

Chapter 13

LI P'ING-ERH MAKES A SECRET TRYST
OVER THE GARDEN WALL;
THE MAID YING-CH'UN PEEKS THROUGH A CRACK
AND GETS AN EYEFUL

Since there's no such thing in this life
as complete satisfaction;
In one's way of coping with the world
do not be too demanding.¹
It's a good thing always to pay heed
only to the words of superior men;
When disputes arise never listen
to the words of petty persons.²
Only regard the customs of the age
as a source of amusement;
While respecting the intentions of others
by keeping them at a distance.
If one were to address perceptive women with
a word to the wise;
It would be, "Don't ever confide your troubles
to your sweetheart."³

THE STORY GOES that one day earlier that summer,⁴ on the fourteenth day of the sixth month, when Hsi-men Ch'ing came in from the front compound and went into Yüeh-niang's room, she said to him, "While you were out today, the Hua household sent a page boy over with a note inviting you for a drink. 'Ask him to come over whenever he gets home,' he said."

Hsi-men Ch'ing looked at the invitation, which read, "Can you join me for a chat at Wu Yin-erh's place in the licensed quarter at noon today? Come over to my place so we can go together. I do hope you can make it."

Hsi-men Ch'ing thereupon dressed himself to befit the occasion, ordered two of his attendants to prepare his best horse, and proceeded directly to the Hua household next door. How could he have known that Hua Tzu-hsü would not be at home? His wife, Li P'ing-erh, was standing on the raised stone platform just inside the second gate, the unfinished vamp of a sand-

green lu-chou pongee shoe in her hand. She was wearing a summer outfit that consisted of:

A chignon enclosed in a fret of silver filigree,
Pendant amethyst earrings in gold settings,
A blouse of pale lavender silk, opening down the middle,
And a white silk skirt with drawnwork borders,
Beneath which there peeked out a pair of tiny shoes,
The points of which bore the beaks of red phoenixes.

Hsi-men Ch'ing, quite unaware of what was in store for him, proceeded through the gate, and the two of them ran smack into each other.

Hsi-men Ch'ing had already had her on his mind for some time. Although he had caught a glimpse of her by the graveside at the old Eunuch Director's funeral the previous summer, he had not yet had a chance to savor the details. Now that he was able to meet her face to face and saw that she had a naturally fair complexion, was petite in stature, and had a face shaped like a melon seed and delicately curved eyebrows, before he knew it:

His ethereal souls flew beyond the sky, and

His material souls dispersed among the nine heavens.⁵

Stepping forward with alacrity, he gave her a deep bow, and the woman returned his salute, after which she turned around and disappeared into the interior of the house. But she sent out the maidservant with her hair cut straight across her forehead, named Hsiu-ch'ün, to ask Hsi-men Ch'ing to take a seat in the parlor, while she herself stood just inside the postern gate:

Half revealing her captivating countenance,

and addressed him, saying, "Please sit down for a little while, sir. He's gone out on an errand just now, but he'll be back any minute."

Before long she sent out a maidservant with a cup of tea, and while Hsi-men Ch'ing was drinking it, she conversed with him from the other side of the gate, saying, "At this drinking party over there that he's invited you to today, sir, whatever happens, for my sake, couldn't you urge him to come home a little earlier than usual? Our two menservants will both accompany him, leaving only these two maidservants and myself, so there won't be anyone to be relied on at home."

"Sister-in-law," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "you're certainly in the right. My brother really ought to:

Pay more attention to his family affairs.

Since you have so instructed me, Sister-in-law, I'll be sure to stick by his side.

Together we'll go and together return.

How could I do anything detrimental to my brother's interests?"

While they were still speaking, who should appear but Hua Tzu-hsü himself, and the woman returned to her own quarters.

Hua Tzu-hsü saluted Hsi-men Ch'ing and then said, "How good of you to accept my invitation. Something came up just now that I simply had to run out and take care of. Forgive me for not being here to greet you myself."

Thereupon, they took their places as guest and host, and a page boy was ordered to bring tea.

It was not long until they had done with the tea, and Hua Tzu-hsü instructed the page boy, "Tell Mother to prepare the refreshments. I'm going to share three cups of wine with Mr. Hsi-men here before we set off."

Then, turning to his guest, he continued, "Today is the birthday of Wu Yin-erh from the licensed quarter, and so I've invited you to join me in paying her a visit in order to celebrate the occasion."

"My Good Brother," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "why didn't you say so before?" Turning to Tai-an, he ordered, "Go home at once, get five mace of silver put into a sealed packet, and bring it back to me here."

"What need is there for you to put yourself to such trouble, Brother?" protested Hua Tzu-hsü. "I'm afraid I'm to blame."

When Hsi-men Ch'ing saw that the servants were setting up a table, he said, "Brother, there's no need to entertain me here. Let's go into the quarter and do our drinking there."

"I wouldn't presume to detain you," said Hua Tzu-hsü. "Just stay a little longer."

Whereupon, in:

Large platters and large bowls,

such delicacies as chicken feet and fresh pork were set before them. A high-stemmed silver goblet in the shape of a sunflower was provided for each of them. There were also four "spring rolls" left over when they had finished eating, which they saved as a treat for the boys who tended their horses.

Before long, after Tai-an had returned with the requested gratuity, the two of them mounted their horses and set off together. Hsi-men Ch'ing was accompanied by Tai-an and P'ing-an, and Hua Tzu-hsü by T'ien-fu and T'ien-hsi, so they had four page boys in their retinue as they made their way directly to Madam Wu the Fourth's establishment in the back alley of the licensed quarter in order to celebrate Wu Yin-erh's birthday.

