

Chapter 14

HUA TZU-HSU SUCCUMBS TO CHAGRIN AND LOSES HIS LIFE, LI P'ING-ERH INVITES SEDUCTION AND ATTENDS A PARTY

The message in her eyes and expectation in her heart
will brook no further delay;

She is not content merely to fiddle with
her hairpin of jade.¹

When spring blooms on her smiling countenance
the flowers look seductive;

At the slightest perturbation of her delicate brows
the willows droop in sorrow.

While blushes suffuse her peachlike cheeks
she dreams of matrimony;

As the chill invades her orchid-scented chamber
she longs for togetherness.

If only she could contrive to comply
with Ssu-ma Hsiang-yü's wishes;

Without suffering the fate of Cho Wen-chün
when she sang the "Song of White Hair."²

THE STORY GOES that one day when Wu Yüeh-niang was feeling out of sorts, her sister-in-law, the wife of Wu K'ai, came to pay her a visit and she invited her to stay overnight.

While she was entertaining her visitor in her room, the page boy, Tai-an, happened to come in, carrying his master's felt bag, and reported, "Father's come home."

Wu K'ai's wife promptly moved over to Li Chiao-erh's quarters in order to get out of the way.

Before long, Hsi-men Ch'ing came in, took off his outer garments, and sat down. Hsiao-yü brought him a cup of tea, but he didn't drink it.

Yüeh-niang noticed that he looked rather worried and asked, "Why is it that you've come home so early from your club meeting today?"

"It was Ch'ang Shih-chieh's turn to entertain us today," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "but he doesn't have room in his own house, so he invited us to make an excursion to the Temple of Eternal Felicity, at Wu-li Yüan, outside the South Gate. Then Brother Hua the Second invited Brother Ying the Second and several of the rest of us, four or five in all, to join him for a drink at Cheng Ai-hsiang's place in the licensed quarter. Just as we were beginning to enjoy ourselves, all of a sudden, a group of official licitors appeared, and:

Without permitting any further explanation, arrested Brother Hua the Second and took him into custody. This development caught all of us completely off guard, and in my alarm I fled to Li Kuei-chieh's place and hid out for a while. Still uneasy about it, I sent someone to make inquiries.

"It turns out that Hua the Elder, Hua the Third, and Hua the Fourth, from Brother Hua the Second's branch of the old eunuch's family, are suing him for a share of the family property. They have filed a suit in the prefectural yamen at K'ai-feng, the Eastern Capital, and, since the suit has been accepted, the authorities in this district have been ordered to arrest the defendant. It was only after ascertaining the facts that we felt secure enough to break up and come home."

When Yüeh-niang had heard him out, she said, "It serves you right! You've been spending altogether too much of your time hanging around and playing the god with that bunch, without so much as thinking of coming home. All you want to do is fool around outside. It's only appropriate that something like this today should happen before you're ready to call it quits. If you don't give it over now, sooner or later you're going to get involved in a brawl in which they'll drag you off somewhere and:

Pound you into a bloody sheep's head,³

before you abandon this kind of behavior once and for all.

"When your legitimate wife, at home, gives you her well-meant advice, you seldom pay any attention. But whenever a whore in the licensed quarter says a few words to you, you prick up your donkey's ears and do as she says. Truly:

The words of your family
are wind in your ears;

The words of outsiders
are sutras in letters of gold."

"Who would have the:

Seven heads and eight galls,

to assault me?" scoffed Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"You good-for-nothing," Yüeh-niang responded. "You're given to shooting off your mouth at home all right, but if it came to the crunch, you'd be so terrified your tongue would hang out."

As they were talking, who should come in but Tai-an, who reported, "Hua the Second's wife, next door, has sent T'ien-fu to ask Father if he would step over there to have a word with her."

"This was just the signal Hsi-men Ch'ing had been waiting for, and he lost no time in starting on his way.

"One of these days," said Yüeh-niang, "if you don't watch out, it's going to be you that gets nabbed."

"It's right next door," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "What harm can it do? I'll just go over and see what she has to say."

Thereupon, he went over to Hua Tzu-hsi's place. Li P'ing-erh sent a page boy to invite him into the rear of the house for a talk. What should he see when he got there but the woman, with her:

Silk tunic in disarray, and

Pale countenance unadorned,

coming out of her room, so frightened her face had turned as fallow as wax?

Kneeling down before Hsi-men Ch'ing and making repeated supplications, she said, "Sir, there's no help for it!

If you won't do it for the priest's sake, do it for the Buddha's."

As the saying goes:

When calamities strike the home,

Neighbors help each other out.

It's all because of my poor husband's refusal to take anyone's advice, coupled with his unwillingness to pay any attention to serious family affairs. He reposes his trust in the people he fools around with outside and stays away from home for days at a time. It's only appropriate that today he should have allowed himself to be taken advantage of and gotten himself into this kind of a fix.

"And now that it's come to the crunch, at this late date, he sends his page boy to me and wants me to pull strings and get him off the hook. I'm only a woman, after all, about as much good as a legless crab; where does he think I'm going to go to find the strings to pull on his behalf? I get so angry when I think of his refusal to take anyone's advice, I'm tempted to let him be dragged off to the Eastern Capital and beaten to a pulp. It would serve him right. The only thing that deters me is that it would reflect unfavorably on the late old eunuch director's reputation.

"I hadn't any alternative, sir, but to ask you to come over and appeal to your generosity. Forget about him! But if you could only find it in you, for my poor sake; if you know of any strings to pull, whatever happens, be good enough to pull one. I just don't want to see him abused, that's all."

When Hsi-men Ch'ing saw the woman kneeling before him, he quickly said, "Sister-in-law, please get up. It's no problem. At first, today, I didn't know what was going on. We were all at the Cheng establishment drinking

wine together when a group of official lictors suddenly appeared and carried brother off to the Eastern Capital."

