in the capital, determined not to leave until he passed the exams. Made presumptuous by his own intellect, he thought success on the exams was within easy reach. (MC: *As is usually the case, this is what ruins things.*) As it turned out, fate was against him. He took five or six rounds of examinations in succession but failed each time. His money gave out. With no money for traveling home or renting enough space for a foothold and staying on for the next round of examinations, he was at a loss as to what to do.

In this moment of desperation, it suddenly occurred to him, "My immortal brother told me to open his envelopes in emergencies. I'm at the end of my rope now. If this isn't an emergency, what is? Why don't I open the first envelope and see what it says? But since these come from an immortal, I mustn't make a rash move."

That evening, he took a bath and ate only vegetables. Early the next morning, he lit enough incense sticks to fill an incense burner, bowed twice, and prayed. "Desperate in my poverty, I now open the first envelope from my immortal brother in the hope of being enlightened." Having said that, he opened the envelope, only to reveal a smaller envelope inscribed with the words "On the _th day of the _th month of the _th year, open the first envelope when your means are exhausted."

Appalled, Li said to himself, "He's truly divine! How did he know I'd be reduced to this? Today is exactly the date shown on it, which means I did right in opening it. There must be something wonderful in it." As he opened the smaller envelope, he found in it a piece of paper inscribed with these brief words: "Go sit in front of Green Dragon Monastery." These words somewhat mystified him, but he dared not disobey. "But what good will that do?" he wondered.

Upon inquiry, he learned that Green Dragon Monastery was more than fifty *li* from his lodging. Resignedly, he hired a lame donkey and proceeded slowly to the temple. By the time he arrived, day was giving way to evening. Following the instructions, he sat listlessly on the threshold for a while, but nothing stirred. As evening closed in on him, he began to grow anxious. Then, recalling the instructions, he felt amused, thinking, "What a fool I am! Would any money come my way if I go on sitting here? Without money, I won't have a place to stay tonight. What am I going to do?"

While he was debating with himself as to what to do, he heard footsteps approaching from inside the monastery. It was the abbot and an acolyte coming to close the front gate. On seeing Li, they asked "Who might you be? Why are you sitting here?"

"My donkey is too weak, I live too far from here, and I have nowhere to go at this late hour. May I stay here tonight?"

The abbot said, "It's so windy and cold here. How can you stay in this spot? Let us take you inside." (MC: *With someone extending an invitation, at least something is astir.*)

Mr. Li demurred, "I don't want to trouble Your Reverence." But at the abbot's insistence, Mr. Li led his donkey and followed them inside. As he had the look of a scholar, the abbot prepared food and tea for him so as not to be remiss in his obligations as host.

While they were drinking at the table, the abbot looked him up and down. Then the abbot turned around, talked with the acolyte, and burst out laughing. Mr. Li was puzzled but thought it improper to ask. After a while, the urge to speak got the better of the abbot. Abruptly, he asked, "What's your surname, sir?"

"Li."

With a start, the abbot exclaimed, "So you're indeed a Li!"

"Why did my humble name startle you so, Your Reverence?"

The abbot continued, "Do you know Commander Li of Songzi, who should be a member of your clan?"

Li stood up and said with a frown, "He's my father, now deceased."

The abbot burst into tears at these words. He said, "Your father and I were close friends of long standing. My heart skipped a beat when I first saw you because you're the very image of your father. So you're indeed his son! I've been looking for you for quite some time now. I'm so glad to finally meet you."

Saddened by the mention of his father, Li said through his tears, "Please forgive me if I gave you offense. I had no idea that you and my father were friends. But I wonder why you've been looking for me."

"Years ago, your father came to this place on his way to seek a position. He brought his money with him. Then he got ill and suffered grievously. He deposited two thousand strings of cash in the vault of this monastery. But after he passed, there has been no use for the money, which has become a burden on my mind. Now that you're here, this case can be closed, and this old monk will have nothing to worry about for the rest of his life." (MC: *Good monk! Mr. Li Senior was a good judge of character.*)

"I knew only that my father died away from home, and nothing has been heard about his money. So it was deposited with Your Reverence. Since there was no witness, Your Reverence could have kept silent about the money, but instead, you tried to look for me. Your Reverence outshines the ancients in your loyalty to a friend. I'll never forget your kindness in keeping the memory of my father alive."

"Why would someone who's renounced the mundane world need money? What's more, how could I appropriate other people's money? I would only be adding to my sins! What I dreaded most was that should I break my promise to your father, I'd remain indebted to him life after life. Now, relieved of this weight on my mind, I'll be able to enjoy a peaceful sleep. (MC: *He not only is loyal to a friend but is also a man of integrity.*) I can see that you're in reduced circumstances. Please write me a note tomorrow to testify that all the money will be yours, to defray your travel expenses and to support yourself. Your father will be able to rest in peace."

Li was overcome by mixed emotions of sorrow and joy—sorrow because of the memories of his father and joy because of this windfall. He poured out a flood of thanks to the abbot and marveled at the immortal's divinatory powers, as shown in his note, something that was quite out of the ordinary.

*The abbot trod in the footsteps of the ancients
And stayed true to the owner of the deposit.*

*The poor son did have an inheritance,
But it would have been out of reach if not for the letter.*

That night, the abbot kept him in the monastery and showered him with hospitality. The next day, the two thousand strings of cash were handed over to Mr. Li, who drew up a receipt, hired a mule, loaded the strings on its back, and bade the abbot farewell.

Thereafter, Li bought a house in Chang'an, for he had suddenly become a rich man. He had been living in genteel poverty for so long that he had remained single because his own livelihood was uncertain. Now that he was seen to be a man of impressive means and with an elite family background at that, matchmakers began to flock to his door. So he married and planned to settle down in Chang'an. He sat for another two rounds of the examinations but failed again each time. As he was getting on in years, his relatives, friends, and servants all advised him to settle for a government post and hold on to it until retirement rather than let the false prospect of success on the exams continue to delude him until he was hoary with old age. However, made presumptuous by his own talent and the fact that his newly acquired wealth had freed him from worries about food and clothing, he said, "This one step will make a great deal of difference. How can I be content to stop here and let those whose talents are inferior to mine become dizzy with their success? (IC: *How pathetic!*) I'll have another go at the exams."

So he sat for another round of the examinations but failed again. This was his tenth failure. No matter how unwilling he was to accept defeat, the annual drinking parties were exhausting his patience.

Storyteller! What drinking parties are you talking about?

Gentle reader, let me explain: During the Tang dynasty, after the list of successful candidates was announced, those who failed to make the list would get together for a feast in order to dispel their sorrows. Imagine joining such feasts ten times! (MC: *Some attend more than ten.*) Undecided on whether or not to stop, he reasoned that if he waited for the next round of examinations, not only would he be overwhelmed by objections from people around him, but he himself would also lose confidence. Moreover, his wife, as was only to be expected, looked forward to life as the wife of an official, even if a minor one. Day in and day out, with her tongue incessantly going, he was all the more at a loss as to what to do. (MC: *Heroes who lose their way feel one another's pain across generations.*) His eyes misting over, he said, "If I give up, I'll remain a 'failed candidate' for the rest of my life. Even if I obtain

a high government post by a stroke of good luck (IC: *Don't count on it in this life!*), the title won't have much of a ring to it."

After weighing his choices for some time, he was suddenly struck by an idea: "My immortal brother has two other envelopes that I can open in emergencies. This is no emergency, but this is a moment of decision as to whether I should settle down here or not. This concerns the rest of my life. Much is at stake. Why don't I open his second envelope and take my cue from it?" Having thus made up his mind, he abstained from meat and took a bath. Early the next morning, he opened the outer envelope and saw this line: "On the _th day of the _th month, you will open this envelope to decide whether to give up on the examinations or not."

Overjoyed, Li said to himself, "So today is the day I'm supposed to open the envelope. If that's the case, there must be instructions inside as to what I should do about the rest of my life."

He opened the smaller envelope inside with alacrity and saw these brief words: "You may go to West Market and sit in the place with a stable."

Li wondered, "Now what am I going to make of this? I thought I'd see clear instructions as to whether or not I should take more examinations, but instead here comes another riddle. Last time, it turned out that the abbot in one Green Dragon Monastery owed me money. Can someone in that place with a stable also owe me a debt, one that has something to do with the exams? (IC: *Maybe so.*) But my immortal brother has never erred in his instructions. Let me do as he directs and see what happens. This is getting a little absurd." After thus talking to himself for a while, he saw no better alternative but to follow the instructions and proceed to West Market.

Once there, he thought, "Where should I sit?" At this point, his eyes fell on a certain place. Behold:

*A pennant flutters high overhead;
Jars of wine stand all around.
The couplet on the gate, written in drunkenness,
Can hardly be passed off as poetry.
The lines scribbled on the walls
Were composed in haste by passing travelers.
A stench assails one at the entrance;
The table is bare of fine dishes.
Orders barked loudly from the seats
Bring no response from the waiters.*

*Never mind the advice "Dismount at the aroma";
Say nothing of letting the good food stop your horse.
You enter just to stay the pangs of hunger
Or to meet someone to discuss matters.*

It was a large restaurant. Feeling bored sitting alone, Li decided to go inside and order a flask of wine. As he stepped into the restaurant, the owner realized that he was looking at a scholar. With his hands respectfully clasped in front of his chest, the owner said, "We have nice tables upstairs. Please go upstairs, sir."

Mr. Li went upstairs and sat down. He saw a nice, clean booth at the eastern end of the corridor. Its door was closed, but there was some noise coming from inside, as if it was occupied. Directly under his seat, on the ground floor, was a room that appeared to be the owner's. In the floor, there was a hole through which he could see what was going on down there. As he sat upstairs alone, waiting for the waiter to bring up his wine and food, he felt bored, and on hearing subdued voices from downstairs, he put his eyes to the hole. He saw one man looking as if he was about to leave and another man patting him on the shoulder and giving him what was apparently the conclusion of a series of instructions: "Tell the young man to be sure to come here early tomorrow morning. If he doesn't have the money, just say that no payment is to be made at this time and that he must not pass up the opportunity. It will be too late if he misses it by one day." (MC: *Truly, a case of the one who wants to sell finding no buyer, and the one who wants to buy finding no seller.*)

The man who was about to leave said, "What if he still has doubts and refuses to come?"

