

The Plum in the Golden Vase
or, CHIN P'ING MEI

VOLUME ONE: THE GATHERING

Translated by David Tod Roy

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To all those students, friends, and colleagues
WHO PARTICIPATED WITH ME IN THE EXCITEMENT
OF EXPLORING THE WORLD OF THE CHIN P'ING MEI
OVER THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY

Chapter 12

P'AN CHIN-LIEN SUFFERS IGNOMINY FOR ADULTERY WITH A SERVANT; STARGAZER LIU PURVEYS BLACK MAGIC IN PURSUIT OF GAIN

How laughable is the parvenu Hsi-men Ch'ing;
Whoever possesses money is welcomed as a patron.
His whole household is in a state of disorder;
Who cares about standards of decency or propriety?
His days are spent consorting with boon companions;
His nights devoted to sleeping with a painted woman.
Though this may not be a long-lived relationship;
It still counts as "a fling in the spring breeze."¹

THE STORY GOES that Hsi-men Ch'ing was so infatuated by Li Kuei-chieh's beauty that he lingered in the licensed quarter for nearly half a month, without going home. Wu Yüeh-niang sent a servant with his horse to bring him home on numerous occasions, but the proprietors of the Li family establishment even hid his clothes and hat, so reluctant were they to let him leave the premises. As a result, the women in his household were all left at loose ends.

This might have been tolerated by the rest of them, but as for P'an Chin-lien: She was still in the springtime of her youth,
not thirty years old;

The flames of her desire could not be banked,²
but flared up ten feet high.

Every day, without fail, she and Meng Yü-lou would make their way to the front gate, looking as though they were:

Modeled in plaster, carved of jade;

Displaying white teeth and red lips,

and lean against the doorjamb as they gazed out into the street, often remaining there until dusk.

In the evening when Chin-lien returned to her room she found that:

On her glossy pillow, amid deserted bed curtains,

There was no companion on the Phoenix Terrace.

Unable to sleep, she would wander into the garden where she:

Gently paced the flower-strewn moss, and

Watched the moon bobbing beneath the water;

fearful lest Hsi-men Ch'ing's:

Heart should prove as difficult to capture.

She objected to the lovmaking of the tortoiseshell cats,

For the tumult it engendered in her fragrant heart.

At the time when Meng Yü-lou had entered the household she had brought with her a page boy named Ch'in-t'ung, who was about fifteen years old and had just begun to wear his hair in adult style. He was:

Bright-eyed and clean-cut,

as well as being:

Artful and accomplished.

Hsi-men Ch'ing had entrusted the keys of the garden to him and made him responsible for keeping it properly swept. At night he slept in a small side chamber just outside the garden gate.

During the day, P'an Chin-lien and Meng Yü-lou often met in the pavilion in the garden and did needlework together, or played board games with each other. This page boy was adept at performing little favors and, when he saw that Hsi-men Ch'ing had arrived home, was in the habit of coming to let the women know before telling anybody else. For this reason Chin-lien was fond of him and often invited him into her room and treated him to a drink of wine. As a result, the two of them:

Morning after morning and evening after evening;

Exchanged looks with eyes and eyebrows,⁴

until they both began to get ideas.

It happened that Hsi-men Ch'ing's birthday on the twenty-eighth day of the seventh month was approaching. When Wu Yüeh-niang realized that he was still in the licensed quarter, so enamored of the mist and flowers that he had no thought of return, she sent the page boy, Tai-an, to take his horse to the Li establishment and try to bring him back home.

P'an Chin-lien secretly addressed a note to him and gave it to Tai-an, with the injunction, "Slip this to your father inconspicuously, and tell him, 'The Fifth Lady hopes you'll come home as soon as possible.'"

Tai-an did not dare to be remiss, but mounted the horse and proceeded straight to the Li family establishment in the licensed quarter. What should he see when he got there but Sponger Ying, Tagalong Hsieh, Sticky Chu, Blabbermouth Sun, and Cadger Ch'ang, the whole bunch of them in fact, keeping Hsi-men Ch'ing company as he embraced his painted lady:

Amid clustering blossoms and clinging brocade;

Enjoying themselves as they drank up the wine.

When Hsi-men Ch'ing saw that Tai-an had arrived, he asked, "What have you come for? Is everything all right at home?"

"Everything's all right at home," replied Tai-an.

"Tell Uncle Fu the Second to try to collect those unpaid bills that are still outstanding in the shop up front," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'll look over the accounts when I get home."

"The last few days Uncle Fu the Second has collected quite a few of them," said Tai-an. "He'll present the accounts when you get home."

"Did you bring that outfit for your Aunt Kuei-chieh?" asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"I've got it right here," replied Tai-an.

He then reached into his felt bag, drew out a red blouse with a blue skirt to match, and handed them to Kuei-chieh. Kuei-chieh and Kuei-ch'ing both bowed to express their thanks, and the present was put away. After which, they made haste to give orders that Tai-an should be properly entertained with food and wine in the servants' quarters.

As soon as the page boy had finished his food and wine he came back into the main room to await his instructions, and he took advantage of the occasion to approach Hsi-men Ch'ing and:

Whisper into his ear in a low voice,⁵

"The Fifth Lady at home asked me to deliver this note. She hopes you'll come home as soon as possible."

Just as Hsi-men Ch'ing was reaching out his hand to take it, Li Kuei-chieh caught sight of the transaction and, assuming it to be a love letter from some prostitute in the front sector of the quarter, snatched it out of his hands and tore it open to see for herself. It turned out to be a sheet of fancy note paper with a diapered border, on which there were a few lines of handwriting. Kuei-chieh handed it to Sticky Chu and asked him to read it out loud to her.

Sticky Chu saw that the missive was in the form of a pair of songs to the tune "The Wind Scatters the Plum Blossoms" and proceeded to declaim them to the company, as follows:

Yearning for him at twilight,
Longing for him by day;

I've tired myself out waiting,
but my lover doesn't come.

Solely on his account, only for his sake,

I've worn myself to a frazzle.

Alas, beneath my brocade coverlet,

I sleep alone.⁶

The lamp is guttering out,

Everyone else is asleep;

All that remains, peeping through my window,
is the bright moon.

Sleeping alone, even if my heart
were hard as iron;

How could it endure the desolation
of this night?

The note was signed:

Respectfully,

Your favorite, P'an the Sixth

When Kuei-chieh heard the contents of this missive, she left the table, went back to her room, threw herself down on the bed, and lay there with her face to the wall.

To resume our story, as soon as Hsi-men Ch'ing realized that Kuei-chieh was upset, he took the note and tore it to shreds and then, in front of everybody, kicked Tai-an twice with his booted foot. He also sent someone twice to ask Kuei-chieh to return, but she did not come back. Hsi-men Ch'ing was so flummoxed by this that he made his way back to her room himself and carried her out to rejoin the party.

Upon his return he said to Tai-an, "I order you to take the horse and go home. If any whore at my place sends you here again, no matter who it is, when I get back I'll beat her to a stinking pulp!"

Tai-an returned home in tears, but we will say no more of that.

"Kuei-chieh," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "there's no need to be so upset. This note is not from anyone else, it's only from the fifth concubine back at my place, asking me to go home because there's something she needs to take up with me. That's all there is to it."

Sticky Chu continued the joke, saying, "Kuei-chieh, don't you believe him. He's only trying to fool you. This P'an the Sixth is really a prostitute from another part of the quarter that he's recently taken up with. She's a real looker. You shouldn't let him off the hook."

Hsi-men Ch'ing laughed and pretended to hit him, saying, "You god-damned louse! All you ever do is plague people to death. She's giving me enough trouble as it is without you and your nonsense on top of everything else."

"It's you who are in the wrong, brother-in-law," said Li Kuei-ch'ing. "As long as you have people at home to keep you in line, what need is there for you to deflower a painted woman in the first place? You might as well stick to the ones you've already got, period. How long have the two of you been together, after all, that you should already be prepared to abandon her?"