"It's a long story."

the woman said. "The trouble is being caused by the nephews of my father-in-law, the late eunuch director, who belong to the same collateral branch of the family as the one from which my husband was adopted. The eldest nephew, Hua the Elder, Hua the Third, Hua the Fourth, and my husband are all natural brothers. The eldest is called Hua Tzu-yu, the third is called Hua Tzu-kuang, the fourth is called Hua Tzu-hua, and my husband is called Hua Tzu-hsiü. They are all the consanguineous nephews of the old eunuch director.

"Although the old gentleman had succeeded in amassing a tidy fortune for himself, he saw clearly enough that this husband of mine would not amount to anything; so, when he came back from Kwangtung, he put his property into my hands for safekeeping. He even went so far, at times, as to give my husband a regular caning. The other nephews, too, had tasted enough of the stick at his hands not to dare to interfere.

"Last year, when the old gentleman died, Hua the Elder, Hua the Third, and Hua the Fourth were given something in the way of furniture and household effects to take home with them, but they didn't receive so much as a candareen's worth of silver. I said at the time, 'We'd better take care of them by giving them a little something.' But this husband of mine spent all his time fooling around on the outside and was unwilling to pay any attention at all to serious matters. Now, today, they've been able to:

Act so quietly not a breath of air escaped, and he's allowed himself to be undone."

When she had finished speaking, she let herself go and began to weep out loud.

"Don't worry, Sister-in-law," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I was afraid it would be something big. But, as it turns out, it's only a case of members of the same branch of the family suing each other over the division of property. It shouldn't be too difficult to handle. As long as you want me to, I'll:

Treat my brother's affairs as my own, and

Treat my own affairs as my brother's.

No matter what you ask of me, I'll be only too happy to comply."

"If you'll only deign to help out, sir," the woman said, "everything will be fine. I'll need to know, though, how much money will be required in order to pull the necessary strings, so I can get it ready."

"It won't require all that much," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I understand that Prefect Yang, who presides over the prefectural yamen in K'ai-feng, the Eastern Capital, is a protégé of the grand preceptor, Ts'ai Ching. Grand Preceptor Ts'ai, along with my kinsman by marriage at four removes, the commander in chief of the Imperial Guard, Yang Chien, are both people

who have the ear of the reigning emperor himself. If these two men can be induced to interest themselves on your behalf, and they both speak to Prefect Yang, he could hardly refuse to comply. No matter how important a matter it might be, that ought to take care of it. Now we will certainly need to make a present to Grand Preceptor Ts'ai, but since Commander in Chief Yang is related to me by marriage, he will probably refuse to accept anything."

The woman then went into her room, opened a trunk, and brought out sixty large ingots of silver, weighing fifty taels each, making a total of three thousand taels, which she handed over to Hsi-men Ch'ing to expend, both high and low, as he saw fit, in the endeavor to pull the necessary strings.

"Half of that would do," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "What need is there to use so much?"

"If there's anything left over, you can keep it for me, sir," the woman said. "Concealed behind my bed there are four lacquer chests decorated with gold tracery that contain python robes, jade-ornamented girdles, jeweled cap buttons, chatelaines, pendants, and bracelets, as well as valuable jewels and objets d'art. If you could take these off my hands at the same time, sir, and keep them over at your place, I could ask for them whenever I need anything. If I don't take precautions ahead of time, but leave everything to him, we're going to end up having trouble making ends meet. It's obvious that:

Three fists are no match for four hands.⁵

If we let ourselves be outnumbered, sooner or later they'll get the better of us and make off with the property, and I'll be left in the lurch with nowhere to turn."

"But what will happen when Brother Hua the Second comes home and starts looking for this stuff?" asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"These are all things," the woman replied, "that the old gentleman, while he was still alive, personally handed over to me for safekeeping. My husband doesn't know a thing about them. You can feel free to take charge of them, sir."

"If that's what you want me to do," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "I'll send someone over to move them as soon as I get home."

Thereupon, he went straight home and consulted with Yüeh-niang about it.

"As for the silver," said Yüeh-niang, "we can send page boys over to carry it back in food boxes. But if we bring the stuff in the chests in at the front door, we can hardly avoid attracting the attention of the neighbors. The best thing to do is, thus and so; if we hoist it over the wall at night, it will be less conspicuous."

Hsi-men Ch'ing was greatly delighted by this suggestion and immediately

two sets of food boxes, to carry the three thousand taels of silver over to his house on their carrying poles. Later that evening, when the moon rose, Li P'ing-erh, on her side, together with her two maidservants, Ying-ch'ün and Hsiu-ch'ün, by putting a bench on top of a table, managed to hoist the chests up to the top of the wall. Hsi-men Ch'ing, on his side, accompanied only by Yüeh-niang, Chin-lien, and Ch'ün-mei, set up a ladder to receive them. They spread a strip of felt over the top of the wall and then hoisted the chests over the top, one at a time, and deposited them in Yüeh-niang's room.

You may well ask:

"Can such things be?"

If you want to get rich,

You've got to take risks.

There is a poem that testifies to this:

Wealth and success are often attained

by strokes of good luck;

Profit and fame, on the other hand,

bring troubles of their own.

If you are destined to attain them,

you will do so in the end;

If you are not destined to attain them,

no amount of effort will avail.⁶

Hsi-men Ch'ing had succeeded in taking into his own possession a considerable quantity of his neighbor's disposable wealth, in the form of gold and silver and other valuables, without the other residents of the neighborhood being any the wiser. The same day he had the requisite monies packed up, requested a letter of introduction from his son-in-law's family, the Ch'ên household, and sent a servant off to deliver them to the Eastern Capital.