Li was mystified by this exchange, thinking, "Could my immortal brother's words have anything to do with what these two men are talking about?" Losing no time, he rushed down the stairs and ran smack into the men, one of whom was the restaurant owner, and the other was unknown to Li. Grabbing the owner, Li asked, "What were the two of you talking about?"

The owner replied, "The vice minister's son needs one thousand strings of cash for an emergency and asked us to find him the money. We're trying to find someone for him."

"A thousand strings is no small amount," said Li. "Where can you find a rich man like that to borrow from?"

The owner corrected him, "No, not to borrow, but to exchange for a favor."

Li repeatedly tried to find out more details, but the owner said, "What's it to you? Why should I spell everything out?"

Intrigued by Li's eagerness, the man who was about to leave stopped in his tracks and turned around. "Why can't we tell him the truth?" said he. "The one we have in mind may not want the deal. We may not be able to find another patron. Why don't we talk about it?"

At this point, the owner whispered into Li's ear, "It's a deal that has to do with next year's examinations."

This was exactly what was preying on Li's mind, and he was amazed that his immortal brother's note had led him to this deal. "Is this for real?" he asked.

The owner said, "The vice minister's son is in the booth upstairs. Of course it's for real."

"From what I overheard of your conversation, you were about to go look for the one you had in mind. Right?"

The owner replied, "A provincial graduate agreed to the deal and was supposed to come yesterday to pay up, but he hasn't shown up so far. He may not have been able to scrape together enough money, or he may doubt that the deal is for real. But in fact the vice minister's son is not demanding payment right now. He can be paid in full after the scholar passes the exams. We were afraid that our provincial graduate hasn't shown up because he doesn't have the money, so I was just asking my friend, who's in charge, to go remind him of the appointment. If he doesn't show up tomorrow, the young master will be gone, and such a good opportunity will go to waste."

Li announced, "For your information, gentlemen, I'm also a provincial graduate, and I do have the money. May I see the young master and close the deal?"

The owner said, "Do you mean it, sir?"

"Of course I do!"

"Such deals can be made with anybody. (MC: *Grow flowers with care, and they die on you. Plant willow twigs at random, and they grow into shady groves.*) If you mean to do it, what's there to stop you?"

The other man weighed in, "As the ancients said, 'Whoever feeds a man is that man's master.' Why should we go look for bronze when we have a ready-made bell on hand? If you're serious about it, I can save myself a trip."

The owner said, "In that case, let's take you upstairs so that you can talk with the young master face-to-face." Whereupon, the two men led Mr. Li upstairs.

After the other man entered the booth at the eastern end of the corridor and spoke for a while, a young man slowly emerged from inside. How did he look?

*With a portly figure and plump, fair-complexioned cheeks,
He was slow in his movements and brash in his speech.
He looked at people with dull eyes;
He talked about things in vague terms.
Thanks to his forefathers' high status,
He lived in pampered luxury. (MC: Portrait of a spoiled son of the rich.)*

When the man emerged from the booth, the restaurant owner hastened to lead Mr. Li to him. "This is the vice minister's son," said he to Mr. Li. "Pay your respects to him properly."

After Li greeted the young man with proper decorum, they exchanged amenities and sat down.

"Are you a provincial graduate?" asked the young man, waving a hand at him. (IC: *What arrogance!*)

Li introduced himself and added, "I've been told about what will be happening next year. Please do help me out in that matter."

The young man nodded without answering and fixed his eyes on the owner and the other man. Gesturing with his hand, he asked, "What's the word on that deal?"

The owner answered, "I've told him about the price. We made an appointment with another man who should have come yesterday, but he didn't show up, supposedly for lack of funds. This Mr. Li here does have the money and is willing to take the deal. So we've brought him to you, sir."

"I'm not asking for a lot of money. (IC: *This man lacks common sense.*) Why do I get a taker only now?" (MC: *He has no idea of how hard life can be.*)

The owner replied, "Most provincial graduates are poor, so we haven't been able to find the right one, being pressed for time."

"Why not just pick a rich one?"

"Those who are rich will surely want the deal, but we just haven't been able to locate any that easily."

Pointing to Li, the vice minister's son asked the owner, "Will this one do?"

Before the owner could reply, Li volunteered, "I have a temporary home in Chang'an, and my family property is all here. I do hope the deal will go through. A thousand strings can be easily had. I surely won't fail you."

The young man said, "That's wonderful. The vice minister who will be the chief examiner for the exams next year is my uncle. I won't fail you either. You need not pay anything today. We'll just sign a contract. After you pass the exams, I'll receive the payment from the restaurant owner. I take it that I won't be shortchanged."

Convinced by the logic and secure in the knowledge that the deal was endorsed by his immortal brother's note, Li felt certain that he would succeed. Without any misgivings, he was ready to take bold action. He retrieved two strings of cash from his sleeve and asked the owner to have wine served. The two parties drew up a contract over their cups of wine and agreed on delivery of the silver after Li passed the exams the following year. (MC: *The god of money works wonders. Talented scholars must also have money. Those with talent but no money get nowhere.*) Then and there, Mr. Li thanked the owner and the other man by giving them two strings of cash, and everyone gleefully went his own way.

With help from the vice minister's son, Li did pass the examinations the following year. We need hardly say that he paid the one thousand strings of cash as promised. All too clearly, his immortal brother's second note brought about his success on the exams, his lifetime goal.

*Real talent may not help with your career;
Gold works better at getting you success.
The story about the immortal's note
Shows that the love of money is bred in the bone.*

After his success on the exams and his appointment to a government post, Li wished to see his immortal brother in order to thank him because he owed his fame and achievements to the immortal's secret notes, and he also wanted to ask more questions about the rest of his life. (IC: *That's quite unnecessary.*) He sent a messenger to Mount Hua in Huayin, but searches everywhere failed to produce any information about the whereabouts of that man in white, so he gave up the attempt. His career proved to be such smooth sailing and so uneventful that he had no reason to open the third envelope.

One day, during his term of office as deputy regional commander of Jiangling, he suddenly experienced chest pains and drifted in and out of consciousness several times within a short period of time. At this moment when his life hung in the balance, he called to mind the third envelope and said to his wife, "My life hanging by a thread qualifies as an emergency, which

justifies opening my immortal brother's third envelope. It must contain a cure." Unable to get out of bed, he asked his wife to take a bath and open the envelope with due reverence. When she opened the outer envelope, she saw a line inside, in the same format as the first two, which said, "On the _th day of the _th month, the Jiangling deputy regional commander will open the third envelope after experiencing chest pains."

His wife was delighted, saying, "Not only is the date accurate; he also got the illness right. So he must have a cure for it." In haste, she opened the smaller envelope, but on reading the note eagerly, she cried out in despair. The note contained fewer characters than the previous two. It said only "Make your last will and testament."

Realizing that all hope was lost, his wife burst into wails of grief. Li said cheerfully, "Since my immortal brother has announced the end of my life, what good does crying do? (MC: *Mr. Li is open-minded indeed, but even if he were not so open-minded, what could he have done?*) When I was poor, he put me on the road to riches. When I was humble, he brought me high status. Now that my number's up, why can't he give me a new lease on life? Because it's all a matter of fate, from which there's no escape. Wealth and rank are in fact in my fate. Everything is predestined. It's just that my immortal brother knew all in advance and took the trouble to give me a few pointers. Come to think of it, I have real talent, and yet I spent a whole lifetime taking exams and failing them. Even when my time came, I still had to gain fame by meeting someone by chance and having a few strings pulled. Isn't it clear that everything is predestined? One should never seek anything that's against one's fate. Now that I've risen so high in my career as an official, how can I not be content when my immortal brother has already revealed my fate to me? How can I nurse any resentment?" Thereupon, he began to make arrangements for his own funeral and leave instructions for his family. Two days later, he passed away with a smile on his lips.

This story, titled "Opening Three Mysterious Envelopes," exhorts people not to ask too much from life because everything is predestined. Those with talent but no luck must be content with their lot and stop feeling sorry for themselves. (MC: *The moral of the story.*)

*Poverty is a matter of fate;
Even immortals find their hands tied.
Wealth and rank fall into one's lap by chance;
The date when the coffin will be closed is hard to change.*

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 In the words of Patrick Hanan, “He saw the ‘authentic nature’ of the vernacular story as the here and now of human beings in society, and he wrote accordingly” (*The Chinese Vernacular Story* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981], 148). Hanan concludes that to this end, Ling’s tales were overtly moralistic.
- 2 All three collections (*Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, 1621; *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言, 1624; *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言, 1627) have been translated into English by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang and published by the University of Washington Press: *Stories Old and New* (2000), *Stories to Caution the World* (2005), and *Stories to Awaken the World* (2009).
- 3 But after a selection of forty of Ling’s and Feng’s stories began to circulate as the often-reprinted *Remarkable Stories New and Old* (*Jin gu qiguan* 今古奇觀) around 1640, Feng’s three collections and both of Ling’s disappeared in China. Ling’s original Suzhou Shanyou Tang 尚友堂 edition was rediscovered in a temple in Nikko, Japan, only in 1941. All *Slapping the Table in Amazement* editions printed in China during the Qing period were incomplete, filled with errors, and often expurgated. See Li Tianyi 李田意, “The Original Edition of the *Po-an chin-ch’i*,” printed at the end of Ling Mengchu, *Pai’an jinqi*, ed. Li Tienyi (Hong Kong: Youlian, 1967), n.p. Eight of the *Slapping the Table* tales (stories 1, 11, 18, 20, 22, 27, 35, 38) appear in *Remarkable Stories*.
- 4 Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 103–21.
- 5 Story 31, for example, varies greatly in details from historical accounts of a woman bandit and rebel; see Liu Bendong 劉本棟, “*Pai’an jinqi kaozheng*” 拍案驚奇考證, in Ling Mengchu, *Pai’an jinqi*, ed. Liu Bendon (Taipei: Sanmin, 1979), 5.
- 6 I refer to the stories of Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1679/80) in his collections *Silent Operas* (*Wusheng xi* 無聲戲) and *Twelve Towers* (*Shi’er lou* 十二樓) and

those of his unidentifiable contemporary Aina Jushi (Aina the Buddhist Layman) in the collection *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor* (Doupeng xianhua 豆棚閒話) (for an English-language translation, see Aina Jushi, *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, ed. Robert E. Hegel [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017]).