"You've got a point there," interjected Sponger Ying. "Sir," he continued, turning to Hsi-men Ch'ing, "if you'll only take my advice, you won't have to go home, on the one hand, and Kuei-chieh won't have to be upset, on the other. From this day on, let's agree that if anyone gets into such a spat again,

each of the culprits will have to forfeit two taels of silver and buy meat and wine to treat the rest of us."

And sure enough, the four or five boon companions at the table:

The talkers talking,

The jokers joking,

Playing at guess-fingers or gaming at forfeits,

Enjoying themselves as they drank up the wine, finally succeeded in mollifying Kuei-chieh. Hsi-men Ch'ing embraced her and sat her on his lap with an ingratiating smile, while the two of them passed the same cup of wine back and forth between them as they drank.

Before long, seven cups of tea were brought in on a vermilion tray of bright red lacquer. The teacups were the color of snowy linen, the teaspoons were in the shape of apricot leaves, and the tea itself, which was flavored with marinated bamboo shoots, sesame seeds, and osmanthus, was of a bewitching fragrance.

When a cup had been placed in front of each of them, Ying Po-ch'ieh said, "I know a song to the tune 'Imperial Audience' that describes the virtues of tea:

The tender leaves,

Of this high-grade tea,

Are nourished by the spring breeze.

Though, if neglected, they will wither away;

The slightest infusion brings out their true colors.

Incomparable, extraordinary;

Hard to depict or to describe;

Often savored in the mouth;

When drunk, you long for them;

When sober, you adore them;

But a single armful will cost you a bundle.⁸

Tagalong Hsieh laughed, saying, "If the Honorable Gentleman is:

Spending his money and wasting his goods,

without hoping to get such an armful, what else could he be hoping for? Now, everyone ought to pitch in, by singing a song if he knows one, or, if he can't sing, by telling a joke, to help Kuei-chieh down her wine."

Tagalong Hsieh, himself, was the first to tell a joke. "Once upon a time there was a mason who was engaged to repave a courtyard in the licensed quarter. Because the madam had been less than generous with him, he surreptitiously stuck a brick in her covered drain.⁹ As a result, when it rained, her whole courtyard filled up with water. The madam, in a state of consternation, sought him out, gave him all he could eat or drink, weighed out a mace of silver, and begged him to get rid of the water for her. The mason consumed the food and wine and then stealthily removed

the brick from her drain, whereupon all the water immediately drained away. 'Foreman,' asked the madam, 'what was the problem?' To which the mason replied, 'The problem with your drain was the same as it is with you:

It's only dough that makes things flow;

Without the dough, there'd be no flow."

It so happens that this joke reflected badly on Kuei-chieh's profession, which induced her to speak up, as follows, "I've got a joke of my own with which to regale you gentlemen. Once upon a time, the Taoist adept Sun Ssu-miao¹⁰ had prepared a feast and wished to summon his guests, so he sent the tiger who was customarily in attendance beneath his dais to invite them. The tiger proceeded to eat each and every one of the guests while they were en route to the feast. The Taoist waited until evening, but not a single guest had arrived. Everyone told him, 'That tiger of yours must have eaten the guests on their way here.' Before long the tiger arrived and the Taoist asked him, 'What has become of the guests I sent you to invite?' To which the tiger, who could speak the language of men, replied, 'You should know, master, that I've never been known to invite people to partake of anything. The only thing I'm any good at is devouring people.'"¹¹

This joke reflected badly on the whole bunch of them.

"It would seem," said Sponger Ying, "that all we know how to do is free-load off your patron, without being able to stand him a treat in return."

Thereupon, he extracted a silver-plated carpick from his hair that weighed one mace. Tagalong Hsieh contributed the pair of gilded rings he used to hold his hairnet in place, which were found to weigh nine and a half candareus. Sticky Chu pulled an old handkerchief out of his sleeve, which was assessed at a value of two hundred discounted cash. Blabbermouth Sun divested himself of the white cotton breechcloth he wore around his loins, which was pawned for enough to buy two and a half jars of wine. Cadger Ch'ang had nothing he could contribute, so he asked Hsi-men Ch'ing for the loan of a full mace of good-quality silver.

The entire proceeds of the collection were handed over to Li Kuei-ch'ing, to defray the expenses of standing Hsi-men Ch'ing and Kuei-chieh a treat. Kuei-ch'ing turned the money over to the servant, who managed to buy a mace worth of crabs, a mace worth of pork, and a chicken. The Li establishment threw in a few side dishes of its own, and everything was duly prepared in the kitchen and served up in:

Large platters and large bowls.

Once the company was seated they scarcely needed an invitation before setting to.

The telling is slow;

What happened was quick.

Behold:

Everyone's mouth goes into motion,
 Each of them lowers his head to the task.¹²
 Obscuring the sky and bedimming the sun,¹²
 They are like a swarm of locusts
 all descending at once;
 Squinting their eyes and hunching their shoulders,
 They are like starving prisoners
 just let out of jail.
 This one sets to with flailing arms,
 As though it has been years
 since he saw food or wine;
 That one holds his chopsticks together,
 As if it has been ages
 since he attended a feast.
 One of them has sweat pouring from his face,
 As he engages in a grudge match
 with a chicken bone;
 Another wipes the oil from his lips,
 As he wolfs down bristle and rind
 with his hog's flesh.
 When they have eaten but a while,
 The cups and plates are in a state of disarray;¹³
 By the time they are through,
 The chopsticks lie about helter-skelter.
 The cups and plates are in a state of disarray;
 As spic-and-span as though washed.
 The chopsticks lie about helter-skelter;
 As neat and clean as though scoured.
 This one rates the designation
 Commander in Chief of the Gourmands;
 That one has earned the sobriquet
 General of the Trenchermen.¹⁴
 The wine pots are drained dry,
 but they continue to upend them;
 The platters are quite empty,
 yet they scan them in vain.

Truly:

Delicacies of every variety
 have perished in but a moment;
 Sacrificed upon the altar
 in the Temple of the Five Viscera.¹⁵
 On this occasion, the bunch of them cleaned the place out as thoroughly
 as any Buddha King of Purifying Light¹⁶ could have done. Hsi-men Ch'ing

and Kuei-chieh barely had two cups of wine apiece, and a few meager gleanings from the dishes on the table, before everything was gobbled up by the ravenous horde.

That day two of the chairs at their table were broken. The page boy who waited out front with the horse was not invited in for a snack, so he knocked the image of the tutelary god off its pedestal in the shrine by the door and deposited a bulging pile of hot shit in its place. On his way out the door, Blabbermouth Sun stuffed the gilded brass Buddha from the Li family's parlor into his waistband. Sponger Ying, pretending to kiss Kuei-chieh, snatched a gold-filled pin from her hairdo. Tagalong Hsieh pocketed Hsi-men Ch'ing's Szechwan fan. Sticky Chu went into Kuei-chieh's room to have a look at himself and made off with her mercury-backed mirror. Even the discount on the mace of silver that Cadger Ch'ang had borrowed from Hsi-men Ch'ing was put onto the reckoning.

It so happened that this bunch of men had nothing better to do than keep Hsi-men Ch'ing company in his revels. What a time they had together! There is a poem that testifies to this:

The prostitutes of the licensed quarter
 are as coquettish as monkeys;
 They are only fit to be visited
 on the impulse of the moment.
 If one allows himself to become infatuated,
 with no sense of satiety,
 To whom can he safely entrust
 the keys to his coffers?

His boon companions continued to cluster around Hsi-men Ch'ing:

Enjoying themselves as they drank up the wine.

But let us put this aside for a moment and return to the story of Tai-an.

When the page boy returned home with the horse, Wu Yüeh-niang was sitting in her room with Meng Yü-lou and P'an Chin-lien.

As soon as she saw Tai-an, she asked, "Have you brought your father back with you or not?"