Along the way this messenger:

Each morning took to the purple road;

Each evening tramped the red dust,⁷

until, one day, he arrived in the Eastern Capital and turned over the letter and presents to the commander in chief of the Imperial Guard, Yang Chien. The latter, in his turn, requested the grand counselor and grand preceptor, Ts'ai Ching, to send a note to Prefect Yang in the prefectural yamen at K'ai-feng.

Now this prefect was named Yang Shih,⁸ his courtesy name was Kuei-shan, and he was a native of Hung-nung district in the province of Shensi. He had passed the *chin-shih* examination in the year 1103 and had risen to the position of chief minister of the Court of Judicial Review before receiving his current appointment as prefect of K'ai-feng. He was an official

of absolute integrity. But the grand preceptor, Ts'ai Ch'ing, had been his examiner in the *chin-shih* examination and Yang Chien was a favored and highly placed official, so he could hardly refuse to do the requested favor.

At the same time Hsi-men Ch'ing had also dispatched a letter to Hua Tzu-hsü, informing him of the steps that were being taken on his behalf, and saying, "The officials involved have all been taken care of. When you appear in court and are interrogated about the whereabouts of the inherited property, simply say that all of the money has been spent and that nothing remains but the houses and real estate."

To resume our story, one day Prefect Yang Shih ascended the tribunal, and the functionaries of the six local offices stood in attendance. Behold:

His official conduct is honest and correct;

His actions reveal integrity and intelligence.

He always harbors a compassionate disposition;

He constantly possesses benevolent intentions.

In cases of disputes over the ownership of land,

He distinguishes between the crooked and the straight before taking action.

In instances of mutual contention or affrays,

He weighs the lightness or heaviness of the offense before passing sentence.

In moments of leisure he fingers the zither

or entertains guests;

He also devotes himself to the investigation of the condition of the people.

Despite the fact that he is a presiding official in the capital,

He really is a father and a mother to the people in his jurisdiction.⁹

That day, Prefect Yang Shih ascended the tribunal and ordered that Hua Tzu-hsü be taken out of the lockup and brought before him. When the parties to the suit had been assembled in the courtroom and knelt down before the dais, the prefect began his interrogation as to the whereabouts of the inherited property.

All Hua Tzu-hsü would say was, "After the death of the old eunuch director, the money was all expended on the funeral and services for the dead. All that remains are two houses and a country estate. As for the furniture and household effects, they have all been divided up among the other members of the family."

"It is difficult to ascertain anything about the property of eunuchs," pronounced Prefect Yang. "It is a case of:

Easy come, easy go."¹⁰

Since the money has apparently all been spent, I hereby rule that the presiding magistrate of Ch'ing-ho district be ordered to depute functionaries to assess Eunuch Director Hua's two houses and country estate, to sell them off for their market value, to divide up the proceeds among Hua Tzu-yu and the other two plaintiffs, and to report back to me in writing."

Hua Tzu-yu and the others wanted to kneel down before the tribunal and petition the prefect to continue to hold Hua Tzu-hsü in custody until the whereabouts of the missing money could be determined, but Prefect Yang angrily rejected their petition, saying, "You rascals are lucky to have escaped a beating. When this eunuch director of yours died, why didn't you bring a suit at that time, instead of waiting until now when:

The affair is over and the circumstances have changed,

to kick up such a fuss and waste the paper and brushes required to file a suit?"

Thereupon, without beating Hua Tzu-hsü a single stroke, he signed an order authorizing the return of the defendant to Ch'ing-ho district, and the assessment of the real estate. But no more of this.

No sooner did Hsi-men Ch'ing's retainer, Lai-pao, ascertain the facts about the disposition of the case than he traveled back, post haste, to report to his master. When Hsi-men Ch'ing heard that the prefect, Yang Shih, had proven responsive to pressure and had released Hua Tzu-hsü and allowed him to return home, he was extremely pleased.

Li P'ing-erh invited Hsi-men Ch'ing over to her place to discuss the matter and said to him, "Why don't you get together a few taels of silver and buy the house we're living in? After all, it won't be long now before I'm completely yours."

Hsi-men Ch'ing went home and broached the issue with Wu Yüeh-niang.

"No matter what it's officially assessed at," Yüeh-niang said, "you ought not to enter into an agreement to buy that house. What will you do if her husband should start to suspect something?"

Hsi-men Ch'ing made a mental note of what she had said.

Not many days thereafter, Hua Tzu-hsü arrived home. The district magistrate of Ch'ing-ho deputed Vice Magistrate Yüeh to carry out the assessment, with the following results. The eunuch director's mansion, located on Main Street in An-ch'ing ward, was evaluated at 700 taels of silver. It was sold to a distaff relative of the imperial family named Wang. The country estate outside the South Gate was evaluated at 655 taels of silver. It was sold to the commandant, Chou Hsiu. All that remained was the modest house in which Hua Tzu-hsü was currently residing. It was evaluated at 540 taels of silver, but because it was right next door to Hsi-men Ch'ing's property, no one dared to buy it.

Hua Tzu-hsü repeatedly sent people over to make representations, but Hsi-men Ch'ing stalled, maintaining that he couldn't afford it, and refused

to rise to the bait. The district magistrate was anxious to settle the matter so that he could file the required written report. Li P'ing-erh, in desperation, secretly sent Old Mother Feng over to Hsi-men Ch'ing's place to suggest that he use 540 taels of the silver she had deposited with him to make the purchase. Only then did Hsi-men Ch'ing agree, and the silver was duly weighed out in the presence of the officials. Hua the Elder even signed the paper that formalized the transaction.