- 7 See Michaela Bussotti, *Gravures de Hui: Étude du livre illustré chinois de la fin du XVI^e siècle à la première moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2001), 88, 363, fig. 114, and 364, fig. 117. The exquisite polychrome illustrations for the 1640 edition of *The Western Wing* printed by Min Qiji, now preserved in the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne, are considered some of the very finest examples of woodblock printing. For reproductions of its illustrations, see Sanwen8, accessed August 30, 2016, <http://sanwen8.cn/p/2b52m9Q.html>, and *Ming Min Qiji huike Xixiang ji caitu, Ming He Bi jiao Xixiang ji* 明閔齊伋繪刻西廂記彩圖, 明何璧校西廂記 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 2005). The less colorful 1640 edition of *The Western Wing* edited by Ling Mengchu was reprinted as *Ling ke taoban huitu Xixiang ji* 凌刻套板繪圖西廂記 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 2005), with illustrations by Wang Wenheng 王文衡, who also illustrated the Min edition.
- 8 For a biographical sketch of the rebel Li Zicheng, see Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1943–44), 491–93.
- 9 For biographical information on Ling, see Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 140–45, and Feng Baoshan 馮保善, *Ling Mengchu yanjiu* 凌蒙初研究 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 2009). The first extensive study of Ling and his work in a European language is Wolf Baus, *Das P'ai-an Ching-ch'i des Ling Meng-ch'u: Ein Beitrag zur Analyse umgangssprachlicher Novellen der Ming-Zeit* (Bern and Frankfurt am Main: Herbert Lang, 1974); I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.
- 10 With the appearance of the second collection, *Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection* (Erke Pai'an jinqi), the first was given the title *Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Collection* (Chuke Pai'an jingqi 初刻), and together they were known as the "Two Slaps" Collection (Erpai 二拍 or Liangpai 兩拍), to parallel Feng Menglong's "Three Words" Collections (Sanyan).
- 11 For an excellent study in English, see Richard G. Wang, *Ming Erotic Novellas: Genre, Consumption, and Religiosity in Cultural Practice* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011). For an example, see Charles R. Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica: The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction (Ruyijun zhuan)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).
- 12 Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧 and Sun Kaidi 孫楷第 have located most of the tales Ling adapted; see Tan, comp., *Sanyan Liangpai ziliao* 三言兩拍資料

(Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1980), esp. vol. 2:573–759; and Sun, comp., *Xiaoshuo pangzheng* 小說旁證 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 2000), 219–88. See also Tan's *Sanyan Liangpai yuanliu kao*, vols. 6–7 of *Tan Zhengbi xueshu zhuzuo ji* 譚正璧學術著作集 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 2012). Hanan (*Chinese Vernacular Story*, 143–44) notes that he rewrote earlier stories for his plays as well.

- 13 Tan, *Sanyan Liangpai ziliao*, 661–62, and Sun Kaidi, *Xiaoshuo pangzheng*, 241–42. Another major difference between these stories and those by Feng Menglong is that Ling Mengchu regularly used longer and more overtly moralistic prologues, each made up of several brief tales and poems.
- 14 Tan, 662; Sun, 242.
- 15 Tan, 662–63.
- 16 Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 148.
- 17 Stories 1 and 5 in this volume were published in English ninety years ago in E. Butts Howell, trans., *The Restitution of the Bride* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1926). Four were published in Yang Hisen-yi (Yang Xianyi) and Gladys Yang, trans., *The Courtesan's Jewel Box: Chinese Stories of the Xth–XVIIth Centuries* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1957). Story 18 appeared in Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau, eds., *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), and story 6 was translated in Victor Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Four of the more erotic stories (stories 6, 26, 32, 34 in this volume) are from Ling's *Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Collection*, and story 34, from *Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection*, are in Ling Mengchu, *In the Inner Quarters: Erotic Stories from Ling Mengchu's Two Slaps*, trans. Lenny Hu, in collaboration with R. W. L. Guisso (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003). Five stories each from *Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Collection* (stories 1, 11, 17, 20, and 33 in this volume) and *Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Collection* that are described as “toothsome” and “fascinating” appear in Lin Mengchu, *The Abbot and the Widow: Tales from the Ming Dynasty*, trans. Ted Wan and Chen Chen (Norwalk, Conn.: EastBridge, 2004). A more extensive sample can be found in Lin Mengchu, *Amazing Tales, First Series*, trans. Wen Jingen (Beijing: Panda Books, 1998), which renders eighteen stories from Ling's *Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Collection*.

PREFACE [1628 EDITION]

- 1 For the stories, see the following volumes compiled by Feng Menglong and translated by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang: *Stories Old and New: A Ming*

Dynasty Collection (2000), *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 2* (2005), and *Stories to Awaken the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 3* (2009).

FIVE EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES FOR THIS COLLECTION

- 1 On *A Formulary for the Correct Sounds for an Era of Great Harmony* (Taihe zhengyin pu), see Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, Vol. 74 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- 2 This is a reference to Feng Menglong's practice of pairing the stories in his *Sanyan* collections.
- 3 On these two works, see Sidney Shapiro, trans., *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1999), and Anthony Yu, trans., *The Journey to the West*, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977–83).

1. THE MAN WHOSE LUCK HAS TURNED CHANCES UPON DONGTING TANGERINES; THE MERCHANT FROM PERSIA REVEALS THE SECRETS OF A TURTLE SHELL

- 1 A *ci* (lyric) poem differs from a poem (*shi*) mainly in that it is written to fit an existing musical tune.

Zhu Dunru (1081–1159), courtesy name Xizhen, was a hermit poet known today mostly for his “Songs of the Woodcutter” (Qiaoge).
- 2 The Seventeen Histories, all written before the Northern Song dynasty, are *Historical Records* by Sima Qian of the Western Han dynasty, *History of Han* by Ban Gu (32–92), *History of Eastern Han*, *History of the Three Kingdoms* by Chen Shou of the Western Jin dynasty, *History of the Jin Dynasty*, *History of the Song Dynasty*, *History of the Southern Qi Dynasty*, *History of the Liang Dynasty*, *History of the Wei Dynasty*, *History of the Northern Qi Dynasty*, *History of the Zhou Dynasty*, *History of the Sui Dynasty*, *History of the Southern Dynasties*, *History of the Northern Dynasties*, *New History of the Tang*, and *New History of the Five Dynasties*.
- 3 Wu Ji (d. 1142), courtesy name Yangao, a native of Jianzhou (present-day Jian'ou, Fujian), was a man of letters in the Jin dynasty.
- 4 Hui'an was a monk in the Southern Song dynasty.
- 5 Su Shi (1037–1101), courtesy name Zizhan, also known as Dongpo, was one of China's greatest men of letters.
- 6 Bianjing is present-day Kaifeng, Henan.
- 7 A courtesy name is the name by which an educated person was addressed by people of his or her own generation; it was probably used more often than the person's official name.

- 8 According to *The Biographies of Fairies*, Su Dan of the Han dynasty irrigated his tangerine trees with well water. One leaf from one of these trees taken with the well water was enough to cure illnesses.
- 9 Prefect Li Heng of Danyang, state of Wu, of the Three Kingdoms period (220–80 BCE), left a thousand tangerine trees to his sons as part of their inheritance.
- 10 A candareen is a unit of weight equivalent to one one-hundredth of a tael.
- 11 The four treasures of the scholar's study are writing brush, ink slab, ink stick, and paper.

2. YAO DIZHU FLEES FROM DISGRACE ONLY TO INCUR MORE DISGRACE; ZHENG YUE'E USES A MISTAKE TO ADVANCE HER OWN INTERESTS

- 1 Shi Chong (249–300), courtesy name Jilun, made a huge fortune through highway robbery. Fan Dan (112–185), courtesy name Shiyun, was an upright scholar living in such poverty that he often ran out of food.
- 2 Zhou Zhimian, courtesy name Fuqing, sobriquet Shaogu, was a Ming dynasty artist known for his flower-and-bird paintings. Shi Dabin, sobriquet Shaoshan, was a famous Ming dynasty pottery master.
- 3 Song Yu was a disciple of the great poet Qu Yuan (ca. 340–278 BCE). He is described as strikingly handsome in the rhapsody “The Lascivious Mr. Dengtu” (Dengtuzi haose fu), which he is said to have written himself. Pan Yu (247–300), courtesy name Anren, popularly known as Pan An, was a man of letters in the Western Jin dynasty and reputedly very handsome.
- 4 In the Ming dynasty, the Southern Metropolitan Area (Nanzhili) consisted of what are now the provinces of Anhui and Jiangsu and Shanghai.
- 5 “Clouds and rain” is a metaphor for sexual encounters. The term was first used in “Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine” (Gaotang fu), attributed to Song Yu (ca. 290–ca. 223 BCE).

3. LIU DONGSHAN BRAGS ABOUT HIS PROWESS AT THE CITY GATE; EIGHTEENTH BROTHER LEAVES HIS MARK IN THE VILLAGE TAVERN

- 1 In the Ming dynasty, the Northern Metropolitan Area (Beizhili) consisted of what are now Beijing, Tianjin, large parts of Hebei, and some parts of Henan and Shandong.

4. CHENG YUANYU PAYS FOR A MEAL AT A RESTAURANT;
LADY ELEVENTH EXPLAINS SWORDSMANSHIP ON MOUNT CLOUD

- 1 During the Jingkang period, Emperors Huizong and Qinzong were captured by the Jurchens, and the Northern Song dynasty perished.
- 2 The Double Ninth Festival falls on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. On this day, the Chinese tradition is to drink dogwood or chrysanthemum wine, climb mountains, and deck one's hair with dogwood sprays.
- 3 The Yellow Emperor is the legendary ruler and ancestor of the Chinese people.
- 4 Zhang Liang (d. 189 BCE), courtesy name Zifang, made a failed attempt to assassinate the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty. Later, he served as adviser to Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty.

Liu Wu, Prince of Liang and son of Emperor Jing (r. 156–140 BCE), had court minister Yuan Ang assassinated for advising the emperor against declaring him crown prince.