After they got there:

Amid clustering blossoms and clinging brocade,

Song and dance and wind and string instruments,

they continued drinking until the first watch before the party broke up. Hsi-men Ch'ing saw to it that Hua Tzu-hsü got stinking drunk, while at the same time, in response to Li P'ing-erh's request, he actually accompanied

him on his way home. When the calls of the page boys had succeeded in getting someone to open the front gate, they helped their master into the parlor and set him down. Li P'ing-erh and her maidservants, carrying lamps and candles, came out and supported Hua Tzu-hsü on his way into the interior of the house.

His mission accomplished, Hsi-men Ch'ing was about to take his leave when the woman came back out to thank him.

"My poor husband is a sorry lot and something of a sot," she said. "It's very kind of you to have put up with him for my sake and to have brought him home with you. Please don't laugh at my solicitude, sir."

"How would I dare?" replied Hsi-men Ch'ing, hastening to make a low bow in response to her salutation. "Since you gave me my marching orders this morning, Sister-in-law, I have shown myself capable of:

Leading the army forth, and

Leading it back again.

How could your wish that I should accompany your husband home be anything but:

Imprinted in my heart and engraved on my bones?⁶

Had I failed to do so, it would not only have added to your worries, but would have shown me to be:

Undependable in the performance of my task.

The people at that establishment would have had Brother in their clutches if I hadn't insisted on urging him to leave. But as we passed by the gate of the Star of Joy establishment—the one that features the painted face, Cheng Ai-hsiang, whose nickname is Cheng Kuan-yin, or Goddess of Mercy Cheng, and who's quite a looker—Brother would have ventured in there, if I hadn't done everything in my power to stop him. 'Brother,' I said to him, 'let's go home. There's time enough to come another day. Sister-in-law's at home worried to death about you.' It was only then that he consented to come straight home with me. Otherwise, if he'd gone into the Cheng place, he wouldn't have been home all night.

"With all due respect, Sister-in-law—I really shouldn't say this sort of thing—but Brother's a fool. With such a young wife and such a large house to look after, how can he simply abandon you and stay away from home for whole nights at a time? It doesn't make any sense."

"It's just as you say," the woman responded. "Simply because of this philtering of his, and his refusal to take anyone's advice, I get so upset here at home that my body aches all over. From now on, sir, whenever you run into him in the licensed quarter, whatever happens, for my sake, urge him to come home as soon as possible.

Your kindness will be amply rewarded,

I will never dare to forget it."

Now this Hsi-men Ch'ing was the sort of man of whom it is said:

If you hit him on the top of his head,

The soles of his feet will ring.

He had been a habitué of the world of breeze and moonlight for so many years that there wasn't much he didn't know about anything. Therefore, on this particular day, the fact that the woman was opening up a wide avenue of approach to herself was not lost on him.

His face wreathed in smiles, he laughed, saying, "How can you talk that way, Sister-in-law? Really! What are friends for, anyway? I'll certainly do my best to admonish my brother. You can rest assured, Sister-in-law."

The woman bowed to him again to express her thanks and also directed a young maidservant to bring out a cup of tea, flavored with fruit kernels, in a carved lacquer cup with a silver spoon.

When Hsi-men Ch'ing had finished the tea, he said, "I'd better be on my way. Be careful not to let anyone into the house."

Whereupon, he took his leave and went home.

From this time on, Hsi-men Ch'ing made up his mind that he would contrive to make a conquest of this woman. Time and again he saw to it that Sponger Ying, Tagalong Hsieh, and the rest of that crowd detained Hua Tzu-hsü in the licensed quarter, carousing all night long, while he slipped out and made his way back to his own home. Once there, he would stand around in front of the gate until the woman and her two maidservants appeared at the front gate next door. She noticed that it was Hsi-men Ch'ing, who gave a discreet cough as he passed in front of her door. First he would head east, then turn around and go west, or come to a halt in front of the gateway across the street and stare fixedly in the direction of her door. The woman would show herself in the doorway and then, when she saw him coming, duck inside, only to stick her head out again as soon as he had passed by. As for:

The messages in their eyes and the expectations in their hearts;

There was no longer any need to express them in words.

One day, as Hsi-men Ch'ing was standing in front of his gate, the woman sent her young maidservant, Hsü-ch'ün, to invite him over.

"What are you inviting me for, Sister?" Hsi-men Ch'ing pointedly asked. "Is your father at home or not?"

"Father's not at home," Hsü-ch'ün replied. "It's Mother that's inviting you, sir. There's something she wants to ask you."

This was just the signal Hsi-men Ch'ing had been waiting for. He complied with alacrity, was shown into the parlor, and took a seat.

After some time, the woman came out and saluted him, saying as she did so, "I'm extremely grateful for your consideration the other day.

It is imprinted in my heart,

My gratitude knows no bounds.

Since my poor husband went out last, it's been two days in a row now that he hasn't come home. I wonder if you happen to have come across him or not, sir?"

"Yesterday, along with three or four others, he was drinking in the Cheng family establishment," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Something happened to come up that brought me home, and today I haven't had a chance to go into the quarter, so I don't know whether he's still there or not. If I'd been there I could hardly have failed to urge him to come home as early as possible. I'm well aware how upsetting it is for you, Sister-in-law."

"It's just as you say," the woman responded. "I suffer constantly from his refusal to take anyone's advice, his frequent resort to the quarter:

Sleeping among the flowers and lolling

beneath the willows,

and his refusal to pay any attention to family affairs."

"If one had to assess Brother's character," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "he's certainly humane and righteous enough, but he does have this one flaw."