That very day the necessary documents were completed and a report was sent up to the higher authorities. The sale of the old eunuch's real estate holdings had produced, in all, a total of 1,895 taels of silver, which was evenly divided among the three plaintiffs.

Hua Tzu-hsü had come out of this lawsuit without anything for himself. His money, his houses, and his landed property were all gone. Not a trace remained of the 3,000 taels of silver, in large ingots, that had been stored in his coffers.

In a state of severe perturbation he demanded an accounting of Li P'ing-erh. "How was the silver that you provided to Hsi-men Ch'ing actually spent? And how much of it is left over? After all, we have to come up with the money to buy another house."

The only result of these queries was that he had to endure four or five days of abuse at the hands of his wife.

"Phooey! You muddleheaded troll!" she railed at him. "Day after day you neglected your proper concerns, going out and:

Sleeping among the flowers and lolling
beneath the willows,

without bothering to come home. It only serves you right that someone should have been lying in wait for you and succeeded in luring you into this trap.

"Once you landed in jail, you sent someone to speak to me, urging me to pull strings on your behalf. I'm only a woman, after all. I've scarcely ventured out so far as the front gate.

I may be able to run, but I can't fly."¹⁰

What do I know about such things? Who do I know, anyway, that might be able to pull strings for you?

Even if I were made of iron, how many nails
could you get out of me?

I had to run all over the place, saying 'Please sir' and 'I beg you, madam,' before I could find anyone that could be of any use. If you haven't planted any seeds in the past, when the going gets rough, who's going to pay any attention to you?

"Thank goodness, our next-door neighbor, Hsi-men Ch'ing, out of consideration for our former relationship, was willing, despite the coldness of the weather and the ugly winds that were blowing, to send his servant all the

way to the Eastern Capital, where he succeeded in bringing this affair of yours to a satisfactory conclusion.

"But now that you've escaped the clutches of the law and find yourself with:

Both feet on level ground again,¹²

what do you do but:

Once your life's been saved, think of money;

Once your wound's been healed, forget the pain,

and come home to demand an accounting of your wife?

"Even if there were anything left over, it wouldn't be yours to fritter away on your own gratification. After all, I've still got the note you sent me. If I didn't have your written authorization, it's not very likely that I'd have laid out your money in order to pull strings for you entirely on my own hook, or have simply handed it over to somebody, is it?"

"Of course I sent you that note," said Hua Tzu-hsü. "But the truth of the matter is I was hoping there would be something left over. We've got to come up with enough money to buy another house and have something to live on before we can worry about anything else."

"Phooey!" his wife exclaimed. "What a nincompoop! I'm just wasting my breath on you. If you'd only paid some attention a little bit earlier, instead of:

Ignoring things when you're flush, and

Starting to worry when you're in the hole!

You may accuse me of spending too much a thousand times, or ten thousand times if you like, but where do you suppose those three thousand taels of yours went, anyway? I wouldn't underestimate the appetites of people like the grand preceptor, Ts'ai Ching, or the commander in chief of the Imperial Guard, Yang Chien, if I were you. If they had been offered any less, do you suppose you could have escaped with impunity from your bout with the law, without suffering so much as a lash with a wisp of straw on your cuckold's body, only so you could come home and shoot off your mouth?

"Hsi-men Ch'ing is no connection of yours. You've got no claim on him. And which of your beloved relatives or friends would have been willing to:

Travel north and journey south,

or go to such lengths or spend so much money, in order to come to your rescue? When you got home you should have laid on a feast and invited him over to express your appreciation, instead of:

Trying to sweep it all under the rug with a
single stroke of the broom,¹³

or demanding that everything be accounted for after the fact."

It did not take very many such pointed and derisive speeches to reduce Hua Tzu-hsü to silence.

The next day Hsi-men Ch'ing sent Tai-an over with a gift to Hua Tzu-hsü to help calm his flustered spirits. Hua Tzu-hsü reciprocated by preparing a feast, hiring two singing girls, and extending an invitation to Hsi-men Ch'ing to express his gratitude. He intended to take advantage of the occasion to ask what had become of his money, and he hoped to be able to rely on Hsi-men Ch'ing for the return of several hundred taels of silver, which would enable him to buy another house.

Li P'ing-erh did not want this to happen, so she secretly sent Old Mother Feng over to say to Hsi-men Ch'ing, "Don't accept this invitation. Provide him with a false account of how the money was spent, claiming that it was all used up in taking care of the officials involved in the case, both high and low."

Hua Tzu-hsü did not catch on, but sent his servant over two or three times to press the invitation. Hsi-men Ch'ing actually went so far as to hide out in the licensed quarter, while ordering his servants to report that he was not at home. Hua Tzu-hsü was giddy with rage at this treatment, but all he could do was stamp his feet in frustration.

Gentle reader take note: As a rule, when a wife has had a change of heart and no longer sees eye to eye with her husband, even a man with the strength and resolution to chew up nails will find it difficult to defend himself against her secret wiles. It has always been true that:

Man is responsible for what lies outside the household;

Woman is responsible for what lies within it.¹⁴

Yet, on many occasions a man's reputation is ruined by a woman. Why is this so? It is always because he doesn't know how to handle her. To sum it up in a nutshell, the secret lies in the saying:

• The husband sings and the wife follows.¹⁵

Where:

Beauty and virtue attract each other,

Affinities are mutually compatible,

The man admires the woman, and

The woman admires the man,

one can, perhaps, be confident that there will be no problem. But, if the slightest distrust develops between them, it will soon turn into revulsion and hatred. As for the likes of Hua Tzu-hsü, who spent his days in:

Insensate dissipation, and

Unrestrained license;

for such a man to hope that his wife would not get other ideas into her head, was futile indeed. Truly:

If one's own resolution is supported,

There is no tempest that can shake it.¹⁶

There is a poem that testifies to this:

If success and accomplishment could be won
by intelligence and effort;

In ancient times Tao Chih¹⁷ would have
been made a marquis.