Gongsun Shu, a warlord toward the end of the Western Han dynasty (206–25 BCE), declared himself king of the Sichuan region and, later, emperor. Emperor Liu Xiu dispatched Generals Cen Peng and Lai Xi on a punitive expedition against him, and Shu's assassins killed the two generals.

Li Shidao, a warlord in the reign of Emperor Xian (806–21), had an assassin kill Prime Minister Wu Yuanheng because the latter had tried to clip the warlords' wings.

- 5 Officer Gu is featured in the story about the woman knight-errant Wushuang in *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (Taiping guangji), translated as "Wu-shuang the Peerless" by Dale Johnson, in Yau-Woon Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau, eds., *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 52–57.
- 6 Zhao Yuanhao (r. 1032–48) was king Jingzong of Western Xia (1038–1227). Duke Han of Wei was Han Qi, a famous general of the Northern Song dynasty.

Miao Fu and Liu Zheng, both military officers of the Song dynasty, staged a failed coup d'état in 1131. Their failed assassination attempt against General Zhang Jun, courtesy name Deyuan, is recorded in "The Biography of Zhang Jun" in *History of the Song Dynasty* (Song shi).

- 7 Zhang Liang did escape after the assassination attempt.
- 8 The Grand Historian is Sima Qian (c. 145–87 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty, author of *Historical Records* (Shiji), which includes a section titled "Biographies of Assassins."
- 9 Jing Ke (d. 227 BCE) tried to assassinate the First Emperor of Qin but failed.
- 10 Kunlun Mole, a character in a Tang dynasty romance story by Pei Xing, is a servant with magic skills who uses them to help his master, Mr. Cui, in the latter's romantic conquest.

- 11 “The Curly-Bearded Knight” (Qiuranke zhuan) is a Tang dynasty tale written by Du Guangting (850–933).

5. ZHANG DERONG ENCOUNTERS A TIGER SENT BY THE GODS
AS A MATCHMAKER; PEI YUEKE BECOMES THE LUCKY MATE JUST
IN TIME FOR THE BLISSFUL DATE

- 1 The Old Man under the Moon is the god of marriage.
- 2 In Buddhist belief, a *yaksha* is usually an evil spirit.
- 3 Li Chunfeng, director of the palace library at the beginning of the Tang dynasty (618–907), was well versed in astronomy.
- 4 The four treasures of the scholar’s study are the writing brush, ink slab, ink stick, and paper.
- 5 From the Han dynasty onward, remonstrance officials were officials charged with scrutinizing and criticizing government policy decisions and the improper conduct of officials.
- 6 Yang Yuhuan (719–756) was a favorite consort of Emperor Xuanzong’s (r. 712–55), of the Tang dynasty.
- 7 Du Linfang is the heroine of the play *The Peony Pavilion* (Mudan ting) by the famous playwright Tang Xianzu (1550–1616).

6. ZHAO THE NUN DRUGS A BEAUTY INTO A STUPOR;
JIA THE SCHOLAR TAKES REVENGE IN A BRILLIANT MOVE

- 1 Zhang Liang (d. 189 BCE) and Chen Ping (d. 178 BCE) were major advisers to Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty. Sui He and Lu Jia were political advisers of great eloquence in the Western Han dynasty.
- 2 Zhang Yi (d. 310 BCE) was an eloquent politician of the Warring States period. Su Qin (d. 317 BCE), another politician of the same period, was also known for his persuasive powers.
- 3 A wooden fish is a round, carved, wooden resonator that is struck by Buddhist monks and nuns to keep the rhythm while chanting sutras.

7. EMPEROR MINGHUANG OF TANG, A DAOIST DEVOTEE, SEEKS
OUT EMINENT DAOISTS; CONSORT WU, A BUDDHIST DISCIPLE,
WITNESSES CONTESTS OF MAGIC POWER

- 1 An Lushan (703–757), a regional commander of the Tang army, rebelled and, after a series of victories, seized Chang’an, the capital, and declared himself Emperor Xiongwu of Yan. Two years later, he was killed by his son An Qingxu. For a fictional account of An Lushan’s adulterous relationship with

Imperial Consort Yang, see the prologue story of story 19 in Feng Menglong, *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 2*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

- 2 Geshu Han (d. 757), a member of the Turkish Geshu tribe, was a regional commander in the Tang army. He was defeated by An Lushan at the Tongguan Pass (in present-day Shaanxi).
- 3 In their flight from Chang'an, soldiers in the emperor's procession blamed Consort Yang for the disaster that befell the empire and demanded her death.
- 4 The legendary Eight Daoist Immortals are Li Tieguai, Han Zhongli, Zhang Guolao, He Xiangnu, Lan Caihe, Lü Dongbin, Han Xiangzi, and Cao Guojiu.
- 5 A *ruyi* scepter is S-shaped and is usually made of jade. It symbolizes good fortune.
- 6 Wu Sansi (d. 707) was Empress Wu Zetian's nephew. Empress Wu Zetian (r. 684–704) of the Tang dynasty is the only female sovereign in Chinese history.
- 7 The famous tune "Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Robe Dance" (*Nishang yuyi qu*) was indeed composed by Emperor Minghuang (or Xuanzong).
- 8 Consort Wu, the great-niece of Empress Wu Zetian (r. 684–704), was a Buddhist believer.
- 9 The two characters *dang gui*, for the herb angelica, can also mean "should return."
- 10 The Yangs are Consort Yang (719–756) and her power-abusing cousin Yang Guozhong (d. 756). The troops demanded the deaths of both during Emperor Minghuang's flight to the Shu region.

8. GENERAL WU REPAYS THE DEBT OF ONE MEAL; CHEN DALANG REUNITES WITH TWO LOVED ONES

- 1 "Timely Rain," according to the Ming dynasty novel *Water Margin* (*Shui hu zhuan*), is the sobriquet of Song Jiang, leader of a rebel bandit group.
- 2 Li She was a Tang dynasty poet and instructor in the Imperial Academy.
- 3 In a Yuan dynasty play set during a famine in the reign of Wang Mang (9–23), when starving people were driven to cannibalism, Zhao Xiao was captured by the bandits, but his older brother Zhao Li offered to die for him, saying that he was fatter than Zhao Xiao. The bandits were so moved that they not only set the brothers free but also rewarded them with food grains.

Zhang Qixian of the Song dynasty was prime minister during the reign of Emperor Taizong (r. 976–98). When he was down and out before his rise to power, he once lodged at an inn where he saw a group of bandits eating and drinking. Instead of fleeing from them, he engaged them in conversation. The bandits were so impressed with his looks and speech that they offered him lavish gifts.

- 4 In the Ming dynasty, there was one government courier station every sixty *li* for those traveling by road or water.
- 5 The Fountain of Greed is in present-day Guangzhou, Guangdong. Legend has it that anyone who drinks from it will become greedy.
- 6 Before Han Xin (d. 196 BCE) rose to power, an old woman washing clothes by the river noticed that he looked hungry and gave him some food. After he became commander in chief under Liu Bang (later to be the first emperor of the Han dynasty), he sought out the old woman and gave her a reward of a thousand pieces of gold.

9. IN THE DIRECTOR'S GARDEN, YOUNG LADIES ENJOY A SWING-SET PARTY; AT PURE AND PEACEFUL TEMPLE, HUSBAND AND WIFE LAUGH AND CRY AT THEIR REUNION

- 1 The story "Qianniang's Departed Soul" and the *zaju* play based on it have been translated by Stephen West and Wilt Idema in *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010).
- 2 *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (Taiping guangji) is a compendium of early fiction printed in 981 in the Song dynasty.
- 3 The Clear and Bright (Qingming) Festival falls on April 5 or 6 and is the time when people visit the graves of their ancestors
- 4 Cao Zhi (192–232) was a gifted poet who, in his early youth, composed a poem in the time it took to take seven steps.
- 5 The Bureau of Remonstrance was an agency of the central government charged with scrutinizing and criticizing policy decisions.

10. SCHOLAR HAN TAKES A WIFE IN A WAVE OF PANIC;
PREFECT WU MAKES A MATCH FOR A TALENTED SCHOLAR

- 1 Wei Gao (745–805), a general of the Tang dynasty, was humiliated by his father-in-law, Zhang Tingshang, but later rose through the ranks of officialdom until he replaced his father-in-law as regional commander of Western Sichuan, much to the latter's mortification. His mother-in-law, Miao-shi, however, never failed to appreciate his worthy qualities.

Lü Mengzheng (944–1011) was prime minister for three terms under Emperors Taizong and Zhenzong of the Song dynasty. In his humble days, before he rose in the world, his father-in-law threw him and his wife out of the house.

- 2 On Wei Gao, see note 1.
- 3 Wang Xizhi (303–361) was a great calligrapher.

- 4 Hongfu was a palace lady in the service of Yang Su, prime minister of the Sui dynasty, when she abandoned him and followed Li Jing (571–649), who later helped Emperor Taizong found the Tang dynasty. Hongfu proved to be of great value to Li Jing in his career.
- 5 Cao Zhi (192–232), courtesy name Zijian, was a poet of the state of Wei in the Three Kingdoms period.
- 6 Pan An (247–300), or Pan Yue, courtesy name Anren, was a man of letters and an official in the Western Jin dynasty but is now better known as the personification of male attractiveness.
- 7 The eight characters of the natal chart are two for the hour of birth (one for the Heavenly Stem, one for the Earthly Branch), two for the day, two for the month, and two for the year.
- 8 The Four Books—*The Great Learning* (Daxue), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong), *The Analects of Confucius* (Lunyu), and *Mencius* (Mengzi)—were promoted by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) as essential texts and became the core of the Confucian curriculum.
- 9 In the Ming dynasty, students in government schools who were rated in the first and second classes were rewarded, whereas those in the fourth rank or lower were punished.
- 10 In fact, Bo Ziting was a Daoist in the Ming dynasty. *Records Compiled After Retiring from the Farm* (Chuogeng lu) was written by Tao Zongyi (1329–1410).
- 11 The six preliminaries are that the groom's family (1) give presents to the prospective bride's family to make the offer of marriage, (2) obtain written documentation of the prospective bride's name and date of birth, (3) secure through divination a good omen endorsing the marriage, (4) send betrothal gifts to the bride's family, (5) seek approval of an auspicious date for the wedding from the bride's family, and (6) send the groom in person to bring the bride home.
- 12 According to the Ming dynasty novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi), Zhou Yu (175–210), military adviser to Sun Quan of Wu, devised a plan for capturing Liu Bei, Sun's rival, by offering him Sun's sister as wife so as to lure him to the Wu region to pick up the bride. But Liu Bei's military adviser, the great strategist Zhuge Liang, saw through the plot and beat Zhou Yu at his own game by having Liu Bei take the bride away and return to his own territory safe and sound. Zhou Yu led his troops in chase but was defeated by Liu Bei's general Zhang Fei. This story is invariably cited in reference to situations in which one ends up suffering a double loss through actions intended to produce a gain.
- 13 It is said that in his days of poverty, Lü Mengzheng (944–1011), later prime minister, used to join the monks at meals whenever he heard the meal bell of the nearby monastery. The monks grew so sick of him that they took to ringing the bell only after they had already eaten.