Tai-an had been crying so hard that both his eyes were as red as could be. He gave an account, thus and so, that concluded, "I only got kicked and cursed by Father for my pains. And he also said, 'Whoever sends after me again will hear from me when I get home.'"

"Just look at him," said Yüeh-niang. "How unreasonable can you get? If he won't come home, so much for that; what business does he have abusing the page boy? How can he allow himself to be so bewitched by that vixen?"

"It's bad enough to kick a page boy," said Meng Yü-lou, "but how can he threaten to abuse us into the bargain?"

"Nine out of ten of those whores in the licensed quarter," said P'an Chin-lien, "don't have any real feelings for their customers. As the saying goes: Not even shiploads of gold and silver,
Can fill up the camps of mist and flowers."

Chin-lien simply blurted out what she had to say, without remembering that:

Even if you only talk along the road,
There may be someone lurking in the grass.¹⁷
Ever since Tai-an had returned from the licensed quarter, Li Chiao-erh had stolen up outside and had been standing by the window, eavesdropping. When she overheard P'an Chin-lien abusing the members of her own household to Yüeh-niang and referring to them as whores a thousand times, if not ten thousand times, she secretly stored up the resentment in her heart and, henceforth, regarded Chin-lien as her enemy. But no more of this. Truly:

Honeyed words and plausible speeches
can make the twelfth month warm;
Cruel words that are hurtful to others
can turn the sixth month cold.¹⁸
Chin-lien's only consideration was
the need to make herself heard;
How could she anticipate that a bystander
could be the cause of calamity?

We will say no more for the moment about the enmity that Chin-lien incurred in Li Chiao-erh, but return to the story of that woman herself.

When Chin-lien returned to her room:

Each half hour was like three months of autumn;
Each two-hour period seemed like half a summer.
Knowing that Hsi-men Ch'ing was not coming home that night, she sent her two maidservants off to sleep, made a pretense of going out for a stroll in the garden, invited Chin-t'ung into her room, drank wine with him until he was drunk, closed the door:

Took off her clothes and unfastened her girdle,
and proceeded to couple with him. Truly:
With lustful daring as big as the sky,
what is there to fear?

Amid mandarin duck curtains the clouds and rain:
a lifetime of passion.¹⁹

Behold:

One of them shows total disregard
for ethical norms or distinctions of status;
The other does not discriminate between
above and below or high and low.

One of them, inspired by perverse lustful daring,
Cares nothing for the severity of her husband;
The other, carried away by lecherous desires,
Ignores a clear-cut violation of the law.
One of them, breathing heavily with staring eyes,
Sounds like an ox snoring in the willow's shade;
The other, with coy words and articulate cries,
Reminds one of an oriole warbling among the flowers.
One of them, murmurs in her partner's ear
of passions evoked by clouds and rain;
The other, swears by the pillow side
to be as faithful as the lulls and seas.
The garden with its hundred flowers,
Has been transformed into a pleasure ground;
The bedroom of his lawful mistress,
Has turned into a Kingdom of Cockaigne.
Almost before they know it, a glob
of donkey's spunk,
Has been deposited in Chin-lien's
jadelike body.²⁰

From this time on, every night the woman invited the page boy into her room for a repeat performance and sent him on his way again before dawn. She secretly let him have two or three of her gold-headed pins to wear in his hair, and she also gave him the brocade scent bag she wore suspended at her waist, together with the gourd toggle that held it in place, so he could wear them under his clothes.

How could she have known that this page boy:

Was not the sort to abide by his lot,²¹
but constantly went out into the street to drink and gamble with his fellow servants, where he was so indiscreet as to allow these gifts to be seen? As the saying goes:

The best way to avoid being found out,
Is not to do it in the first place.²²

One day word of this came to the ears of Sun Hsüeh-o and Li Chiao-erh, who said to each other, "That lousy whore is forever hypocritically protesting her own virtue. How is it, then, that today she's been caught red-handed committing adultery with a page boy?"

The two of them went off together to tell Yüeh-niang about it, but Yüeh-niang expressed herself repeatedly to be incredulous.

"It's all because the two of you are on the outs with her," she said. "But how can you help offending Sister Meng the Third by such an accusation? She'll say you're just trying to get rid of her page boy."

This response reduced the two to silence.

Sometime after this, the woman was carrying on with the page boy in her room one night when she forgot to close the back door. Her maidservant, Ch'ü-chü, happened to come out to relieve herself and saw what was going on. The next day she reported what she had seen to Hsiao-yü in the rear compound, and Hsiao-yü mentioned it to Hsüeh-o. Hsüeh-o and Li Chia-erh again sought out Yüeh-niang and told her about it.

It happened to be the twenty-seventh day of the seventh month, the eve of Hsi-men Ch'ing's birthday, and he had just come back from the licensed quarter to celebrate it. The two of them recounted everything, thus and so.

"The maidservant from her own quarters has reported it with her own mouth. It's not just a case of our trying to do her in. If you won't say anything about it, we'll go tell Father ourselves. You'd do as well to forgive a whore like that as you would to forgive a scorpion!"

"He's only just come home," said Yüeh-niang, "and it's a special day for him to boot. If you two disregard me and insist on telling him about it, in a little while, when the trouble starts, you'll have to look out for yourselves."

The two of them did not take Yüeh-niang's advice, but waited until Hsi-men Ch'ing came into his room and then told him all about how Chin-lien had been committing adultery with the page boy.

If Hsi-men Ch'ing had not heard these words nothing might have happened, but having heard them:

Anger flared up in his heart, and

Malice accrued in his gall.²³

Marching out to the front compound, he sat down and called out in a loud voice for Ch'in-t'ung.

It was not long before someone reported these events to P'an Chin-lien. In a state of panic she sent Ch'un-mei to call the page boy into her room, where she enjoined him, "Whatever happens, don't admit to anything!"

She demanded back the pins he was wearing in his hair, but she was so flustered she forgot to recover the scent bag with the gourd toggle.

Summoned into the front reception room, the page boy was made to kneel in front of Hsi-men Ch'ing, who ordered three or four servants to stand by with heavy bamboo canes.

"You lousy slave!" Hsi-men Ch'ing addressed him, "Do you acknowledge your crime?"

Ch'in-t'ung was too frightened to answer for some time.

Hsi-men Ch'ing ordered his minions, "Take off his hat and pull out the pins in his hair. I want to take a look at them. He's been seen sporting two gold-headed silver pins." Then, addressing him directly, he demanded, "What's become of the gold-headed silver pins you've been wearing?"

"I've never had any silver pins," said Ch'in-t'ung.

"The slave is still up to his tricks," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Strip off all his clothes and beat him with the bamboo."

The two or three servants in attendance set about their task. One of them, while engaged in stripping off his clothes, took down his trousers, disclosing the fact that underneath them he was wearing a jade-colored damask tunic, from the waist-string of which there hung a brocade scent bag with a gourd toggle.

Hsi-men Ch'ing noticed it immediately and called out, "Bring it here so I can have a look at it."

Recognizing it as the very object that P'an Chin-lien customarily wore suspended at her waist, he became enraged.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded. "Tell me the truth. Who gave it to you?"

The page boy was so frightened that it was some time before he could open his mouth to reply.

"It's something I picked up one day while I was sweeping in the garden," he said. "Nobody gave it to me."

Hsi-men Ch'ing gnashed his teeth in rage and shouted out the order, "Tie him up and give him a real thrashing."

Then and there Ch'in-t'ung was bound, hand and foot, and the blows of the cane fell on him like rain. In no time at all they had administered thirty strokes of the heavy bamboo, so severely that:

The skin was broken, the flesh was split, and

Fresh blood flowed down his legs.²⁴

Hsi-men Ch'ing also gave orders to his chief household retainer, Lai-pao: "Pluck out the hair on the slave's temples and throw him out of here. See that he never sets foot on the threshold again."