If one's actions are righteous, one is truly
deserving of respect;

If one is lustful and uncaring, how can one fail
to be ashamed?¹⁸

The scion of the Hsi-men family was given over to
lust and dissipation;

His adulterous and fickle paramour was nothing but
a captivating wench.

Hua Tzu-hsü became so engorged with rage
his tender guts gave way;

But another day, in the court of the underworld,
he would be revenged.

To make a long story short, Hua Tzu-hsü could only scrape together 250 taels of silver, with which he bought a house on Lion Street for them to live in. He was already suffering from the ill effects of his rage, and no sooner had they completed their move than he was unfortunate enough to come down with an acute intestinal fever.

He took to his bed early in the eleventh month and was unable to get up again thereafter. Li P'ing-erh responded to his entreaties by calling in Dr. Hu from Main Street, but later had to dispense with him in order to save money. From then on it was merely a matter of time.

One day became two,

Two days became three,

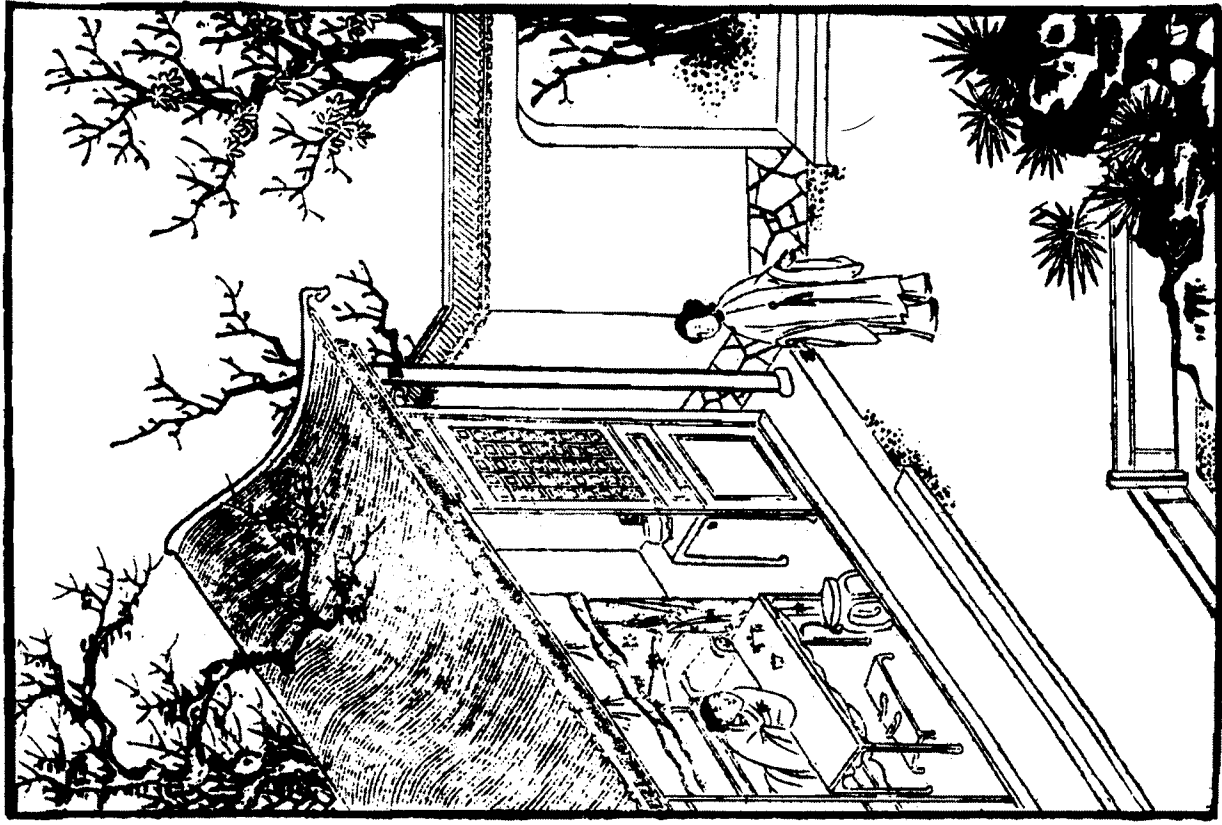
until finally, on the last day of the month:

Alas and alack,

He stopped breathing and died.

At the time of his death he was twenty-three years of age. No sooner had he taken to his bed than his eldest servant, T'ien-hsi, absconded with five taels of silver and vanished without leaving a trace.

Once Hua Tzu-hsü was dead, Li P'ing-erh lost no time in sending Old Mother Feng to ask Hsi-men Ch'ing over for a consultation. A casket was purchased, the encoffining ceremony completed, sutras were duly recited, and Hua Tzu-hsü's body was escorted out to the graveyard and buried. Hua the Elder, Hua the Third, and Hua the Fourth, together with their wives, all came to offer their condolences, and after they had returned from accompanying the coffin to its final resting place they went their separate ways.



On the day of the funeral Hsi-men Ch'ing also had Wu Yüeh-niang arrange for a table of food and wine in their name so that they could offer a sacrifice at the graveside of the deceased.

That day, when Li P'ing-erh had returned home in her sedan chair, she procured a spirit tablet for her dead husband and set it up in her room. But, although she went through the motions of keeping vigil for him, all she could think of was Hsi-men Ch'ing. Even while Hua Tzu-hsü was still alive she had encouraged Hsi-men Ch'ing to make free with her two maid-servants, and now that he was dead the two families became closer than ever.