- 14 Gu Hong is a character in the Tang dynasty romance *Biography of Wushuang*. A champion of justice, he saved Wushuang from danger and brought about her marriage to Wang Xianke.

11. AN EVIL BOATMAN COMMITS BLACKMAIL WITH A DEAD BODY;
A HEARTLESS SERVANT WRONGFULLY PRESSES MURDER CHARGES

- 1 Legend has it that the First Emperor of Qin (259–210 BCE) had in his possession a magic mirror in which he could see all the internal organs of the human body and therefore diagnose illnesses.
- 2 Xiao He (d. 193 BCE) was an early lawmaker. When he was prime minister under the first emperor of the Han dynasty, he formulated the larger part of the Han penal code.

12. MR. TAO TAKES IN STRANGERS SEEKING SHELTER FROM THE
RAIN; JIANG ZHENQING GAINS A WIFE WITH A JEST

- 1 Yu, founder of the Xia dynasty, was a sage-king who led the people in controlling floods and succeeded Shun as ruler.
- 2 Legend has it that Yellow Stone Sage passed on a book on the art of war to Zhang Liang (d. 189 BCE), who would later serve as adviser to Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty.
- 3 The Shangshan hermits were four hermits of the early Western Han dynasty who began serving the imperial court when they were in their eighties.
- 4 Zhu Yuming (1460–1506), sobriquet Zhishan, was a famous calligrapher.

13. MR. ZHAO SPOILS HIS SON AND DIES AS A RESULT;
MAGISTRATE ZHANG SENTENCES AN UNFILIAL SON TO DEATH
IN AN IRONCLAD CASE

- 1 *The Book of Songs* (Shi jing) is China's earliest collection of songs.
- 2 Wang Zhu of the Song dynasty wrote a number of poems that were later compiled in *Child Prodigy Poems* (Shitong shi), which became a popular children's primer. *Poetry from a Thousand Poets* (Qianjia shi) is a collection of ancient poetry originally compiled by Liu Kezhuang (1187–1269), whose condensed version later became a popular poetry primer for children. *The Great Learning* (Daxue) is one of the Four Confucian Classics.
- 3 "Sixteen" (十六) may be a misprint for "sixty" (六十). Zhao the Sixth borrowed sixty taels of silver from Squire Chu.
- 4 A cangue is a wooden collar, usually three or four feet square, used in ancient China to confine the neck and sometimes also the hands of convicts.

15. WITH HIS MERCILESS HEART, SQUIRE WEI PLOTS TO SEIZE
ANOTHER MAN'S PROPERTY; WITH HIS CLEVER PLAN, SCHOLAR
CHEN WINS BACK HIS HOUSE

- 1 *Liezi*, a classic Daoist work collected at the beginning of the Han dynasty, is named after the Daoist Lie Yukou, or Liezi, of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).
- 2 It is “Qinhuai Lake” in the Chinese original, but in fact the Qinhuai is a river. This mistake probably arose because “lake” and “river” are homophones in the dialects of the author's native place, the Wu region.

16. ZHANG LIU'ER LAYS ONE OF HIS MANY TRAPS;
LU HUINIANG SEVERS A BOND OF MARRIAGE

- 1 A green dragon symbolizes good luck, and a white tiger, misfortune.
- 2 “The Terrace” is a metaphor for a lovers' tryst. It was first used in the prose poem “Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine” (Gaotang fu), attributed to Song Yu (ca. 290–ca. 223 BCE).

17. PRAYER SERVICES ARE HELD AT WEST HILL TEMPLE FOR A
DEPARTED SOUL; A COFFIN IS PREPARED IN THE KAIFENG YAMEN
FOR A LIVING CRIMINAL

- 1 Zhang Jiao was a leader of the Yellow Turbans Uprising, a large-scale peasant revolt that broke out at the end of the Western Han dynasty. The real founder of the Five Piculs of Rice Sect was Zhang Daoling.
- 2 A silencer was an oblong piece of wooden board with which a magistrate trying a case struck the table, to frighten the accused with the noise.
- 3 For more on Ren Daoyuan and the whip, see the prologue story of this story.

18. AN ALCHEMIST TURNS HALF A GRAIN OF MILLET INTO
A NINE-CYCLE PILL; A RICH MAN SQUANDERS THOUSANDS
OF TAEELS OF SILVER TO WIN A BEAUTY'S SMILE

- 1 Tang Yin (1470–1524), courtesy name Bohu, was a painter and calligrapher of the Ming dynasty and is often featured as a romantic figure in popular literature.
- 2 Lü Chunyang, or Lü Dongbin, is one of the Eight Immortals in Daoist mythology.
- 3 For more on Du Zichun, see story 37 in Feng Menglong, *Stories to Awaken the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 3*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

- 4 Tao Zhu, or Tao Zhugong, was Fan Li, who, after helping the king of Yue conquer the state of Wu toward the end of the Spring and Autumn period (772–481 BCE), became a rich businessman. Yi Dun sought advice from Fan Li on ways of gaining wealth and went from rags to riches.
- 5 Pei Hang is a fictional character featured in Tang dynasty romance stories.
- 6 Legend has it that Wang Zhi of the Jin dynasty (265–420) was chopping wood in the mountains when he stopped to watch two men play a game of chess. When the game ended, he saw that the handle of his ax had rotted away. On returning home, he learned that a hundred years had elapsed.

19. LI GONGZUO INGENIOUSLY INTERPRETS A DREAM; XIAO'E CLEVERLY SNARES PIRATES

- 1 Ban Jieyu was a poetically inclined imperial consort of Emperor Cheng of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Cao Dagu, or Ban Zhao, was the daughter of Ban Biao of the Eastern Han dynasty, sister of Ban Gu, and wife of Cao Shishu; a learned and talented scholar, she helped finish Ban Gu's *History of the Han Dynasty* (Hanshu). Yu Xuanji was the Daoist name of Li Yiqie, a woman poet of the Tang dynasty. Xue Tao was a celebrated courtesan-cum-poet of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Li Jilan was a woman poet and a Daoist priest. Li Yi'an was Li Qingzhao (1084–1151), China's greatest woman poet. Zhu Shuzhen was a native of Hangzhou in the Song dynasty (960–1279); unhappy in her marriage, she wrote *ci* poems of a mostly melancholy nature.
- 2 Ban Gu was the author of *History of the Han Dynasty*; the work was completed by his sister Ban Zhao. Yang Xiong was a man of letters of the Han dynasty. Lu Zhaolin was a man of letters of the Tang dynasty. Luo Binwang was a poet of the Tang dynasty.
- 3 Lady Han was the mother of General Zhu Xu, who was assigned to guard the city of Xianyang against attack at the beginning of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420); she led women in defending the city and routing the enemy. The Detachment of Women fought under the leadership of Princess Yangping, daughter of Emperor Li Yuan (r. 618–27) of the Tang dynasty. Lady Xian of Gaoliang (now the city of Yangjiang, Guangdong) was a tribal military leader in southern China in the Southern Dynasties (420–589). Mother Lü of East Sea, a native of East Sea County (now the city of Rizhao, Shandong), led a peasant rebellion in the Eastern Han dynasty.
- 4 Han Xin was instrumental in helping Liu Bang found the Han dynasty. Bai Qi (d. 257) was a leading general of the state of Qin in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).

- 5 Guan Yu (d. 220), courtesy name Yunchang, a sworn brother of Liu Bei's, is revered to this day as a central figure in the folk pantheon. He and Zhang Fei (d. 221), the other sworn brother of Liu Bei, helped Liu Bei found the Kingdom of Shu.
- 6 Zhuo Wenjun was renowned for her beauty, intelligence, and musical talent. For her elopement with the celebrated writer Sima Xiangru (179–118 BCE), see the prologue story of story 6, in Feng Menglong, *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, Volume 2, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). Hongfu was a courtesan in the service of Yang Su, prime minister of the Sui dynasty, when she abandoned him and followed Li Jing (571–649), a military strategist; she later proved to be of great value to him in his career. Wang Hun's wife, Zhong-shi, was a great-granddaughter of Zhong Yao's, a famous calligrapher of the Three Kingdoms period (220–80), and was known for being a good judge of character. Wei Gao of the Tang dynasty had been humiliated by his father-in-law before his rise to prominence, but his mother-in-law, Miao-shi, never failed to appreciate his worthy qualities.
- 7 Sun Yi, prefect of Danyang in the Three Kingdoms period, was murdered by one of his subordinate. His wife, Xu-shi, sought revenge and stabbed the murderer to death.

Dong Chang of the Song dynasty (960–1279) was persecuted to death by Fang Liuyi. Fang then forced Dong's wife, Shentu-shi, to marry him. Shentu-shi pretended to accept the marriage offer but killed Fang in the nuptial chamber on the wedding night.

Eqin of the Eastern Han dynasty was Pang Zixia's wife. Her father, Zhao Jun'an, was murdered by Li Shou of the same county. In her resolve to avenge her father, she secretly bought a sword and later used it to kill Li Shou.

Zou Jingwen and his wife of the Later Liang dynasty (907–23) were both killed by bandits. Their servant's wife feigned joy so as not to arouse the bandits' suspicions but then reported the murder to the local police and had the bandits arrested and executed.