As they were talking, the young maidservant brought tea, and they drank it together. Hsi-men Ch'ing was afraid Hua Tzu-hsü might come home and thought it imprudent to linger, so he prepared to take his leave.

The woman, for her part, begged Hsi-men Ch'ing, in no uncertain terms, "If you happen to go there tomorrow, whatever happens, urge him to come home as soon as possible. Your kindness will be rewarded. You can be sure I'll make it worth your while, sir."

"Say no more, Sister-in-law," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "After all, Brother and I are just like that together."

After saying which, Hsi-men Ch'ing went home.

The next day, when Hua Tzu-hsü came back from the licensed quarter, the woman complained to him, saying, "While you've been out:

Indulging your taste for wine and sex,

we've become more than a little obligated to our next-door neighbor, the Honorable Hsi-men, who has, more than once, helped to see you safely home. You really ought to buy him a present of some kind to express your gratitude if you don't want to fall behind in your social obligations."

Hua Tzu-hsü immediately bought four boxes of presents and a jar of wine and sent the page boy, T'ien-hsi, to deliver them to Hsi-men Ch'ing's household. Hsi-men Ch'ing accepted them and gave the messenger a generous tip, but we will say no more of this.

Wu Yüeh-niang, who was present on this occasion, asked, "What is the Hua household sending you this batch of presents for?"

Hsi-men Ch'ing replied, "This must be because, the other day, when

Brother Hua the Second invited me to join him in the licensed quarter to help celebrate Wu Yin-erh's birthday, he got drunk, and I had to help him to get home. And also because his wife is aware that I constantly urge him not to spend the night in the quarter but to go home as early as possible, and she can't get over her feelings of gratitude at my consideration. I imagine she must have suggested to Brother Hua the Second that he buy these presents in order to thank me."

Wu Yüeh-niang folded her hands in front of her chest and made him a bow in the manner of a Buddhist priest, saying, "Brother, you really ought to take a good look at yourself. You're just like:

The earthenware idol preaching to the idol of clay.

You, too, stay away from home for days at a time:

Seducing people's daughters and carrying on

with their wives,

and you have the face to preach to someone else's husband."

"I don't suppose," she continued, "that you're planning to simply accept these presents from them without doing anything in return. Whose name was written on the card that came with the gifts, anyway? If it was his wife's name, then we can write an invitation in my name today and invite her over for a visit. She's been anxious to make our acquaintance for some time. If it was her husband's name, invite him or not, as you please. It's no business of mine."

"It was in Brother Hua the Second's name," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'll invite him over tomorrow, that's all."

The next day, sure enough, Hsi-men Ch'ing made the necessary preparations and invited Hua Tzu-hsü over for a visit. They spent the better part of the day drinking together.

When he got home, Li P'ing-erh said to him, "We mustn't be remiss in our social obligations. We sent him a set of presents and he has reciprocated by inviting you over for a drink. Some day soon you ought to make the necessary preparations and invite him back over here for a drink. Turnabout is fair play."

Light and darkness alternate swiftly.

Before long the Double Yang festival,¹ on the ninth day of the ninth month, rolled around. Hua Tzu-hsü took advantage of the occasion to engage the services of two singing girls, and sent an invitation to Hsi-men Ch'ing to come over and enjoy the chrysanthemums with him. He also invited Sponger Ying, Tagalong Hsieh, Sticky Clu, and Blabbermouth Sun to keep them company. Playing the game:

"Passing the Flower to the Beat of the Drum,"²

they:

Enjoyed themselves as they drank up the wine.

There is a poem that testifies to this:

The raven and the hare² move in their orbits
as swiftly as arrows;

Among the festivals in the human world
it is again the Double Yang

The red leaves on a thousand branches
supply autumn color;

The yellow blossoms on the garden paths
emit unusual fragrance.

But the black-hatted young official is not seen
ascending the heights;

He is still dreaming of a silk-clad young lady
offering him wine.

Amid embroidered hangings, behind latticed doors,
they gaze at each other;

From this time on, their mutual love
will never be forgotten.

That day the bunch of them continued to drink until after the lamps had been lighted. At this juncture Hsi-men Ch'ing happened to get up from his place and go outside to relieve himself. He did not anticipate that Li P'ing-erh would be standing there, eavesdropping, just on the other side of the latticework partition, and the two of them ran smack into each other. Before Hsi-men Ch'ing could get out of the way, the woman, who had hastily withdrawn behind the postern gate on the west side of the courtyard, surreptitiously sent her maidservant, Hsiu-ch'ün, to waylay him in the shadows.

"Mother has sent me to ask you, sir," she whispered, "if you won't take it easy on the wine and go home as early as you can. Right now she's contriving a way to hustle Father off to the quarter to spend the night. This evening, thus and so, Mother would like to have a word with you."

When Hsi-men Ch'ing heard this:

His delight knew no bounds.

He returned to the party, after relieving himself, and from that point on surreptitiously disposed of his drinks, concealing what he was doing behind his sleeve. As the singing girls continued to play their instruments, sing, and ply the guests with wine, he pretended to be too drunk to have any more.

Before long it was already the first watch, and Li P'ing-erh kept coming back impatiently to eavesdrop outside the screen. She saw that Hsi-men Ch'ing was sitting in the place of honor, pretending to have fallen asleep, while Sponger Ying and Tagalong Hsieh were sitting there, as if their bodies were nailed to their chairs. They were so drunk they bobbed about like the

Sticky Chiu and Blabbermouth Sun finally left, but the two of them still wouldn't budge. Li P'ing-erh was beside herself.

Hsi-men Ch'ing eventually got up to go, but Hua Tzu-hsü wouldn't let him get away.