Before long it was the ninth day of the first month and Li P'ing-erh had ascertained that it was P'an Chin-lien's birthday. Even though the fifth of the seven weekly commemorations of Hua Tzu-hsü's death had not yet been observed, she bought presents, got into her sedan chair, all dressed up in a white satin jacket over a skirt of blue brocade, with a white hempen snood over her chignon, held in place with a pearl headband, and came to pay a call in honor of Chin-lien's birthday. Old Mother Feng carried her felt bag, and T'ien-fu escorted her sedan chair.

The first thing she did after crossing the threshold was to kowtow to Wu Yüeh-niang four times:

Just as though inserting a taper in its holder,

saying as she did so, "The other day at the graveside I'm afraid I provided you with but meager fare. And thank you very much for your lavish present."

After she had paid her respects to Yüeh-niang, she asked to be presented in turn to Li Chiao-erh and Meng Yü-lou. It was only then that P'an Chin-lien came in.

"So this is the Fifth Lady," the visitor exclaimed, as she kowtowed once again, repeating as she did so, "Elder Sister, please accept my salutation."

Chin-lien demurred at first and the two of them dickered politely for a while until they settled the matter by kowtowing to each other. Chin-lien thanked her for her birthday presents. The visitor was also introduced to Wu Yüeh-niang's sister-in-law, the wife of her elder brother, Wu K'ai, and to Chin-lien's mother, Old Mrs. P'an.

Li P'ing-erh then asked to be allowed to pay her respects to Hsi-men Ch'ing, but Yüeh-niang told her, "Today he's gone to the Temple of the Jade Emperor outside the Eastern Gate to attend the *chiaio* rites of cosmic renewal¹⁹ in honor of the Jade Emperor's birthday."

She urged her visitor to sit down, and another serving of tea was called for and consumed. After some time had passed, who should come wandering in but Sun Hsüeh-o.

Li P'ing-erh, observing that she was slightly less well dressed than the others, got up and asked, "Who might this lady be? Since I did not know of her, I'm afraid I didn't ask to be presented to her."

"She's just one of my husband's young ladies," said Yüeh-niang.

Li P'ing-erh hastily prepared to kowtow to her, but Yüeh-niang intervened, saying, "There's no need for you to go to all that trouble. A bow to each other will be quite sufficient."

When the two of them had finished saluting each other as directed, Yüeh-niang invited Li P'ing-erh into her own room to change her clothes and instructed a maidservant to set up a table in the parlor and serve tea.

Before long wine was brought in, and they:

Drew round the newly replenished brazier, and

Decanted the finest Yang-kao²⁰ vintage.

Thereupon, Wu K'ai's wife, Old Mrs. P'an, and Li P'ing-erh, took the seats of honor, Yüeh-niang and Li Chiao-erh assumed the role of hosts, Meng Yü-lou and P'an Chin-lien sat to one side, and Sun Hsüeh-o, not daring to presume on their company for too long, went back to look after things in the kitchen.

Yüeh-niang, observing that Li P'ing-erh never refused a drink, served a round of wine herself and then directed Li Chiao-erh and the others each to serve a round in turn.

They joshed with their guest freely, saying, "Mrs. Hua, you've moved so far away that we sisters must:

Spend more time apart than together."²¹

You no longer give us a thought. It would really be too cruel of you if you don't promise to visit us again."

"If it hadn't been for P'an the Sixth's birthday," said Meng Yü-lou, "you wouldn't even have come to see us today."

"My dear First Lady, and Third Lady," said Li P'ing-erh, "thanks to the kindness all of you have shown me, I've wanted to come and pay you a visit for a long time. But, on the one hand, I'm still in mourning, and on the other hand, after my poor husband's death, there's been no one to look after the place. In fact, I've hardly observed my husband's fifth weekly commemoration yet. If I hadn't been afraid of offending the Fifth Lady, I wouldn't have ventured to come today."

She then went on to ask, "First Lady, when does your birthday come?"

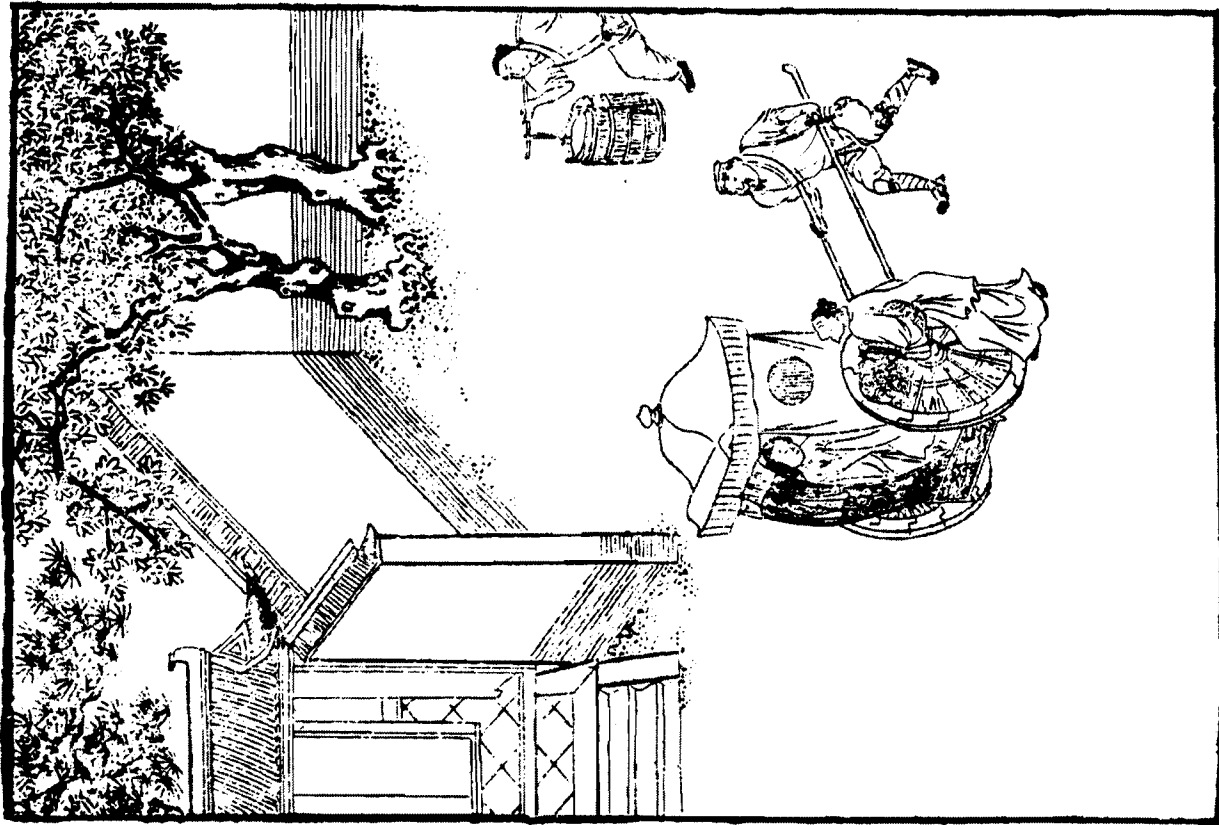
"It's a bit early yet for my birthday," said Yüeh-niang.