When Ch'in-t'ung had kowtowed to his master, still weeping and wailing, he was given the gate. This page boy, only because:

Last night he flirted with the nymph who keeps the books
in the Palace of the Jade Emperor;

Today, guilty of a clear-cut violation of Heaven's law,²⁵
is banished to the realms below.

There is a poem that testifies to this:

Tigers deploy the revenants of their prey,
birds are snared with decoys;

Chin-lien was not the sort to remain chaste
within her empty boudoir.

Today she's in an untenable position
for adultery with a servant;

From now on, if she encounters criticism
she has no one to blame but herself.

On this occasion, Hsi-men Ch'ing had Ch'in-t'ung beaten and the ejected him from the household.

When P'an Chin-lien, in her room, heard what had happened, it was: just as though she had been dunked in a tub of ice water.

Before long, Hsi-men Ch'ing came into her quarters. The woman trembled with fright as if the pulse had stopped beating in her body. When she went up to him, obsequiously, to take his outer garments, Hsi-men Ch'ing slapped her in the face so hard he knocked her down. He ordered Ch'un-mei to lock the front and back gates and not let anyone in. Then he got himself a small chair, sat down in the courtyard underneath the flower arbor, pulled out a riding crop, and, brandishing it in his hand, commanded, "Whore! Take off your clothes and get down on your knees."

The woman, troubled as she was by a bad conscience, did not dare to disobey. She actually took off all her clothes, above and below, and knelt down before him:

Hanging her powdered face in shame, not daring to utter a sound.

"You lousy whore!" said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "There's no use pretending you're:

Still asleep in dreamland.

I've just gotten the truth out of that slave. He's confessed to everything. Tell me the truth. While I've been away from home, how many times have you made out with him?"

"My Heavens!" the woman wept. "You really do me a mortal injustice, that's all there is to it. During the whole time you've been away from home the last half month or so, I've spent my days in the company of Sister Meng the Third, doing needlework together, and in the evenings I've locked the gate early and gone to bed. Without some reason I haven't presumed to step outside the postern gate. If you don't believe me, just ask Ch'un-mei, that's all. If I'd been indulging in any:

Illicit salt or illicit vinegar,²⁶

she could hardly fail to know about it." Then, calling to Ch'un-mei, she said, "Sister, come over here and tell your father all about it."

"You lousy whore!" Hsi-men Ch'ing cursed. "They say you gave two or three of your gold-headed hairpins to that page boy on the sly. How can you deny it?"

"They do me a mortal injustice, that's all there is to it," the woman said. "It's all the doing of some backbiting whore, who will come to a bad end, eating her heart out when she sees how often you come to my room to spend the night, and angry enough to try to nail me with such a preposterous²⁷ story. As for the hairpins you've given me, there are only so many of them, and every last one is accounted for. Take a look for yourself. What could I be thinking of to give them to that slave for no reason at all? Someone like that, who hardly even makes the grade as a slave! He's such a babe in the woods it would be no exaggeration to say he hasn't even learned to

piss yet. It's all a story someone has made up out of whole cloth to get back at me."

"Forget about the hairpins," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out Ch'in-fung's scent bag. "This is something that belongs to you. How did it come to be discovered hanging underneath the clothes of that page boy? Brazen that out if you can."

As he spoke, the gorge rose within him and he brought down the riding crop, with a whistling slash, across her pale and fragrant flesh. He struck the woman so hard that:

The pain was difficult to bear, and

Tears streaked her powdered face.

"Please, Father!" she blubbered. "If you let me speak, I'll speak. If you don't let me speak, you can beat me to death if you like, and make a stinking mess of the place. As for this scent bag and its gourd toggle; while you were away from home one day, I was going past the banksia rose trellis, on my way into the garden to do some needlework with Sister Meng the Third, when my girdle came undone. It must have fallen off at that time. I've looked for it everywhere. Who could have known that this slave would pick it up? I certainly never gave it to him."

This explanation happened to accord perfectly with what Ch'in-fung had just stated in the front reception room when he said he had picked it up in the garden. Moreover, when Hsi-men Ch'ing saw the woman's flowerlike body, which had been stripped stark naked, kneeling before him as she uttered her:

Winsome sobs and melting words,²⁸

His anger flew to Java,

and he became 80 or 90 percent disposed to clemency.

Calling over Ch'un-mei, he sat her in his lap, and asked her, "Has the whore really been engaged in hanky-panky with the page boy or not? If you tell me to forgive the whore, I'll forgive her."

Affecting the:

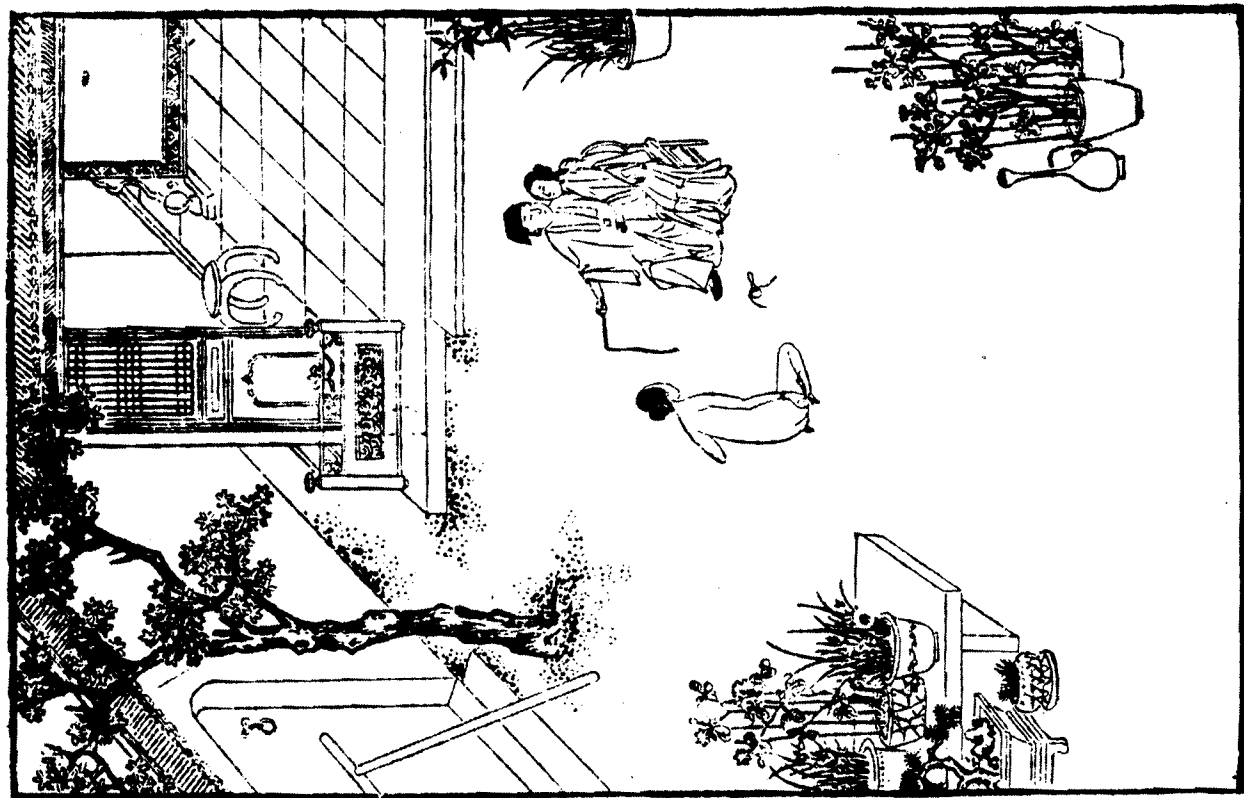
Coquetry and petulance of a spoiled child,²⁹

Ch'un-mei sat down in his lap and said, "As for that, Father, needless to say, all day long Mother and I have been:

As inseparable as the lip and the cheek.³⁰

How could she have had anything to do with that slave? This is all something fabricated by someone who is jealous of Mother and me. Father, you ought to think what you're doing, or you'll only make an ugly reputation for yourself, which won't sound any too good when it gets abroad."