"I must not have done my duty as a host today," he said. "Brother, how can you refuse to stay a little longer?"

"I'm really drunk," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "I can't swallow another drop." Whereupon, making a deliberate display of:

Swaying to the east and tumbling to the west,

he prevailed upon his two page boys to help him back home.

"I don't know what's the matter with him today," said Sponger Ying, "that he kept refusing to have anything more. He got drunk when he'd hardly had anything to drink. But since our host has gone to so much trouble on our behalf, let's ask our two sisters here to bring out some larger cups, and we'll have another forty or fifty rounds before breaking up."

When Li P'ing-erh heard this, from her vantage point on the other side of the screen, she cursed them unremittingly for a pair of slobber-pussed jailbirds, and inconspicuously sent the page boy, T'ien-hsi, to call Hua Tzu-hsü out for a word with her.

"If you want to go on drinking with that bunch," she told him, in no uncertain terms, "you can take yourselves into the licensed quarter, this minute, and do your drinking there. Don't stick around the house and bother me anymore. Before I know it, it'll be:

The third watch in the middle of the night,
and you'll still be:

Burning oil and wasting fuel.

I've had enough of it."

"If I go into the licensed quarter with them at this hour," said Hua Tzu-hsü, "I'll never make it back home tonight. You'd better not give me a hard time about it."

"You go ahead," the woman said. "I'll not give you a hard time about it, that's all."

This was just the signal Hua Tzu-hsü had been waiting for. He came back and told the others about it, thus and so, saying, "Let's go into the licensed quarter."

"Really?" said Sponger Ying. "Sister-in-law said that? It's no use trying to fool us. You'd better go back and ask Sister-in-law again before we get going."

"My wife just spoke to me about it a minute ago," said Hua Tzu-hsü. "She told me not to come home till tomorrow."

"I've got it," said Tagalong Hsieh. "She just couldn't take any more of Beggar Ying's palaver. Now that our brother's succeeded in getting her permission we can go without anything to worry about!"

Thereupon, along with the two singing girls, the whole party set off for the licensed quarter. T'ien-fu and T'ien-hsi accompanied their master, Hua Tzu-hsi, and his two guests. When they arrived at Wu Yin-erh's place in the back alley of the quarter it was already the second watch. They called until someone opened the gate. Wu Yin-erh had already gone to bed, but she got up, lit some candles in the reception room, and invited them to come in and have a seat.

"The patron of your establishment," explained Sponger Ying, "invited us to his place to enjoy the chrysanthemums and have a drink today. Having already drunk to the point where we can't stop, he's also invited us to look in on you here in the quarter. Whatever you've got in the house to drink, serve it up, so we can continue drinking."

We will say no more, for the moment, about Hua Tzu-hsi's drinking bout in the licensed quarter, but return to the story of Hsi-men Ch'ing.

When he arrived home, still feigning drunkenness, he went into P'an Chin-lien's quarters. No sooner had he taken off his outer clothes, however, than he went out into the front garden and sat down to await a signal from Li P'ing-erh's side of the wall. After some time had passed, he heard them chasing the dog and locking the gate on the other side. Not long after this, what should appear in the dark shadows over the wall but the maidservant, Ying-ch'ün. She pretended to be calling a cat, but when she saw Hsi-men Ch'ing sitting in the pavilion, she gave him a message. Hsi-men Ch'ing then moved over a table and a bench and, by mounting on top of them, was able to get over the wall. A ladder had already been put in place on the other side. Now that Hua Tzu-hsi was out of the way, Li P'ing-erh had already:

Removed her headdress,

Carelessly coiled her raven locks, and

Adorned herself with demure elegance,

before coming out to stand in the veranda. When she saw Hsi-men Ch'ing come over the wall:

Her delight knew no bounds.

She welcomed him into her room, which was brightly illuminated by lamps and candles, and where she had already laid out a magnificent spread of wine and delicacies, condiments and appetizers.

There was a small pot:

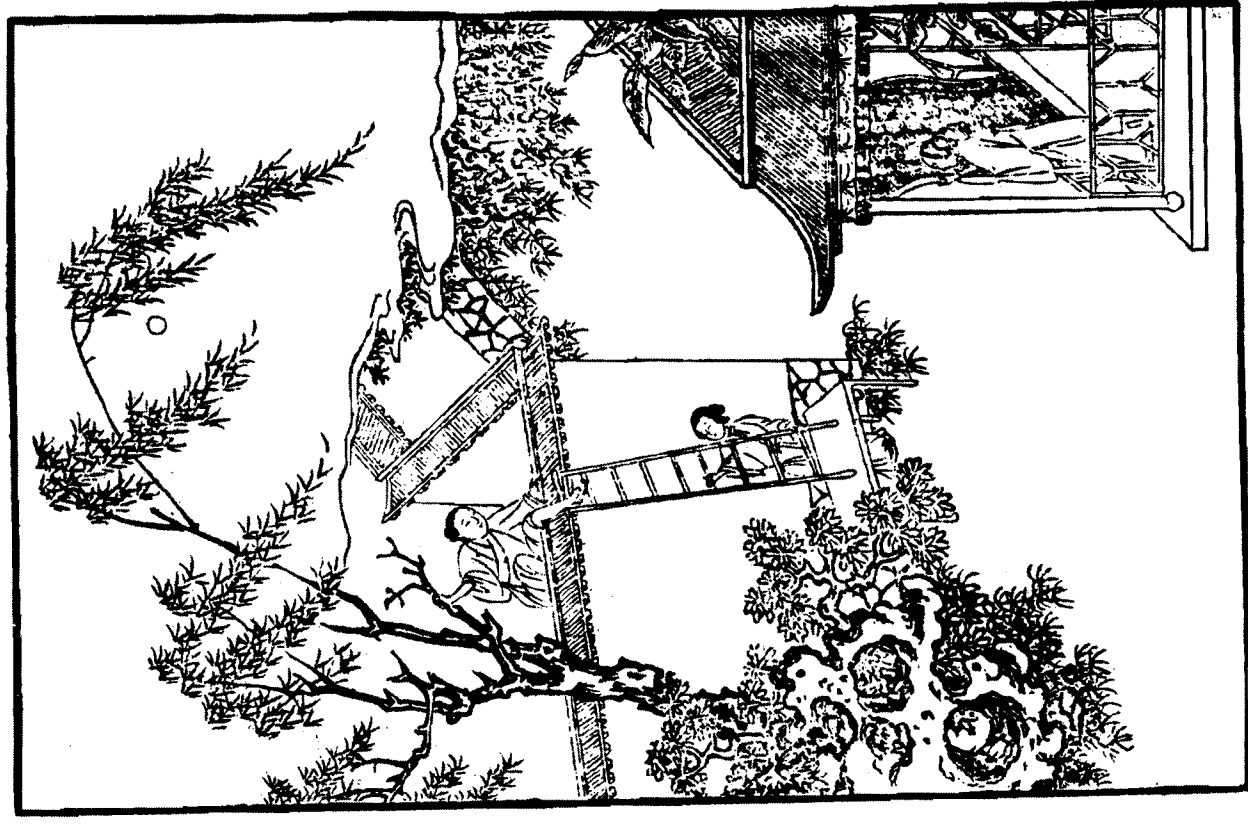
Filled to the brim with fragrant wine.

The woman:

Lifting high a jade goblet,

with both hands, allowed Ying-ch'ün to fill it from the wine pot, and then offered it to Hsi-men Ch'ing with a deep bow, saying, "We've been obligated to you in the past, sir, and you have even gone to the trouble of entertaining us. It's enough to make me:

Uneasy in my heart.



Li P'ing-erh Makes a Secret Tryst over the Garden Wall

Today I took it upon myself to prepare this cup of watery wine and invite you over, sir, as a means of expressing some small part of my inadequate feelings. And then I've had to contend with the refusal of those two god-damned slobber-pusses to leave. I was really beside myself. But now I've succeeded in packing them all off to the licensed quarter."

"My only fear is that Brother Two might come home," said Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"I've already told him to spend the night there and not come back," said the woman. "The two menservants have both gone with him. There's no one else left at home but these two maidservants and Old Mother Feng, who looks after the gate. She's been a servant in my family since I was a child and is completely trustworthy. The front and back gates are already locked."

When Hsi-men Ch'ing heard this, he was completely delighted. The two of them then sat down together:

Shoulder to shoulder and thigh over thigh,

Exchanging cups as they drank,

while Ying-ch'ün stood at their side to pour the wine and Hsiu-ch'ün went back and forth to serve the food. When they began to feel the effects of the wine; within the brocade bed curtains, the maids:

Perfumed with incense the mandarin duck quilt, and

Put in its place the coral pillow.

The servants then removed the table at which they had been drinking and put the latch on the door, after which the two of them:

Got into bed and engaged each other in amorous sport.

It so happens that well-to-do households are equipped with double windows, the outer layers of which are called shutters, and the inner layers, casements. When the woman sent her maidservants out of the room, she closed the two casements on the inside, so that even though the room was illuminated by lamps and candles, no one could see in from the outside.

Now the maidservant, Ying-ch'ün, was already sixteen years old and knew something of the world. When she saw that the two of them were going to engage in an illicit liaison that night, she stealthily pulled a hairpin out of her headdress, poked a hole in the paper of the lower part of the casement, and peeped inside. Truly, what were the two of them doing with each other? Behold:

By the gleam of lamplight,

Amid mermaid silk curtains;