"The First Lady's birthday," said P'an Chin-lien, taking over the conversational lead, "is on the fifteenth day of the eighth month. I hope, whatever happens, you'll be able to come visit us then."

"Needless to say," said Li P'ing-erh, "I'll be sure to come."

"Now that you're here," said Meng Yü-lou, "why don't you give us the pleasure of your company by making a night of it, and not bothering to go home?"

"I really would welcome the chance to have a good talk with all of you," said Li P'ing-erh. "To tell you the truth, I find myself living in reduced circumstances, a newcomer to the neighborhood, and ever since my poor



husband died, there's been no one to look after the place. The back wall of my house abuts on the garden of that distaff relative of the imperial family named Ch'iao. It's as desolate as can be, and at night there are often fox spirits about:

Pitching bricks and tossing tiles,²²
and I'm afraid. We used to have two page boys, but the eldest of them has run away. T'ien-fu, here, looks after the front gate, but the back of the house is completely deserted. I'm entirely dependent on Old Feng. She's been with me a long time, and she often comes over to do the laundry and help the maidservants make shoes. I'm really beholden to her."

"How old is Mother Feng?" asked Yüeh-niang. "She certainly looks like a good, dependable body. I've never even heard her raise her voice."

"She's fifty-five years old this year," said Li P'ing-erh. "She was born in the year of the dog. She has no children of her own, either male or female, and depends on matchmaking for her living. I supply her with clothes from time to time. Ever since the recent death of my poor husband I've asked her to come over and keep me company. At night she sleeps on the same k'ang with the maidservants."

"There you are," said P'an Chin-lien, who was always quick on the uptake, "as long as you've got Old Feng to look after the house for you, you might just as well spend the night here. After all, since Mr. Hua is dead, there's no longer anyone to tell you what to do."

"If you'll do as I say," said Meng Yü-lou, "you'll send Old Feng home with the sedan chair and forget about going yourself."

Li P'ing-erh only smiled, without uttering a sound.

As they were talking:

Several rounds of wine had been consumed. Old Mrs. P'an was the first to get up and make her way toward the front of the compound. P'an Chin-lien then followed in her mother's wake and went off to her own quarters.

"I've already had enough wine," Li P'ing-erh kept insisting, as she refused to accept any more, but Li Chiao-erh said, "How is it that you've been willing enough to drink at the hands of the First Lady and the Third Lady, but when I offer you wine, you refuse to drink any? It's really too discriminatory."

Thereupon, she picked up a larger cup and proceeded to fill it.

"My dear Second Lady," protested Li P'ing-erh, "I really can't manage any more. I'm not just pretending."

"After you've finished this cup," said Yüeh-niang, "you can rest awhile. Only then did Li P'ing-erh accept the proffered cup and put it down in front of her while she continued to engage them in animated conversation.

Meng Yü-lou, noticing that Ch'un-mei was standing to one side, asked her, "What's your mother doing up front, anyway? You go up there and

invite both your mother and Old Mrs. P'an to come back here. Tell them that the First Lady invites them back to help her keep Mrs. Hua company while she drinks wine."

Ch'un-mei had not been gone for long when she returned and said, "Old Mrs. P'an is not feeling well and has gone to bed. Mother is in her room putting on her makeup. She'll be here any minute."

"I've never seen anything like it," said Yüeh-niang. "After all, you're one of the hostesses, and yet, before anyone even knows what you're up to, you abandon your guest and run off to your own room. I don't know how many times a day this sister of mine has to redo her face. Whenever she feels like it she runs off to do it again. She's fine enough in other respects, but about this one thing she's still rather childish."

While she was still speaking, who should appear but P'an Chin-lien. She was wearing a saffron-colored jacket of Lu-chou silk that opened down the middle and was decorated with a motif of wild geese holding bulrushes in their mouths. It had a stiff-standing white satin collar with puffed edging and gilt buttons that depicted honeybees rifling chrysanthemum blossoms. Beneath this she wore a drawnwork skirt with a foot-wide, gold-spangled border representing sea horses sporting in the waves, shoes of scarlet silk with high white satin heels, and figured ankle leggings. She also sported pendant onyx earrings and a pearl headband. In fact, she was dressed identically with Meng Yü-lou. Yüeh-niang, on the other hand, had on a scarlet silk jacket, a plain blue satin cloak, and a skirt of sand-green pongee, while on her head she wore a fret over her chignon, enclosed in a sable toque.