With these few words she succeeded in reducing Hsi-men Ch'ing to silence. Throwing aside the riding crop, he told Chin-lien to get up and put on her clothes, on the one hand, while he also gave orders to Ch'in-chü to fetch something to eat and set the table so they could have a drink.



The woman thereupon filled a cup of wine to the brim and, holding it in front of her with both hands, knelt down on the ground:

Like a sprig of blossoms swaying in the breeze;

Sending the pendants of her embroidered sash flying,
as she offered it up to him.

Hsi-men Ch'ing admonished her as follows: "I'll forgive you this once. But whenever I'm away from home, I want you to:

Cleanse your heart and reform your ways.³¹

Lock the doors early and don't allow yourself to:

Give way to foolish fancies.³²

If I find out anything, I certainly won't forgive you again."

"I hear and I obey," the woman said, and then:

Just as though inserting a taper in its holder,

she kowtowed to Hsi-men Ch'ing four times. Only then did she take her place at the table and keep him company as they drank wine together. Truly:

If you're going to be a human being,
don't be a woman;

Or your every joy and sorrow will be
dependent on another.³³

This woman, P'an Chin-lien, had been so favored by Hsi-men Ch'ing in the past as to lose all sense of decorum, but today she had brought this shameful ignominy on herself. There is a poem that testifies to this:

No matter how congenial and compliant

Chin-lien might appear;

She flaunted her favor to compete for affection
and thereby aroused enmity.

Had it not been for Ch'un-mei's intervention
on the day in question;

How could her parents' legacy of skin and flesh
have borne up under the lash?

While Hsi-men Ch'ing was still drinking wine in Chin-lien's room, they were interrupted by the sound of a page boy knocking at the gate, who announced that Hsi-men Ch'ing's brothers-in-law, Wu Yüeh-miang's eldest brother Wu K'ai³⁴ and second brother Wu the Second, along with his shop manager, Fu Ming, his daughter and son-in-law, and other relatives, had arrived in the front reception room to offer presents and wish him a happy birthday. Only then did Hsi-men Ch'ing relinquish Chin-lien, readjust his clothing, and go out front to entertain his guests.

On this occasion, there were gifts from Ying Po-chüeh, Hsieh Hsi-ta, and the other members of the club, and Li Kuei-chieh's establishment in the licensed quarter also sent a servant with a gift. Hsi-men Ch'ing was kept busy in the front compound, acknowledging the presents people had sent

To resume our story, when Meng Yü-lou heard that Chin-lien had been thus humiliated, she waited until Hsi-men Ch'ing was out of the house, took pains to evade the notice of Li Chiao-erh and Sun Hsüeh-o, and came to pay Chin-lien a visit.

Finding her lying on her bed, she asked, "Sister Six, what's the real story behind this? Tell me all about it."

Her eyes brimming over with tears, Chin-lien sobbed out, "Sister Three, just look at what that insignificant whore has done. Today, behind my back, she's provoked our husband into giving me such a beating. From now on, the enmity between those two whores and me will be as deep as the sea."

"Even if you had a bone to pick with them," said Yü-lou, "you didn't have to do it in such a way that my page boy got thrown out of the household, did you? Sister Six, don't let yourself get too depressed about it. After all, it's not as though our husband will no longer listen to anything we have to say. If he doesn't come into my quarters someday soon, there won't be anything I can do about it, but if he does come into my quarters, I'll see if I can't put in a good word for you."

"Many thanks for your help, Sister," said Chin-lien. She then called in Ch'un-mei to bring them some tea, and they sat down and chatted together for a while, until Yü-lou said good-bye and returned to her own quarters.

That evening, because Wu Yüeh-niang's sister-in-law, Wu K'ai's wife, was visiting in the master suite, Hsi-men Ch'ing went to Yü-lou's quarters to spend the night.

Yü-lou took the opportunity to say to him, "You really oughtn't to flout Sister Six's feelings for you. She never did anything like that. It's all because, in the past, she's had words with Li Chiao-erh and Sun Hsüeh-o, and now, for no reason at all, these charges have been trumped up against my page boy. Without so much as enquiring into the:

Blue or red, black or white,³⁵

of the situation, you've done him an injustice. You mustn't blame Sister Six. You've really been too hard on her. I'm prepared to swear an oath on her behalf. If anything like that had really happened, do you think Elder Sister wouldn't have told you?"

"I asked Ch'un-mei about it," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "and she said the same thing."

"She's in her room right now," said Yü-lou, "feeling miserable. Why don't you go look in on her?"

"I know," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'll go to her quarters tomorrow."

Of the events of that evening there is no more to tell.

The next day was Hsi-men Ch'ing's birthday, and a lot of distinguished guests had been invited to attend a party, including the commandant, Chou Hsiu,³⁶ the judicial commissioner, Hsia Yen-ling, the militia commander, Chang Kuan, and Hsi-men Ch'ing's brother-in-law, Wu K'ai. A sedan chair

was dispatched to bring Li Kuei-chieh, and the services of two other singing girls were also engaged, to sing at the daylong celebration.

When Li Chiao-erh saw that her niece had come, she led her in to meet Yüeh-niang and the others, and she was invited to sit down in the master suite and have a cup of tea. She asked to meet P'an Chin-lien, and maid-servants were sent after her twice, but Chin-lien refused to put in an appearance, claiming that she felt out of sorts.

In the evening, when Kuei-chieh was about to go home, she came to say goodbye to Yüeh-niang, who gave her a vest of cloud-patterned damask, a handkerchief, and some other trinkets, and, together with Li Chiao-erh, accompanied her to the main gate.

On their way, Kuei-chieh herself went up to Chin-lien's postern gate in the garden, saying, "Come what may, I'd really like to meet the Fifth Lady."

When Chin-lien heard she had come, she sent Ch'un-mei to shut the postern gate and:

Lock it tight as an iron bucket, so that

Not even Fan K'uai himself could get through,³⁷

while repeating, quite audibly, the words, "I won't let her in."

As a result of this rebuff, the prostitute returned home:

Her face crimson with mortification.

Truly:

Distribute your favors widely;

In this life you never know where

you will meet again.

If you make a lot of enemies;

You'll encounter them in a tight spot

where there's no escape.³⁸

We will say no more for the moment about how Li Kuei-chieh went home, but return to the story of Hsi-men Ch'ing. That evening he appeared in Chin-lien's quarters and she met him at the door with her:

Cloudy locks in disarray, and her

Flowery countenance dispirited,

as she helped him off with his clothes. She waited on him with tea and hot water to wash his feet, playing up to him with every trick at her disposal in the endeavor to please him. That night as they shared pillow and mat:

Like fish sporting in the water;

She humbled herself to the most shameful acts.

There was no length to which she would not go.³⁹

"Darling," she said, "who is there in the whole household who really loves you? Out of all these cases of:

Cohabitation amid the dewdrops,⁴⁰

among all these 'remarried goods,' you and I are the only ones who really understand . . .

how much time you spend with me, it makes them angry, and they fabricate things behind my back and try to make trouble between us. My foolish lover, what have you been thinking of, to allow yourself to be made the instrument of someone else's revenge? How could you have treated the person you love with such heartless cruelty? As the saying goes:

If you beat domestic fowl,

they'll hop around in circles;

If you beat wildfowl,

they'll fly high into the sky.⁴¹

Even if you were to beat me to death, I'd still be right here in this room. Where else would I dare go? Just the other day, for example, when you were in the licensed quarter and kicked and cursed your page boy—fortunately Elder Sister from the master suite and Sister Meng the Third were there to corroborate this—didn't I say something—and it was well-intentioned—about my fears that the painted woman in that establishment would exhaust your vitality—that the singing girls in the licensed quarter are only in it for the money and don't have any real feelings for their customers—what do they really care for you? How was I to know that this would be overheard by an interested party and that the two of them would connive against me behind my back? It's always been the case that:

When other people are out to get you it's seldom fatal;

It's only when Heaven is out to get you that it's fatal.