- 8 Mulan was a girl who disguised herself as a man and went into military service in her ailing father's stead. For more on Mulan, see the first prologue story of story 28 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

Lou Cheng of Dongyang of the Southern Qi dynasty (479–502) disguised herself as a man and became a civil servant in Yangzhou.

Madam Meng of the Tang dynasty was the wife of a subordinate of General Guo Ziyi's (697–781). After her husband died, she posed as his brother and continued to serve in the military. Guo Ziyi later became prime minister, and after he died, she became an imperial inspector.

- Huang Chonggu of the Five Dynasties was a learned woman scholar and, disguised as a man, rose to be head of a government bureau.
- 9 For more on the Ancient Sword Spirit who killed with wisps of incense smoke, see the third prologue story, about Fragrant Pellet, in story 4 of this collection.
 - 10 Li Gongzuo (ca. 770–ca. 848) was the author of “The Biography of Xie Xiao’e,” on which this story is based.
 - 11 Monkey King, a much beloved character in the Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji), is able to change the hair on his body into bugs that put people to sleep.
 - 12 *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (Taiping guangji), one of three huge compendia of early fiction compiled by imperial order during the Taiping reign (976–83), is devoted to anecdotes and tales. The collection is also widely valued as a source for nonliterary disciplines.

20. LI KERANG SENDS A BLANK LETTER; LIU YUANPU BEGETS TWO PRECIOUS SONS

- 1 Pei Du (765–839), Duke of Jin and prime minister of the Tang dynasty, brought about the union of a young woman, Huang Xiao’e, in his service and a low-ranking official named Tang Bi. See story 9 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
- 2 Fan Shi of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) rode at top speed over a great distance to offer help at his friend Zhang Shao’s funeral. This story appears as story 16 in *ibid.*
- 3 The Five Wutong Gods are five brothers and are believed to be evil spirits according to folk mythology in areas south of the lower reaches of the Yangzi River.
- 4 The Clear and Bright (Qingming) Festival falls on April 5 or 6 and is the time for visiting the graves of ancestors.
- 5 Yan Hui (521–490 BCE) was Confucius’s favorite student. He died at age thirty-two.
- 6 Zhao Xincheng, prefect of Nanyang in the Western Han dynasty, was lovingly called “Father Zhao” by the local populace. Du Shi, who held the same post in the Eastern Han dynasty, was called “Mother Du.”
- 7 A cangue was a wooden collar, usually three or four feet square, used in ancient China to confine the neck and sometimes also the hands and feet of convicts.
- 8 Xishi, a beauty of the state of Yue in the Spring and Autumn period, is believed to have been offered to Fuchai, King of Wu. She served as a spy for Yue and caused the defeat of the king.

- 9 Wang Qiang, or Wang Zhaojun, was a lady-in-waiting at the Western Han court. She volunteered to marry a Xiongnu chief in 33 BCE in order to bring about peace between the Xiongnu and the Han court. In popular versions of the story, she is unwilling to bribe the court painter, which leads to her being neglected in the imperial harem.
- 10 Chang'e is the Goddess of the Moon. Legend has it that she swallowed her husband's elixir and flew to the moon.
- 11 In this poem, words enclosed in quotation marks are song titles.
- 12 Peng Zu is a legendary figure from the time of the sage-king Yao (before 2100 BCE) and is said to have lived for eight hundred years.
- 13 Yan Hui (521–490 BCE) was one of Confucius's students.
- 14 Lü Wang—popularly known as Taigong Wang, Jiang Taigong, or Jiang Ziya—was a military strategist who did not rise to eminence until he was accosted by King Wen of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1027–956 BCE) while fishing by Panxi Creek, which flowed into the Wei River. He was already about eighty years old at the time.
- 15 For more on Old Man Zhang, see story 33 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

21. YUAN'S FACE-READING SKILLS IMPRESS THE HIGH AND MIGHTY; ZHENG'S GOOD DEED WINS HIM A HEREDITARY TITLE

- 1 The phrase “The mighty heroes of Yan and Wu” refers respectively to Gao Jianli of the state of Yan in the Warring States period and Zhuanzhu of the state of Wu in the Spring and Autumn period. Gao Jianli was a friend of Jing Ke's (d. 227 BCE) and is famous for his failed assassination attempt against the King of Qin (later the First Emperor of Qin), which he undertook out of loyalty to the Prince of Yan; Gao Jianli hid a heavy piece of lead in his lute and hurled the musical instrument at the King of Qin but missed his target. Zhuanzhu (d. 515 BCE), acting out of loyalty to the Prince of Wu, hid a knife in a fish and used it to assassinate the king.
- 2 In the Tang dynasty, the nine classics were *The Rites of the Zhou Dynasty*, *Rituals and Ceremonies*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Zuo Zhuan* (*The Spring and Autumn Annals with Commentaries by Zuo Qiuming*), *The Spring and Autumn Annals with Commentaries by Gongyang Gao*, *The Spring and Autumn Annals with Commentaries by Guliang Chi*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Collection of Ancient Texts*, and *The Book of Songs*. The three histories were *The Historical Records* by Sima Qian, *History of the Han Dynasty*, and *The History of Eastern Han*.

- 3 Wu Daozi was a famous painter of the Tang dynasty, and Emperor Xuanzong (r. 673–756) often commissioned him to paint in the palace.
- 4 Lu Tong was a poet of the Tang dynasty and a connoisseur of green tea.
- 5 For the story about Pei Du of the Tang dynasty returning a jade belt, see story 9 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
- 6 Tang Ju of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and Xu Fu, a woman of the Han dynasty, were both celebrated fortune-tellers.

22. WITH MONEY, A COMMONER GAINS AN OFFICIAL POST;
OUT OF LUCK, A PREFECT BECOMES A BOATMAN

- 1 Huang Chao (d. 884) led a major peasant rebellion toward the end of the Tang dynasty. Chen Jingxuan (d. 893), a military commander, was Tian Lingzi's brother. (Tian Lingzi was given away in childhood and assumed his adoptive father's surname, Tian.)
- 2 For the remark on Confucius, see book 16 of *The Analects*. Sunshu Ao, an official in the state of Chu during the Spring and Autumn period, encountered a two-headed snake on the road in his childhood. Superstition had it that everyone who saw such a snake was going to die. In order to prevent the snake from harming more people, Sunshu Ao killed it and buried it then and there.

23. THE OLDER SISTER'S SOUL LEAVES HER BODY TO FULFILL A WISH;
THE YOUNGER SISTER RECOVERS FROM ILLNESS TO RENEW A BOND

- 1 This line alludes to the poem improvised by Cao Zhi (192–232) when his older brother Cao Pi (187–226) allegedly threatened to have him killed. The shorter extant version of the poem reads: "As the beanstalks are lit to make a fire, / The beans in the pot burst into sobs: / 'Didn't we spring from the very same root? / Why torment us with such ruthlessness?'"
- 2 Yao and Shun were legendary sage-kings who ruled, one after the other, in high antiquity.
- 3 Images of a boy and a girl made of paper or clay used to be placed next to the shrine to the dead, one on each side.

24. THE OLD DEMON OF YANGUAN COUNTY INDULGES IN
DEBAUCHERY; THE BODHISATTVA ON MOUNT HUIHAI PUTS
THE EVIL SPIRITS TO DEATH

- 1 Wang Jun was prefect of Yizhou at the end of the Three Kingdoms period (220–80). On orders from Sima Yan (r. 265–90), emperor of the Jin dynasty,

Wang Jun launched an attack on the state of Wu and burned the iron chains guarding the shore. Wu surrendered.

- 2 In fact, the poem was titled “Meditating on the Past at Western Fort Hill.”
- 3 It is impossible to see the Yangzi River from anywhere near Hangzhou. Perhaps Ling Mengchu had the Qiantang River in mind.
- 4 Shi Chong was a fabulously rich man of the Jin dynasty. For more on Shi Chong and Green Pearl, see the prologue story of story 36 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
- 5 Sima Xiangru (279–117 BCE), one of the most celebrated *fu* (rhyme-prose) writers in the history of Chinese literature, is also known for his romance with the young widow Zhuo Wenjun. The two eloped after their first meeting. For more on them, see the prologue story of story 6 in Feng Menglong, *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 2*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).
- 6 Pan An (247–300), or Pan Yue, courtesy name Anren, was a man of letters and an official in the Western Jin dynasty but is now better known as the man who personifies male beauty. He was walking down the streets of Luoyang one day when a group of women danced around him and tossed fruit at him as a way of expressing their admiration.
- 7 Lü Wang—popularly known as Taigong Wang, Jiang Taigong, or Jiang Ziya—was a military strategist who did not rise to eminence until he was accosted by King Wen of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1027–256 BCE) while fishing by Panxi Creek, which flowed into the Wei River. He was already about eighty years old.
- 8 Fu Sheng was a Confucian scholar of the Han dynasty. Legend has it that he began to give lectures to Emperor Wen on Confucian classics when he was ninety years old.
- 9 According to legend, two young men, Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao, met fairy maidens in Peach Blossom Cave on Tiantai Mountain in Zhejiang.

25. REVENUE MANAGER ZHAO LEAVES WORD FOR HIS LOVE A THOUSAND *LI* AWAY; SU XIAOJUAN ACHIEVES HAPPINESS WITH A SINGLE POEM

- 1 Li He (790–816), courtesy name Changji, was a famous poet of the Tang dynasty. Legend has it that when he was on his deathbed, he saw a red-robed celestial messenger ordering him to write a poem on the white jade tower that had just been built on orders from the Lord on High.
- 2 “A man of Tianshui” refers to the Zhao Bumin of the story. As a member of the royal Zhao clan of the Song dynasty, Zhao Bumin should be a native of

Zhuozhou, in Hebei, not of Tianshui, which is to the southwest of present-day Jingning, Gansu. Since Li Yuan, founder of the Tang dynasty, claimed to be descended from Li Hao (351–417), founder of the state of Xiliang, and Li Hao was a native of Chengji, west of the Longshan Mountains in what was Tianshui County during the Tang dynasty, the author may have confused the native places of the founders of the Tang and Song dynasties.