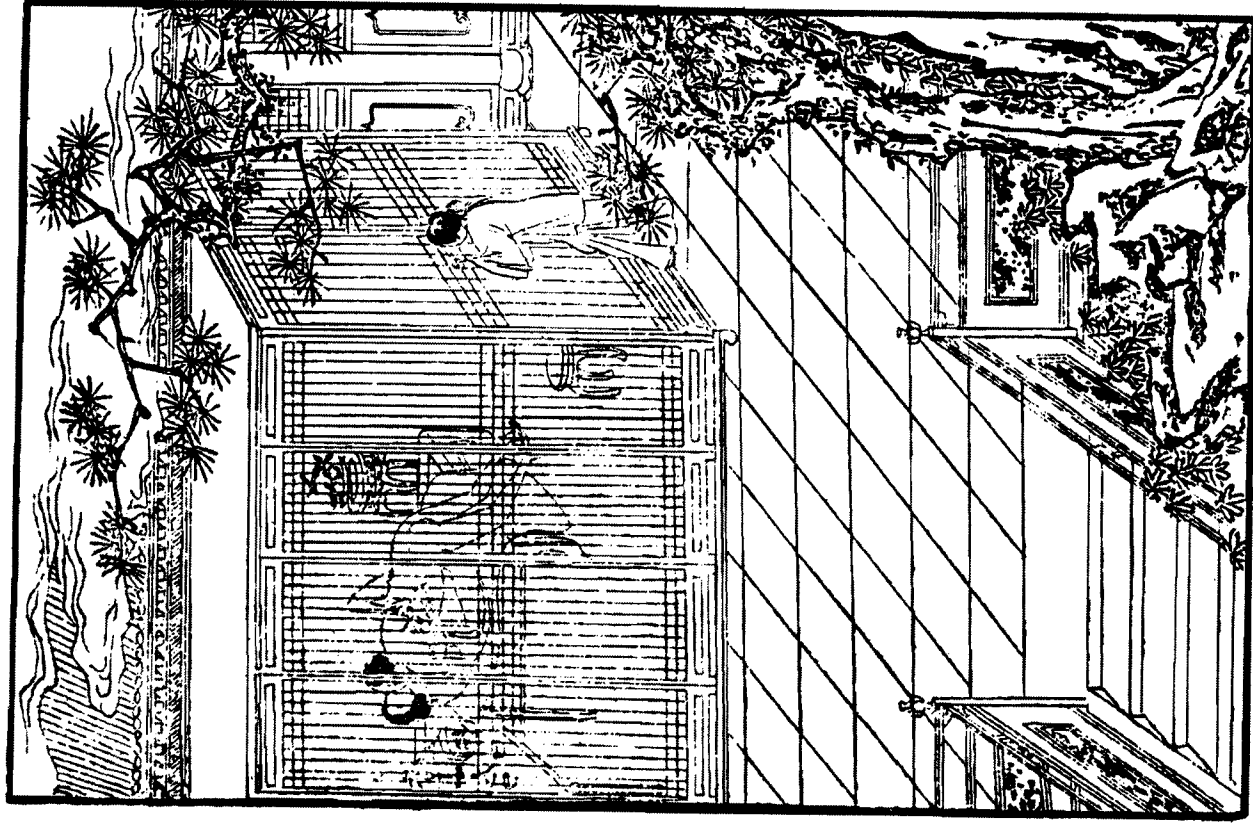
One comes, the other goes,

One butts, the other lunges.

One of them stirs his jade arms into motion,

The other raises her golden lotuses on high.

This one gives vent to the warbling of an oriole,



The Maid Ying-ch'ün Peeks through a Crack and Gets an Eye[ful]

That one gives voice to the twittering of a swallow

It is just like Chang Chün-jui's rendezvous
with Ts'ui Ying-ying;¹⁰

It much resembles Sung Yü's secret tryst

with the Goddess of Witches' Mountain.¹¹

Promises to be as faithful as the hills and seas,

Still resonate within their ears;

The butterfly is enamored, the bee distraught,

They are not yet willing to call a halt.

The engagement is protracted,

The coverlet disturbed by crimson waves,¹²

Until the transfixing touch of the "magic rhinoceros
horn"¹³ penetrates her creamy breast;

The battle is prolonged,

The bed curtains clipped by silver hooks,

Until the twin arcs of her painted eyebrows
wilt on her jade face.

Truly:

The third time that lip meets lip

passion is stronger than ever;

A single melting sensation suffuses the body
when lovers meet in secret.

While the two of them were in the room playing at clouds and rain, who would have thought that everything they did was so clearly seen and heard by Ying-ch'ün from her vantage point outside the window that she might well have exclaimed:

"Is it not delightful?"¹⁴

She could hear everything that they said.

"How old are you?" Hsi-men Ch'ing asked the woman.

"I was born in the year of the rain," said Li P'ing-erh, "so, this year, I'm twenty-two."

She then went on to ask, "How old is your first lady?"

"My wife was born in the year of the dragon," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "which would make her twenty-five."

"So she's three years older than I am," said the woman. "One of these days I ought to buy a set of presents and go pay a call on your First Lady. My only fear is that she may not be any too friendly."

"My wife has always had a most accommodating disposition," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "If that were not the case, how could I ever manage to keep so many bedmates around the place?"

"When you came over here, just now," the woman went on to ask, "did the First Lady know about it or not? If she should ask you about it, what would you say?"

"My wives all live in the rear compound," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "four courtyards back from the front of the house. The only exception is my fifth concubine, née P'an, who lives all by herself in a two-storied belvedere in the front garden, but she doesn't dare interfere with me."

"And how old is the Fifth Lady?" the woman asked.

"She was born in the same year as my wife," replied Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"That's good," the woman said. "If she doesn't think it presumptuous of me, I'd like to acknowledge her as an elder sister. Someday soon, if you can get hold of the outlines of the First Lady's and the Fifth Lady's feet for me, I'll make two pairs of shoes for them, myself, and take them over with me, as a token of my feelings."

The woman then pulled out two gold pins from among those that held her headdress in place and gave them to Hsi-men Ch'ing, enjoining him, "If you should go into the licensed quarter, don't let Hua Tzu-hsü see them."

"I understand," Hsi-men Ch'ing promised.

Thereupon, the two of them:

Like glue and like lacquer,

dallied with each other until the fifth watch, when:

The cock crowed outside the window, and

The eastern horizon began to grow light.

Hsi-men Ch'ing, fearing that Hua Tzu-hsü might come home, got up and put his clothes in order.

"You can climb over the wall the same way you came," the woman said.

The two of them agreed on a set of signals between themselves. Whenever Hua Tzu-hsü was safely out of the way, a maidservant on this side would look over the wall and give a surreptitious cough as a signal, or first throw a piece of tile over the wall to see if the coast was clear before climbing up to communicate with him. Hsi-men Ch'ing could then use a ladder to climb over the wall, where he would find another already in place to receive him. The two of them could thus:

Communicate across the intervening wall,¹⁵

as they engaged in:

Pilfering jade and purloining perfume.¹⁶

As long as they did not go in and out the main gates, there would be no way for the neighbors in the vicinity to find out about their clandestine affair.

There is a poem that testifies to this:

In your eating, go easy on the salt and vinegar;

Don't bother to go places where you don't belong.