Later on:

With the passage of time the truth will become clear.⁴²

The only thing is you've got to stand up for me, that's all."

On this occasion, with no more than these few words she succeeded in mollifying Hsi-men Ch'ing. That night the two of them:

Indulged their lusts without restraint.

The next day Hsi-men Ch'ing had his horse prepared and set off for the licensed quarter with the two page boys, Tai-an and P'ing-an, in attendance.

To resume our story, Li Kuei-chieh was all dressed up and engaged in entertaining a customer. When she heard that Hsi-men Ch'ing had arrived, she hastily returned to her room, where she:

Washed away her makeup,

Took off her pins and earrings,

Threw herself down on the bed, and

Pulled the coverlet over her head.

Upon his arrival, Hsi-men Ch'ing had to wait a long time before anyone came out to keep him company. At long last, the old lady appeared, bowed to him in greeting, and offered him a seat.

"How now, Kinsman?" the madam said. "It's been days since you've paid us a visit."

"It's only on account of all the busywork in connection with my birthday,"

said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "There isn't anyone to be relied on at home."

"My daughter imposed on your hospitality the other day," said the madam.

"Why didn't her elder sister, Kuei-ch'ing, come with her that day?" asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"Kuei-ch'ing is not at home," the madam replied. "Her patron has taken her to stay with him in his inn and hasn't let her come home the last few days."

They talked for a long time. After a while, someone brought tea and she kept him company while he drank it.

"What's become of Kuei-chieh?" Hsi-men Ch'ing finally asked.

"You mean you don't know about it, Kinsman?" the madam asked. "It's childish of her, and I don't know what it was that happened, but she was upset about something when she came home that day. She's been out of sorts ever since and has taken to her bed. In fact, she hasn't set foot outside her room from that time to this. It's really too cruel of you, Kinsman, not to have come to see her."

"Is that so?" said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I didn't know anything about it." And he went on to ask, "Which room is she in? I'll go pay her a visit."

"She's sleeping in her bedroom at the back of the house," the madam replied, and immediately ordered a maidservant to show him the way.

Hsi-men Ch'ing went back to her room, where he found the painted woman with:

Raven locks in disarray, and

Pale countenance unadorned,

sitting on the bed, with the coverlet wrapped around her, and her face to the wall. When she saw it was Hsi-men Ch'ing, she made no response of any kind.

"What went wrong when you were at my place the other day?" he asked.

Receiving no reply, he asked again, "Who was it who upset you? Tell me all about it."

He kept on asking for a long time before Kuei-chieh replied, saying, "Well, anyway, it was the Fifth Lady of your household. Since you've already got someone who's so good at:

Playing up to people and trading on her looks,

what need is there for you to bother yourself with whores like me? We may have been born to the trade, but when we put our legs in the air we do a better job of it than any of those amateurs on the outside, no matter what their social standing. I wasn't there in my professional capacity the other day, to provide entertainment, but came to bring you a gift, like the other guests. The First Lady treated me very cordially, as did the other two ladies, and presented me with clothes and trinkets. Under the circumstances, if I hadn't asked to be introduced to her, she would have said that we denizens

of the licensed quarter were ignorant of the rules of proper behavior. Having heard people say there was a Fifth Lady in your household, I assumed I might ask to be introduced to her. But she refused to make an appearance. When I was about to come home, together with my aunt, I went to say goodbye to her, but she sent her maidservant to shut the gate in my face. Really:

She wouldn't know a favor if she saw one."

"Don't hold it against her," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "She was really feeling out of sorts that day. If she had been feeling all right, she could hardly have refused to come out and meet you. What a whore she is! Why, several times, on account of her backbiting and troublemaking, I've been on the verge of giving her a beating."

Kuei-chieh brushed Hsi-men Ch'ing across the face facetiously with the back of her hand and said, "What a shameless fellow! You'd actually beat her, would you?"

"You don't know what I'm capable of," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Except for my regular wife, it's nothing for me to give any one of the other concubines or maidservants a beating. When you get right down to it, if twenty or thirty strokes with a riding crop are not enough to subdue them, I'll even go so far as to cut off their hair, whether they like it or not."

"Decapitation's too good for you," said Kuei-chieh. "This calls for 'deification,' if there's any such thing. You probably:

Bow down to them thrice, and

Say yes to them twice,"¹³

for all I know. If you're really up to it, when you get home, just cut off a single hank of hair, and bring it here to show me. Only then will I acknowledge your claim to fame as a real devotee of the licensed quarters."

"Are you willing to shake on it?" asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"I'd shake on it a hundred times," said Kuei-chieh.

That day Hsi-men Ch'ing spent the night in the licensed quarter. The next day, around dusk, he said goodbye to Kuei-chieh and mounted his horse to return home.

Kuei-chieh said:

"My eyes are on the lookout for the flag of victory,

My ears are always on the alert for good tidings.

Darling, if the quest for this object proves unsuccessful, you needn't expect to see me again."

Hsi-men Ch'ing's dander was up as a result of her needling, and he was already inebriated by the time he returned home. He didn't go anywhere else, but headed straight for P'an Chin-lien's quarters in the front compound. When the woman saw that he was in his cups, she waited on him with more than usual care. In reply to her questions, he said he didn't want any food or wine, but ordered Ch'ün-mei to wipe off the cool bamboo bed

Sitting down on the bed, he ordered the woman to take off his boots. The woman did not dare to refuse. In no time at all she had taken off his boots and helped him into bed. But Hsi-men Ch'ing did not go to sleep. Sitting up on a pillow, he ordered the woman to take off her clothes and kneel down on the surface of the bed before him.

The woman was so apprehensive she broke into a sweat. Without any idea what it was all about, she knelt down on the bed and began to weep out loud in a quavery voice, saying, "Father, if you'd only give me a clear-cut idea of what's going on:

I'd be prepared to die if I must."¹⁴

Even when you:

Keep me on tenterhooks,"¹⁵

all evening and I do my level best to watch my step, I don't seem to be able to suit your fancy. How can I bear it when all you do is saw away at me with a blunt knife?"

"You lousy whore!" cursed Hsi-men Ch'ing. "If you don't take off your clothes I'm going to lose my patience."

"The riding crop's hanging on the other side of the door," he called out to Ch'ün-mei. "Bring it here for me, will you?"

Ch'ün-mei deliberately refused to come into the room. Only after he had called for some time did she push open the door and come in:

Just as slow and easy as you please.

She saw the woman kneeling on the surface of the bed in the lamplight, with her hair tumbled before her like oil pouring from an overturned table. Hsi-men Ch'ing repeated his order, but she didn't budge.

"Ch'ün-mei, my sister," the woman pled with her. "Help me! He's going to beat me."

"Little oily mouth," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Don't pay any attention to her. Just fetch me the riding crop so I can give this whore a beating."

"Father, how can you carry on so shamelessly?" demanded Ch'ün-mei.

"What business of yours has Mother ever ruined, that you should take the word of some whore, whose only interest is to:

Stir up a storm in untroubled waters,"¹⁶

and persist in making such capricious demands on her? How can you expect anyone to be:

Of one heart and one mind,

with you under the circumstances? You'll be lucky if they give you a second glance."

Ch'ün-mei refused to obey him, latched the door behind her, and went off to the front of the compound.

Hsi-men Ch'ing, finding himself:

At a loss for what to do next,

laughed loudly and said to Chin-lien, "I won't beat you then. You can just

"Darling," the woman said, "my whole body, bones and flesh alike, is completely at your disposal. Whatever it is you may want, I could not refuse to comply. But I don't know what it is you've set your heart on."

"What I want," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "is a lock of the best hair from the crown of your head."