- 3 Lady of Qianguo is Li Wa, or Li Yaxian, a character in “The Tale of Li Wa” (Li Wa zhuan) by Bai Xingjian (775–826) of the Tang dynasty. For the story of how Li Wa, a courtesan, helped her lover Zheng Yuanhe pass the examinations, see the prologue story of story 3 in Feng Menglong, *Stories to Awaken the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 3*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).
- 4 Cassia is a symbol of success on the imperial civil-service examinations.
- 5 A green dragon symbolizes good luck, and a white tiger, misfortune.
- 6 Su Xiaoxiao was a famous courtesan of Qiantang in the Six Dynasties period.
- 7 The four treasures of the scholar’s study are writing brush, ink slab, ink stick, and paper.
- 8 According to the prose poem “Rhapsody at the Gaotang Shrine” (Gaotang fu), attributed to Song Yu (ca. 290–ca. 223 BCE), King Xiang of Chu dreamed of having a sexual encounter with the goddess of Wu Gorge.
- 9 *Lotus Blossoms out of Filthy Mud* (Qingni lianhua ji) is a collection of literary sketches by Mei Dingzuo of the Ming dynasty.

26. IN A COMPETITION FOR SEXUAL FAVOR, A VILLAGE WOMAN IS MURDERED; IN CLAIMING CELESTIAL AUTHORITY, A JUDGE SOLVES A CASE

- 1 A wooden fish is a round, carved, wooden resonator that is struck by Buddhist monks and nuns to keep the rhythm while chanting sutras.

27. GU AXIU DONATES TO A NUNNERY WITH JOY; CUI JUNCHEN IS SHOWN THE LOTUS SCREEN THROUGH A CLEVER SCHEME

- 1 Hepu is a pearl-producing area in present-day Guangxi Autonomous Region.
- 2 This song, attributed to Lu Zhongyang of Zhenzhou (present-day Yizheng, Jiangsu), concludes “The Story of the Lotus Painting Screen” (Furongping ge), which is found in chapter 4 of *More Stories Written While Trimming the Wick* (Jiandeng yuhua), by Li Zhen (1376–1452), courtesy name Changqi.
- 3 Han Yi, a Tang dynasty poet, wrote a poem titled “The Willows of Zhangtai” (Zhangtai liu) in remembrance of his lover née Liu (Willow), who was

abducted during An Lushan's rebellion in 755. They were eventually reunited and became man and wife.

- 4 Wen Xiao, a distinguished scholar of the Tang dynasty, married a beautiful girl named Wu Cailuan. Both were believed to have become Daoist immortals.
- 5 Zhang Chang (d. 47 BCE), who served as magistrate of the capital under Emperor Xuan (r. 73–49 BCE), often painted his wife's eyebrows and is held up as an example of a loving husband.
- 6 Huang Quan (934–965) was a famous painter whose subject was mostly flowers and birds.
- 7 Huaisu (725–785) was a monk of the Tang dynasty, famous for his “wild cursive” style of calligraphy.
- 8 The thirty-volume *Catalogue of Inscriptions on Ancient Bronzes and Stone Tablets* (Jinshi lu) is by Zhao Mingcheng (1081–1129), renowned epigrapher of the Song dynasty.
- 9 A *jinshi* is a scholar who passed the imperial civil-service examinations at the national level.
- 10 The term “Nine Springs” refers to the netherworld.

28. THE MASTER OF GOLDEN LIGHT CAVE RECALLS THE PAST; THE VENERABLE ELDER OF JADE VOID CAVE IS ENLIGHTENED ABOUT HIS PREVIOUS LIFE

- 1 “Letian” is the courtesy name of the great Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi (772–846). Both poems quoted on this page were written by him.
- 2 Tusita Heaven is the fourth layer of heaven in the Buddhist belief.
- 3 According to the Daoists, Penglai Island is an abode of the immortals.
- 4 Dongfang Shuo (154–93 BCE) was a man of letters of the Western Han dynasty. Stories about his wisdom abound.
- 5 Ma Zhou (601–648) was a Tang dynasty court minister. For more on Ma Zhou, see story 5 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
- 6 Wang Fangping of the Eastern Han dynasty resigned from his position at the imperial court to enter the Buddhist order.
- 7 Zhen Dexiu, sobriquet West Hill (1178–1235), was secretary of the Department of Revenue and a Hanlin academician of the Song dynasty.
- 8 Su Shi (1037–1101), courtesy name Dongpo, was one of China's greatest men of letters. For more on his previous incarnation as a Buddhist abbot, see story 30 in Feng Menglong, *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*,

trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

- 9 Bu Shang (b. 507 BCE), courtesy name Zixia, was one of Confucius's students.
- 10 Guo Pu (276–324) was a man of letters of the Eastern Jin dynasty.
- 11 Tao Hongjing (456–536) was a Daoist thinker and a physician of the Southern Dynasties.
- 12 On Li He writing an ode to the White Jade Tower, see the prologue story of story 25 in this collection.
- 13 Li Linfu (d. 752) was a powerful evil prime minister of the Tang dynasty. Lu Qi (d. 785) was another evil Tang dynasty prime minister.
- 14 *First Honors on All Three Levels of the Exams* (Sanyuan ji) is a play written by Shen Ling, courtesy names Shouqing and Yuanshou, of the Ming dynasty.
- 15 *The Story of the Lute* (Pipa ji), by Gao Ming (ca. 1305–ca. 1370), is a forty-two-scene play. The protagonist, Cai Bojie, becomes a *zhuangyuan* by winning first place on the civil service examinations in the capital, and Grand Councilor Niu marries his daughter to him, but Cai already has a wife, named Wuniang, in his home village. While he is in the capital, his parents die of starvation, and Wuniang goes to the capital in search of her husband. Along the way, she sings out her story to the accompaniment of her lute (*pipa*). Cai's new wife brings about a reunion between Cai and Wuniang, and in the end, Cai and his two wives receive imperial honors.

The West Chamber, a play by Wang Shifu (thirteenth century), is based on the Tang dynasty tale “The Biography of Yingying” by Yuan Zhen, courtesy name Weizhi. In the play, Student Zhang falls in love with Cui Yingying, who is betrothed to Zheng Heng. When an armed rebellion breaks out, Mrs. Cui promises her daughter to anyone who can protect her and her daughter. Student Zhang has his friend General Du put down the rebellion, but Mrs. Cui reneges on her promise. Student Zhang and Cui Yingying, with the help of the girl's maid, decide to take things into their own hands. After Student Zhang passes the examinations, the general helps bring about the young lovers' marriage. In the original tale, Student Zhang rejects Cui Yingying in the end, and both marry other people. For an English-language translation of the play, see Lili Chen, *Master Tung's Western Chamber Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
- 16 “The Return” (Gui qu lai ci) is the title of a poem written by Tao Qian (365–427), also known as Tao Yuanming.
- 17 Zhang Sengzhou (d. ca. 519) was a famous painter of the Liang dynasty (502–57) during the Southern Dynasties.

29. THEY REMAIN LOYAL TO EACH OTHER THROUGH THEIR TRYSTS;
HIS SUCCESS IS ANNOUNCED AT THE JAILHOUSE

- 1 Bandit Zhi of Liu was a brigand who lived toward the end of the Spring and Autumn period (770–456 BCE). Zhou Xing (d. 691) and Lai Junchen (651–697) were cruel and ruthless officials of the Tang dynasty.
- 2 Lü Wang (popularly known as Taigong Wang, Jiang Taigong, or Jiang Ziya) was a military strategist who did not rise to eminence until he was accosted by King Wen of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1027–256 BCE) while fishing by Panxi Creek, which flowed into the Wei River. He was already about eighty years old.
- 3 “The Yellow Springs” is a term for the netherworld.
- 4 Sima Xiangru (179–117 BCE), one of the most celebrated prose poem (*fu*) writers in the history of Chinese literature, is also known for his romance with Zhuo Wenjun. The two eloped after she heard him play the zither. See the prologue story of story 6 in *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 2*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).
- 5 Song Yu (ca. 290–ca. 223 BCE) said in one of his prose poems that a beautiful neighbor girl stole furtive glances at him over the wall for three years.
- 6 Dongfang Shuo (154–93 BCE) was a man of letters of the Western Han dynasty. Stories about his cleverness abound.

30. COMMISSIONER WANG RIDES ROUGHSHOD OVER HIS
SUBORDINATES; ADJUTANT LI GETS HIS COMEUPPANCE FROM
A REINCARNATED VICTIM

- 1 Peng Sheng, prince of the state of Qi in the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), was killed by Duke Xiang of Qi.
Prince Ruyi of Zhao was the son of Qi-shi, concubine of Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty. Both Prince Ruyi and his mother were killed by the jealous Empress Lü-shi. Before she died, Empress Lü-shi is said to have complained that the spirit of Prince Ruyi was haunting her.
Dou Ying and Guan Fu, officials of the Western Han dynasty, were both killed by the evil Prime Minister Tian Fen.
- 2 *Unofficial Histories* (Yi shi), by Jiang Fu of the Southern Song dynasty, is no longer extant, but this story is preserved in chapter 125 of *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility* (Taiping guangji), which was compiled during the Taiping reign period (976–83) of the Song dynasty.

- 3 *Records of the Listener* (Yijian zhi), by Hong Mai (1123–1222), is the second-largest traditional collection of stories; *Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility* is the largest. On *Extensive Gleanings*, see note 2.
- 4 On Empress Lü-shi, see note 1.
- 5 In Buddhist mythology, King Yama is the king of hell and judge of souls.

31. PRIEST HE COMMITS FORNICATION VIA BLACK MAGIC; REGISTRAR ZHOU WIPES OUT REBELS VIA FORNICATION

- 1 Zhang Jiao (d. 184) is said to have used black magic as leader of the Yellow Turbans Uprising
- 2 Zhang Liang (d. 189 BCE) served as adviser to Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty. Lu Jia was a political adviser of great eloquence in the Western Han dynasty.
- 3 On Zhang Jiao, see note 1. Zheng Ce and Zheng Er were sisters who rebelled at the beginning of the Eastern Han dynasty and were killed. Sun En was the leader of a peasant rebellion toward the end of the Eastern Jin dynasty. Lu Xun was Sun En's brother-in-law and one of the leaders.
- 4 *Quelling the Demons' Revolt* (Pingyao zhuan) is a novel allegedly written by Luo Guanzhong. Later expanded by Feng Menglong, it tells of Wang Ze's short-lived rebellion in 1047.
- 5 Hereafter, the page boy is referred to as "Meng Qing."