If you want to be respected, study diligently;

If you don't want a deed discovered, don't do it.¹⁷

To resume our story, as the day dawned, Hsi-men Ch'ing climbed back over the wall the way he had come and went to P'an Chin-ling's room.

Chin-lien, who was still in bed, asked him, "Where did you go off to yesterday without anyone's knowing it? You didn't come home all night, and you didn't tell me where you were going."

"Once again," explained Hsi-men Ch'ing, "it was Brother Hua the Second who sent a page boy over to invite me to join him on an excursion into the licensed quarter. We've been drinking half the night, and I came home as soon as I could tear myself away."

Although Chin-lien believed him, the shadow of a doubt still lingered in her mind.

One day, after dinner, she and Meng Yü-lou were sitting in the pavilion in the garden doing some needlework together when a piece of tile came flying over the wall and landed right in front of them. Meng Yü-lou was so preoccupied with stitching the sole of the shoe she was working on that she didn't notice anything. But P'an Chin-lien swiftly surveyed the scene and caught an indistinct glimpse of a white face that poked over the top of the wall and then immediately withdrew.

Chin-lien nudged Yü-lou, pointing to the place where the head had appeared, and said, "Look, Sister Three, that was the older of the two maidservants in the Hua household next door. She must have climbed up to look at our flowers over the wall and then, on seeing us here, gotten down again."

Although this is all that she said at the time, she didn't let it go at that.

Later the same evening, Hsi-men Ch'ing arrived home after a social engagement and came into Chin-lien's quarters. When she helped him off with his outer garments and asked if he wanted anything, he expressed no interest in food or tea of any kind, but made a beeline for the front garden. P'an Chin-lien, on the principle that:

One thief knoweth another, decided to spy on him and observed that, after he had sat there for some time, the same maidservant as before pecked over the wall, whereupon Hsi-men Ch'ing clambered up a ladder and disappeared over the wall himself. Once there, he was met by Li P'ing-erh, who conducted him into her room for a rendezvous, but there is no need to describe this in detail.

P'an Chin-lien returned to her room where, all night long, she: Tossed first this way and then that, but could not get to sleep.

At dawn the next day, who should appear but Hsi-men Ch'ing, who pushed open the door to her room and came inside. The woman pretended to be asleep and did not pay him any attention. Hsi-men Ch'ing, who was already feeling somewhat uneasy about the situation, came up and sat down beside her on the edge of the bed.

When the woman saw what he was doing, she jumped up into a sitting position herself, took hold of him by the ear with one hand, and berated

him, saying, "You unfaithful scoundrel! Where did you really go off to last night, anyway; leaving your old mother to fret the whole night through?"

"No sooner do I let you out of my sight," she continued, "than you're up to your old tricks. But I already know all about them, and you're beginning to try my patience. Tell me the truth at once, all this while, how many times have you made out with that whore in the Hua household next door? If you confess to everything, I may let you off the hook; but if you try to deceive me by so much as a single word, the next time you set one foot over there, I'll raise such a hue and cry before you can get your other foot over the threshold, you fickle jailbird, that:

You'll die without a plot to be buried in.¹⁸

"You've been arranging to have your cronies latch onto her husband and keep him overnight in the licensed quarter while you're here making out with his wife. If it's trouble you want, I'll give you enough so that:

When you've had your fill, there'll be enough left over for you to wrap up and take home with you.

No wonder, yesterday, when Sister Meng the Third and I were in the garden doing our needlework, what should appear but that elder maidservant from her place:

Sticking out her head and craning her neck, over the wall? It turns out she was nothing but a ghost-snatching demon

sent by that whore to snatch you away. You think you can fool your old mother, do you? The other night when that cuckold of hers supposedly invited you to join him for an excursion into the licensed quarter, it was his own home that was the licensed quarter, wasn't it?"

If Hsi-men Ch'ing had not heard these words nothing might have happened, but having heard them, he was flustered enough to adopt the posture of a dwarf.

Stamping his feet in exasperation, he knelt down on the ground with an ingratiating laugh and pleaded with her, saying, "You crazy little oily mouth! Not so loud! The truth of the matter is that, thus and so, she asked how old the two of you were and said that, someday soon, if she can get hold of the outlines of your feet, she'll make a pair of shoes for each of you. She'd also like to acknowledge you both as elder sisters. She's quite content to be a younger sister to you."

"I don't need that whore to acknowledge me as any older brother or older sister," exclaimed Chin-lien. "She steals other people's husbands and then comes around offering to do them little favors as a means of cementing the relationship. Your old mother is:

Not the sort of person to let dust be thrown in her eyes.¹⁹

She thinks she can get away with that kind of mischief right under my nose, does she?"

As she spoke, she pulled open his trousers with one hand, exposing to view his limp and flaccid organ, which still had a silver clasp fastened around it. "Tell me the truth," she demanded. "How many times did you make out with that whore last night?"

"Only once that would really count," replied Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"You'll have to swear an oath on that all too vigorous body of yours before you can get me to believe that," said the woman. "One time only and it's:

As soft as drizzling snot and thick as gravy.²⁰
It might as well have been stricken with paralysis. The slightest sign of vitality would be cause for hope."

As she spoke, she removed the clasp with a single motion of her hand, and continued to berate him, saying, "You shameless ruffian!

You may be a brown cat, but you've got a black tail.

No wonder I turned the place upside down looking for it, and all the time it was you who had spirited the thing away in order to screw around with that whore."