"Dear heart," the woman said, "any part of my body is yours for the asking. You can burn it with moxa wherever you like and I'll go along with you. But to cut off my hair is out of the question. The very thought of it scares me to death. From the time I left my mother's womb twenty-five years ago, I've never done anything like that. On top of which, recently the hair has already begun to thin out on the crown of my head. You really ought to take pity on me, that's all."

"You were upset at my annoyance with you just now," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "but when I ask you for something, you refuse to comply."

"If I didn't comply with your desires," said the woman, "with whose should I comply?" She then went on to ask, "Tell me the truth. What do you want this hair of mine for, anyway?"

"I want to make a hairnet," said Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"If you want to make a hairnet," said the woman, "I'll make it for you. Just don't give it to that whore so she can use it to cast a spell on me."

"I won't give it to anybody, that's all," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I only want your hair to make the main cord of a hairnet to bind my topknot with."

"If all you want it for is to make a cord for your topknot," said the woman, "I'll cut it off for you."

Thereupon, the woman undid her hair and let Hsi-men Ch'ing himself take a pair of scissors and neatly cut off a large lock from the crown of her head. He wrapped it in paper and put it in his wallet.

The woman then fell into Hsi-men Ch'ing's arms and, weeping coquettishly, said, "I'll do anything you want. I only hope you don't forget your feelings for me. No matter how stuck you become on anyone in the quarter, just don't abandon me."

That night they:

Enjoyed each other even more than usual.

The next day Hsi-men Ch'ing got up and, as soon as the woman had fed him his breakfast, went outside, mounted his horse, and headed straight for the licensed quarter.

"Where's the hair you've cut off her head," Kuei-chieh demanded.

"I've got it right here," replied Hsi-men Ch'ing. He then reached into his wallet, pulled it out, and handed it to Kuei-chieh. She opened it and took a look, and when she saw that it was really a lock of beautiful hair, as glossy and black as oil, she promptly tucked it into her sleeve.

"Now that you've seen it, give it back to me," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Last night she made all kinds of difficulties about cutting this hair. It was only

when I changed countenance and got angry that she let me cut off this single lock of it. I fooled her by saying I only wanted it to make the main cord of a hairnet to bind my topknot with, and then brought it straight here to show you. You can see, I'm as good as my word."

"What sort of a rarity is this," said Kuei-chieh, "to have put you into such a state? When you're ready to go home I'll give it back to you. If you're as afraid of her as all that, you shouldn't have cut it off in the first place."

"Who's afraid of her?" laughed Hsi-men Ch'ing. "It's just that I don't want to go back on my word."

Kuei-chieh induced Kuei-ch'ing to keep him company for a drink of wine, and then, as soon as she was out of sight, inserted the woman's hair into the linings of her shoes, so she could trample her underfoot every day. But no more of this.

Now that she had Hsi-men Ch'ing in her clutches, she kept him there for several consecutive days, without letting him go home.

From the time that Chin-lien allowed the cutting off of this lock of her hair, she became dispirited. Every day she:

Confined herself to her room.

Too languid to consume tea or food.

Wu Yüeh-niang, consequently, sent a page boy after a certain Dame Liu, whose services were frequently called upon in the household, to come and take a look at her.

"Madam has contracted a black humor," the old lady said, "which continues to rankle in the heart and can't be eliminated. Your head aches, you feel nauseous, and you have no appetite."

On the one hand, she opened her medicine bag and left behind two doses of medicine, in the form of black pills, which were to be taken in the evening along with a decoction of ginger, while, on the other hand, she said, "I'll get my old man to come by tomorrow and ascertain whether or not you're fated to suffer any calamities during the current year of your horoscope."

"So your old man can also tell fortunes, can he?" said Chin-lien.

"Even though he's blind," said Dame Liu, "there are two or three things he can do. First of all, he's an expert at the Yin-yang School of fortune-telling and can either avert peoples' calamities or offer them protection against them. Secondly, he's well versed in acupuncture, moxabustion, and the treatment of pyogenic infections of the skin. His third skill is one that I really shouldn't talk about, but he's always helping people to perform 'turnabouts.'"

"What does the word 'turnabout' mean?" asked the woman.

"Well, for example," said Dame Liu, "if a father and son are at odds, or two brothers are not getting along harmoniously, or a legitimate wife and a concubine are quarreling with each other; if one of the parties calls on the services of my old man, he can employ a counterfactive agent on his or her

behalf in order to keep the other party in check, or provide him or her with a philter containing a counteractive spell that, if given to the other party to drink, will cause, within three days, the father and son to become intimate, the brothers to become harmonious, or the wife and concubine to cease to quarrel. Or if someone's business is not doing well, or his real estate is not prospering, he can 'open the door to wealth' for him, or enable him to 'turn a profit.' And as for such things as the treatment of disease, the performance of ritual purification, the exorcism of the spirits of baleful stars,⁴⁷ or the invocation of the Great Dipper, he's good at all of them. For this reason people all call him Stargazer Liu.

"There was one case, I remember, of a newly married daughter-in-law, of humble social origin, who was somewhat light-fingered and was constantly stealing things from her mother-in-law's household and taking them back to her own family. Whenever her husband found out about it she was regularly beaten. My old man was able to perform a 'turnabout' for her, by writing two spells, which were burnt, and the ashes buried under the water jar. The whole family drank water from the jar, after which the daughter-in-law could steal things right in front of their eyes without their noticing it. He also provided her with a counteractive agent, which was placed under her pillow, with the result that whenever her husband slept on that pillow it was just as though his hands had been restrained and he no longer beat her."

When P'an Chin-lien heard this, she took it to heart and ordered her maidservant to provide Dame Liu with tea and something to eat. When the latter was about to leave, Chin-lien wrapped up three mace of silver for her medical services. She also weighed out an additional five mace to enable her to buy paper money and other ritual objects, and asked her to bring her blind husband back with her at breakfast time the next day to burn the spirit money for her. Dame Liu then took her leave and went home.

The next day, sure enough, bright and early in the morning, Dame Liu showed up with the blind rascal in tow and proceeded to come straight in through the front gate. That day Hsi-men Ch'ing was still in the licensed quarter, from which he had not yet returned home.

The page boy in charge of the gate asked the blind man where he thought he was going, to which Dame Liu replied, "Today we've come to burn paper for the Fifth Lady."

"Dame Liu," said the page boy, "if you've come to burn paper for the Fifth Lady, you can lead him right in, but look out for the dog."

The old lady took her husband by the hand and led him straight to P'an Chin-lien's parlor, where they had to wait a long time before the woman finally appeared. The blind man saluted her and then sat down.

The woman told him the eight characters that determined her horoscope,⁴⁸ and after the blind rascal had performed some calculations on the

fingers of his hand, he said, "Madam was born in a *keng-ch'ien* year, in a *keng-yin* month, on an *i-hai* day, during the hour *chi-ch'ou*. Since the solar term 'Spring Begins' fell on the eighth day of the first month that year, one day before the day of your birth, your horoscope begins in the first month of the year. According to the orthodox interpretation of the Tzu-p'ing School,⁴⁹ although this horoscope of yours is certainly splendid and remarkable, you will not, in this life, receive any support from your 'husband star,' which corresponds to the stem *keng*. There will also be some difficulty as far as your 'children star' is concerned. The element wood, associated with the stem *i* in the combination *i-hai* that designates the day of your birth, is the governing element in your horoscope, but your horoscopic 'body' cannot be said to 'flourish' when this element occurs in the first month. If the effect of this unpropitious factor is not counteracted, the element is likely to burn itself up. Moreover, the reduplication of the element metal, associated with the stem *keng* in the combinations *keng-ch'ien* and *keng-yin* that designate the year and month of your birth, indicates that the influence of the baleful star Yang-jen, or Ram's Blade, is too great. This will create difficulties for your 'husband star.' Only after you have gained the ascendancy over two husbands will you be all right."

"I already have," the woman said.