32. MR. HU CORRUPTS A FELLOW MAN IN A WIFE-SWAPPING SCHEME; A CHAN MASTER IN MEDITATION EXPLAINS THE PRINCIPLE OF RETRIBUTION

- 1 Xiang Yu (232–202 BCE) and Liu Bang (256–195 BCE) were rivals for the throne. Liu Bang became the first emperor of the Han dynasty.
- 2 Lay Yu was Xiang Yu's favorite consort. Lady Qi was Liu Bang's favorite consort.
- 3 The Five Buddhist Precepts are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no falsehood, and no drinking.

33. SQUIRE ZHANG, IN HIS NOBLE-MINDEDNESS, ADOPTS AN ORPHAN; JUDGE BAO, IN HIS WISDOM, RECOVERS A DOCUMENT

- 1 The character *fei* 飛 (to fly) is a homophone of the character *fei* 非 (not).
- 2 Ancient writings in Chinese were unpunctuated, as is this will. Punctuation is up to the reader.

- 3 As prefect of Kaifeng, Judge Bao (999–1062) gained such fame as a wise and fair dispenser of justice that stories about him abound in folklore and traditional drama.
- 4 The Five Classics are *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.
- 5 The Clear and Bright (Qingming) Festival usually falls on the fifth or sixth of April, a day on which people visit the graves of their ancestors.
- 6 The God of Mount Tai, or the East Mountain God, is the Daoist counterpart of King Yama.

34. SCHOLAR WENREN SHOWS HIS PROWESS AT CUIFU NUNNERY; THE NUN JINGGUAN GOES IN GLORY TO HUANGSHA LANE

- 1 Sima Xiangru (179–117 BCE), one of the most celebrated prose poem (*fu*) writers in the history of Chinese literature, is also known for his romance with the young widow Zhuo Wenjun. The two eloped after meeting when he was still in straitened circumstances. See the prologue story of story 6 in Feng Menglong, *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection, Volume 2*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).
- 2 Kunlun Nu is the main character in the classical tale “Kunlun Nu” by Pei Xing (825–880). The Yellow-Robed Sojourner (Huangshan Ke) is a character in “The Story of Huo Xiaoyu” (Huo Xiaoyu zhuan), by Jiang Fang (fl. early ninth century). Captain Xu (Xu Yuhou) is a character in the classical tale “The Story of Liu-shi” (Liu-shi zhuan), by Xu Yaozuo of the Tang dynasty.
- 3 Legend has it that Feng Zhi of the Tang dynasty repeatedly rejected the advances of a fairy maiden.
- 4 The man of Lu was a bachelor in the state of Lu during the Spring and Autumn period. He once refused to let in a neighboring widow who knocked on his door in a rainstorm because he was afraid he might not be able to control himself.
- 5 The eight characters on a natal chart, in four pairs of two characters each corresponding to one Heavenly Stem and one Earthly Branch, represent, respectively, the year, month, day, and hour of a person’s birth.
- 6 Pan An (247–300), or Pan Yue, courtesy name Anren, was a man of letters and an official in the Western Jin dynasty but is now better known as the man who personifies male beauty. Cao Zhi (192–232), courtesy name Zijian, was a prodigiously talented poet of the state of Wei in the Three Kingdoms period.

- 7 Jia Wu, daughter of Jia Chong, a court minister of the Western Jin dynasty, fell in love with Han Shou, a subordinate of her father's, and surreptitiously gave Han the incense that her father had received as a gift from the emperor.
- 8 Xishi, also known as Xizi, was a legendary beauty of the state of Yue toward the end of the Spring and Autumn period.
- 9 The Double Seventh Festival falls on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar and celebrates the annual meeting of the stars Herdboy and Weaving Maiden, who are reunited for a day when magpies form a bridge for them across the Milky Way.

The Ullambhana Festival, or Festival of All Souls, first observed in the time of Emperor Wudi of the Liang dynasty, is a Buddhist festival held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month for the purpose of releasing the souls of the dead from purgatory and feeding "hungry ghosts."
- 10 According to Song dynasty folklore, Pan Bizheng, a native of Henan, fell in love with the Daoist priestess Chen Miaochang. The two were later joined in matrimony.
- 11 In Buddhist mythology, Sudhana, also translated as "Treasure Boy," is one of the boy attendants serving the bodhisattva Guanyin.

35. A PAUPER KEEPS TEMPORARY WATCH OVER ANOTHER MAN'S MONEY; A MISER RESORTS TO TRICKS WHEN BUYING HIS NEMESIS'S SON

- 1 Ancient Chinese philosophers used the five-phases theory to explain the origin and transformations of the world. The five phases are metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. They promote one another in the fixed order of wood, fire, earth, metal, water, and wood again but subdue one another in the order of water, fire, metal, wood, earth, and water again.
- 2 Literally, "When your time comes, the wind will send you to the Pavilion of Prince Teng." This is from a Tang dynasty legend about Wang Bo (649–676), a famous poet and master of prose. The story goes that he was on his way to visit his father in Jiangxi when a gust of wind blew him to the prefect's banquet in the Pavilion of Prince Teng, in the city of Nanchang by West River, and that was how he came to write his best-known piece, "A Preface to the Poem 'On the Pavilion of Prince Teng.'"
- 3 Literally, "When your time goes, a thunderbolt will smash the stone tablet of Jianfu Temple." This is from the following Song dynasty story: When the famous essayist and poet Fan Zhongyan (989–1052) was prefect of Raozhou, a poverty-stricken scholar went to seek his help. Fan Zhongyan offered to make

him one thousand rubbings of a Jianfu Temple stone tablet with inscriptions by Ouyang Xun, the most popular calligrapher of the day, for each would be worth a thousand in cash. On the very night before the rubbings were to be done, the stone tablet was destroyed by a thunderbolt.

- 4 In the term *zhenggong diao*, *gong* refers to the note in the ancient Chinese pentatonic scale that corresponds to 1 in numbered musical notation and is equivalent to scale degree number 1 in major keys.
- 5 Han Yu (768–824) is a major figure in the history of Chinese literature. One of his poems mentions snow at Langan Pass (in present-day Shaanxi).
- 6 Meng Haoran (689–740) ranks among the most renowned poets of the Tang dynasty. He is said to have gone by donkey on a snowy day to look for wintersweet flowers.
- 7 Wang Huizhi (338–386) of the Jin dynasty, son of the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi, went to visit his friend Dai Kui on a snowy night. On reaching Dai Kui's door, he turned back without going in. Later, when asked why, he replied that he had set out because of an urge and returned when that urge disappeared.

36. THE MONK OF THE EASTERN HALL INVITES DEMONIC SPIRITS DURING A LAPSE IN VIGILANCE; THE MAN IN BLACK COMMITS MURDER IN AN ABDUCTION ATTEMPT

- 1 Niu Sengru (779–848) was prime minister at the time and a major author of classical tales of the type adapted by Ling Mengchu.

37. QUTU ZHONGREN CRUELLY KILLS OTHER CREATURES; THE YUNZHOU PREFECT HELPS HIS NEPHEW IN THE NETHERWORLD

- 1 The six directions of reincarnation are divine existence, human existence, Asura spirits, the hells, hungry ghosts, and animals.
- 2 Liu Ling was a man of letters of the Jin dynasty (265–420). He had a propensity for drinking.
- 3 Li Bai (701–762), also romanized as Li Po, was one of China's greatest poets.
- 4 "The Yellow Springs" is another term for the netherworld.
- 5 In the story "The Prefect of Nanke" by Li Gongzuo (ca. 770–ca. 848), a man called Chunyu dreams that he has become the prefect of Nanke in the Kingdom of Ants, only to wake up and see the cup of wine he had not finished before he fell asleep. Mr. Lu is a man in the story "The World Inside a Pillow" by Shen Jiji of the Tang dynasty. In it, a man dreams of a life of fame and fortune. When he wakes up, the yellow millet on the stove is still cooking.

38. TO STAKE HIS CLAIM ON THE FAMILY FORTUNE, A JEALOUS SON-IN-LAW PLOTS AGAINST THE RIGHTFUL HEIR; TO CONTINUE THE BLOOD LINE, A FILIAL DAUGHTER HIDES HER BROTHER

- 1 By the traditional Chinese method, a person is considered one year old at birth, and one year is added on each lunar New Year's Day. Thus, the two boys, conceived fifteen years ago, are considered to be fifteen years old.

39. HEAVENLY PRECEPTORS, WITH THEIR THEATRICALS, CLAIM TO SUBDUE DROUGHT DEMONS; A COUNTY MAGISTRATE, IN HIS SINCERITY, PRAYS FOR SWEET RAIN FROM HEAVEN

- 1 Ximen Bao was a magistrate of Ye County in the state of Wei during the Warring States period. A witch extorted money from the local people and sacrificed a maiden every year as a bride for the River God. Ximen Bao turned the witch's trick against her and had her thrown into the river. Thereafter, he worked to bring the river under control and is regarded in Chinese history as the builder of the first canal irrigation system.
- 2 For more on King Qian Liu, see story 15 in *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
- 3 He Zhu (1052–1125), courtesy name He Fanghui, was a Song dynasty poet.
- 4 Legend has it that Tang, the first king of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1028 BCE), cut his fingernails to the quick in order to show his sincerity in praying for rain.

40. ON THE HUAYIN TRAIL, LI MEETS ONE EXTRAORDINARY MAN; THE JIANGLING COMMANDER OPENS THREE MYSTERIOUS ENVELOPES

- 1 Legend has it that every time Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), a great historian, epigrapher, statesman, poet, and essayist, graded examination essays, he sensed the presence nearby of a red-robed man and gave a passing grade to each essay that received a nod from the man in red.
- 2 The Four Books are *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects of Confucius*, and *Mencius*. The Five Classics are *The Book of Changes*, *Collection of Ancient Texts*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Rites*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.
- 3 An examination sealer's job was to seal the corner of an exam paper where the examinee's name or number was entered.

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