Affecting an ingratiating smile, Hsi-men Ch'ing said, "You crazy little whore! You'll be the death of me yet. She has repeatedly asked me to convey the message that someday soon she'll come over and kowtow to you. And she's going to make a pair of shoes for you too. Yesterday she sent her maid-servant over for an outline of the feet of the one from the Wu family. And today she asked me to deliver this pair of hairpins in the shape of the character for long life to you as a present."

Thereupon he took off his cap, pulled them out of his headdress, and presented them to Chin-lien. Taking them into her hand and looking them over, Chin-lien saw that they were a pair of gold, openwork pins, in the shape of the character for long life, which had been deeply chased in intaglio and inset with azurite. It was obvious from the extraordinary intricacy of the craftsmanship that they had been manufactured for imperial use and came from the palace.

Chin-lien was utterly delighted and said, "Well, if that's the way things stand, I won't say any more about it, that's all. When you go over there in the future, I'll act as a lookout, so the two of you can screw away to your hearts' content. How would that be?"

Hsi-men Ch'ing was so delighted he put both arms around her and said, "My precious child, if you really do that, it will prove the truth of the adage:

You don't raise a child in the hope it will

shit gold and piss silver;

All you can hope for is that it will

respond empathetically to you.²¹

Tomorrow I'll go myself and buy you a set of patterned clothing to express my gratitude."

"I don't trust that:

Honeyed mouth and sugared tongue,
of yours," the woman responded. "If you want your old mother to fix things up for the two of you, you'll have to agree to three conditions."

"No matter how many conditions you impose, I'll agree to them all," said Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"The first condition," the woman said, "is that you will have to give up frequenting the licensed quarter. The second condition is that you must do as I say. The third condition is that when you go over to sleep with her, when you come home, you must tell me all about it, without deceiving me by so much as a single word."

"Those conditions are no obstacle," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'll agree to all of them, and make an end to it."

From this time on, whenever Hsi-men Ch'ing came back after spending the night next door, he would regale the woman with an account of his adventures.

"Li P'ing-erh has a naturally fair complexion," he would say. "Her face is shaped like a melon seed. She's very amorous and she drinks like a fish. We often bring a box of delicacies inside the bed curtains and play cards there and drink for half the night before going to sleep."

One day, he reached into his sleeve and pulled out an object, which he handed to Chin-lien to look at, saying, "This is an album of paintings from the Palace Treasury that the old eunuch director obtained during his service in the Imperial Household Department. The two of us consult it by lamp-light and then attempt to emulate the proceedings."

Chin-lien took the album in her hand and opened it up to take a look. There is a lyric that testifies to this:

Mounted on patterned damask in the imperial palace,

Fastened with ivory pins on brocade ribbons;

Vividly traced in outlines of gold,

enhanced by blue and green colors;

The square painting on each folio leaf
is neatly framed

The women vie with the Goddess of Witches' Mountain,

The men resemble that handsome paragon, Sung Yü.²²

Pair by pair, within the bed curtains, they show
themselves to be practiced combatants.

The names of the positions are

twenty-four in number;²³

Each one designed to arouse the
lust of the beholder.

Chin-lien, having perused it from beginning to end, was reluctant to let it out of her hands and, turning it over to Ch'un-mei, said, "Put it away safely in my trunk so we can amuse ourselves with it whenever we want to."

"You can look it over for a few days," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "but then you'll have to return it to me. This is a prized possession, belonging to someone else, which I borrowed to bring home and look at, on condition that I return it to her afterward."

"If it belongs to her, what's it doing in my house?" demanded Chin-lien. "I didn't take it out of her hands. And even if I had, she couldn't get it out of me now."

"It wasn't you who asked her for it," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "It was I who borrowed it. You crazy little slave. Stop fooling around."

As he spoke, he went after her and tried to wrest the album out of her hand.

"If you try to grab it," said Chin-lien, "I'll go you one better. I'll tear it to shreds and then nobody will be able to enjoy it."

"I guess I'm outmaneuvered," said Hsi-men Ch'ing with a laugh. "Do as you like with it, but return it when you're through, that's all. If you give this back to her, she's got another remarkable object I can borrow for you in the future."

"My child, whoever taught you to be so disingenuous?" said Chin-lien. "Bring it here first, and then I'll let you have this album back."

The two of them continued their badinage for some time.

That evening, in her room, Chin-lien:

Perfumed with incense the mandarin duck quilt,

Deftly trimmed the silver lamp's wick,

Made herself up alluringly, washed her private parts,

and, together with Hsi-men Ch'ing, opened up the album inside the bed curtains, preparatory to:

Enjoying the pleasures of connubial bliss.

Gentle reader take note: Black magic and sorcery have existed since ancient times. If you look at the way in which Chin-lien, from the time she prevailed upon the blind Stargazer Liu to effect a "turnabout" on her behalf, in no time at all contrived to so complicate the situation that Hsi-men Ch'ing's:

Annoyance and anger were transformed into favor, while her:

Seclusion and disgrace were transmuted to joy,

with the result that he no longer dared to control her; can the existence of such arts be doubted? Truly:

Though you may be as devious as any demon,

You'll drink the water she's washed her feet in.²⁴

There is a lyric to the tune "Partridge Sky" that testifies to this:

She remembers that time in the studio
when they had just met;

The clouds and rain they enjoyed together
were known to only a few.

When evening came, the phoenix and his mate
alighted on adjacent pillows;

Left untrimmed, the silver lamp
shed only a half-light.

Thinking of the past,

Her dreaming soul deluded;

Tonight she is all too happy to enjoy
the pleasures of connubial bliss.

Tumbled and tossed like male and female phoenixes,
their pleasure knows no bounds.

From this time on, surely, the pair of them
will never be separated.²⁵

If you want to know the outcome of these events,

Pray consult the story related in the following chapter.