The blind rascal then continued, "As for this horoscope of yours, madam, excuse me for saying so, but the Tzu-p'ing School attaches great importance to the horoscopic categories called the 'killer' and the 'seal,' which would correspond, in your case, to the elements metal and water. These two elements would normally be quite compatible, but the presence of the element water, associated with the stem *kuai*, in the 'one-sided seal' pertaining to the combination *i-hai* that designates the day of your birth, and the recurrence of the same element in the horoscopic category called 'injuror of the official' pertaining to the combination *keng-ch'ien* that designates the year of your birth, indicates an excess of water that produces a 'collision' with your governing element of wood. This is inadequately compensated for by the presence of the element earth, associated with the stem *chi* in the combination *chi-ch'ou* that designates the hour of your birth. Since the stem *keng*, which is your 'official,' and the stem *hsin*, which is your 'killer,' are both associated with the element metal, they conflict with each other. As the authorities say:

If the 'killer' is in the ascendant for a man,

he will exercise authority and power;

If the 'killer' is in the ascendant for a woman,

she is sure to 'punish' her husband.

"All of this indicates that you must be intelligent, adept at adapting yourself to changing circumstances, and sure to attract the favorable or unfavorable attention of others. But there is one problem. This year of your horo-

scope is a *chia-wu*⁵⁰ year, and the indications are that during this 'annual fatal period' calamities are likely to occur. You are fated to suffer difficulties resulting from encounters with the influence of the two baleful stars Hsiao-hao, or Little Waster, and Kou-chiao, or Strangler. Although you may escape unharmed, the indications are that there will be disharmony resulting from the 'matched shoulders' between your governing element and that associated with the stem *chia* in the designation of this year in your horoscope, both of which are wood. The wagging tongues of petty persons may often cost you some groaning and discomfort."

When the woman had heard him out, she said, "I'd be much obliged to you, sir, if you could do whatever you can to effect a 'turnabout' on my behalf. I've got a tael of silver here for you, sir, as a token of my gratitude. I hope it will suffice to buy you a cup of tea. I don't ask for anything else; all I want is to keep petty persons at a distance, and to be assured of the love and respect of my husband."

Retiring into her bedroom, she pulled out two of her hair ornaments and handed them to the blind rascal, who accepted them and tucked them into his sleeve.

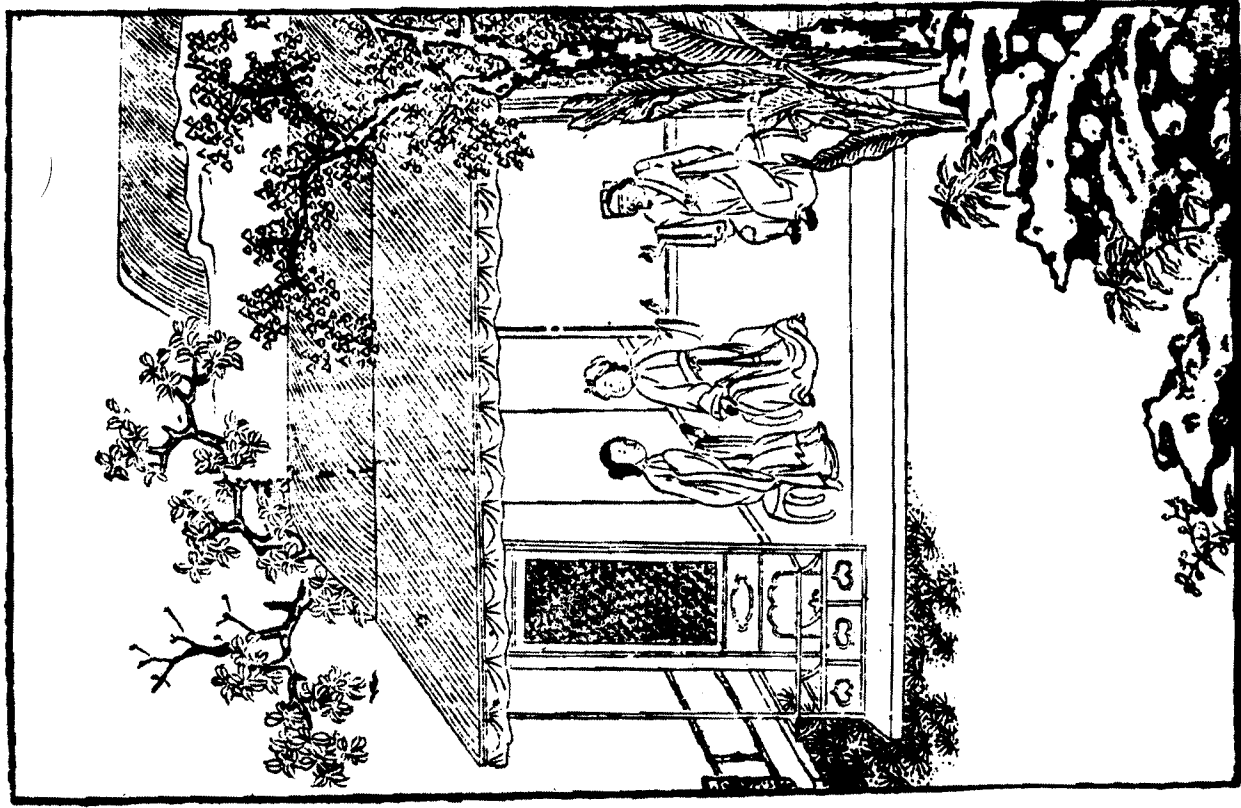
"If you want me to effect a 'turnabout,'" he said, "I'll take a piece of willow wood and carve a pair of male and female effigies out of it. They must be inscribed, respectively, with the sets of eight characters that determine your and your husband's horoscopes, and then bound together with seven times seven, or forty-nine, strands of red thread. A strip of red gauze must be fastened over the eyes of the male effigy, love grass must be stuffed into its heart cavity, its hands must be secured with needles, and, below, its feet must be stuck together with glue. The effigy must then be concealed inside the pillow on which he sleeps. In addition to this, I will write a spell for you, using vermilion ink, which you must burn to ashes, and surreptitiously stir into a cup of strong tea. If your husband drinks the tea and sleeps, the same night, on the pillow, in no more than three days, the magic will naturally take effect."

"Please, sir," the woman asked, "tell me, what's the significance of these four things?"

"I'll explain them to you, madam," the blind rascal said. "The fastening of the gauze around the eyes is to make you appear in your husband's sight as captivating and voluptuous as Hsi-shih. The stuffing of the heart cavity with love grass is to make him love you in his heart. The securing of the hands with needles is to prevent him from daring to strike you, no matter what you do, so that, in fact, he'll even get down on his knees to you. The sticking together of the feet with glue is to make it impossible for him to go out and sow any more wild oats."

When the woman heard tell that:

Such things could be,



she was utterly delighted. Thereupon, the incense, candles, and paper money were all prepared and the ceremony of burning spirit money on the woman's behalf was duly carried out.

The next day Stargazer Liu sent his wife to deliver the spell for the making of the philter and the other counteractive agents that he had promised. The woman took care of everything just as she had been told. Having burnt the spell to ashes, she stirred it into some good tea and, when Hsi-men Ch'ing came home, had Ch'un-mei serve it to him. That night the two of them:

Shared a single pillow on the same bed.

As time passed:

One day became two,

Two days became three,

and they became:

As inseparable as fish from water, and

Enjoyed each other as usual.

Gentle reader take note: No matter whether your household be great or small, it is best to avoid the services of priests and nuns, Buddhists and Taoists, wet nurses and go-betweens. There is no telling what they will do behind your back. A poet of yore has left us some words of admonition, in the form of a quatrain, that express this very well:

To the formal reception room of your house

never admit female professionals;

Always keep your back door securely locked

in order to deny them admission.

If you have a well in your courtyard,

repair even the slightest fissure;

Then your catastrophes will be few

and your stars of good fortune many.

If you want to know the outcome of these events,

Pray consult the story related in the following chapter.