Meng Yü-lou was the first of the party to catch sight of Chin-lien as she made a conspicuous entrance:

Heavily made up and richly attired,

with a gold pin in the shape of the character for long life carelessly stuck in the hair over her temple.

She proceeded to josh her, saying, "A fine wench you are, Slavey Five. You're the one who was you know what 'under a lucky star'²³ this very day, yet you've abandoned your guest and run off to hide in your room. And you call yourself a human being!"

Chin-lien laughed loudly and gave her a playful slap.

"You're a pretty nervy wench, Slavey Five," exclaimed Yü-lou. "It's your turn to offer our guest a drink."

"I've already had more than a little at the hands of the Third Lady," said Li P'ing-erh. "I've reached my limit."

"What you had to suffer at her hands is her business," said Chin-lien. "I, too, make bold to offer you a cup."

Thereupon, she tucked up her sleeves, filled a large cup to the brim, and presented it to Li P'ing-erh, who merely allowed it to sit in front of her, without venturing to take a drink.

Yüeh-niang, who had withdrawn into the master suite with her sister-in-law, Wu K'ai's wife, came out and saw that Chin-lien had sat down to help entertain Li P'ing-erh.

"Why doesn't Old Mrs. P'an come out and provide some company for our guest?" she asked.

"My mother isn't feeling well," replied Chin-lien. "She's stretched out in my room, and even if you send for her, she won't come."

Yüeh-niang caught sight of one of the pins in the shape of the character for long life that was visible in the hair over Chin-lien's temple and asked Li P'ing-erh, "Where was this pair of pins that you gave Sister Six made? They're really very fine. In the future I'd like to get them reproduced so we could each have a pair to wear."

"If you'd like some, First Lady, I still have a few more of them at home," said Li P'ing-erh. "One day soon I'll send over an additional pair for each of you. They are made to imperial specifications and were smuggled out of the palace by the old eunuch, my late father-in-law. Workmanship of this kind is not to be found on the outside."

"I was only having a little joke at your expense," said Yüeh-niang. "There are such a lot of us, you could scarcely be expected to have that many to give away."

As the group of womenfolk continued to drink and amuse themselves, the sun was gradually sinking in the west. Old Mother Feng, who had been plied with wine in Sun Hsueh-o's quarters at the rear of the compound, came out with a very red face and urged Li P'ing-erh to make up her mind either to leave or, if not, to send the sedan chair back home.

"Don't go," said Yüeh-niang to her guest. "Just tell Old Feng to go home with the sedan chair."

Li P'ing-erh merely said, "There's no one to look after the place. I'll come again sometime soon to pay my respects to all of you. There'll be time enough for me to stay the night another day."

"Why be so insistent on having your own way?" said Meng Yü-lou. "It looks as though none of us carries much weight with you, but if you won't send the sedan chair off, just wait until Father comes home in a little while; you can be sure he'll try to persuade you to stay, too."

This argument had the effect of overcoming Li P'ing-erh's objections. Taking out the keys to the house, she handed them to Old Mother Feng, saying, "Since all these ladies are so insistent on my staying, if I were to refuse, it would only show that:

I didn't know a favor when I saw one.

You can dismiss the sedan chair for today, but tell the bearers to come back for me tomorrow. When you and the page boy get home, be careful not to let anyone into the house."

She also called Old Mother Feng over to her and:

Whispered into her ear in a low voice,

"Tell my head maid, Ying-ch'ün, to get the keys to the trunk in my bedroom and take four pairs of pins in the shape of the character for long life out of the small jewelry box with the gold tracery on it. Bring these to me first thing tomorrow morning. I want to give them to the four ladies here."

When Old Mother Feng had received her instructions she took formal leave of Yüeh-niang.

"Have something to drink before you go," Yüeh-niang said.

"I've had both food and wine just now in the quarters of the young lady at the rear of the compound," said Old Mother Feng. "I'll be back first thing tomorrow morning."

Whereupon, with:

A thousand thanks and ten thousand

expressions of gratitude,

she made her exit. But no more of this.

Shortly thereafter, when Li P'ing-erh refused to have anything more to drink, Yüeh-niang invited her into the master suite to have some tea with her sister-in-law.

All of a sudden, who should come in but the page boy, Tai-an, carrying his master's felt bag. Hsi-men Ch'ing had come home, and his first words upon lifting aside the portiere and entering the room were, "So Mrs. Hua is here."

Li P'ing-erh jumped hastily to her feet and the two of them exchanged salutations, after which she sat back down again. Yüeh-niang called Yü-hsiao to help Hsi-men Ch'ing off with his things.

Turning to Wu K'ai's wife and Li P'ing-erh, Hsi-men Ch'ing said, "Today I've been attending the *chia* rites of cosmic renewal in celebration of the birthday of the Jade Emperor at his temple outside the Eastern Gate. It was my turn to preside this year. Otherwise, I would have come home after the vegetarian feast at noon. As a consequence I had to join the others in going over the accounts in Abbot Wu's room and, what with one thing and another, have been tied up all this time."

He then went on to ask, "I take it that Mrs. Hua is not going to go home today?"

"She kept refusing our invitations and proposing to leave," said Meng Yü-lou, "until, by combining our efforts, we carried the day by main force."

"There's no one to look after the place," said Li P'ing-erh. "I can't help worrying about it."

"Don't talk such rot!" said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "The night patrols have been very strict recently. What is there to be afraid of anyway?"

If the wind so much as stirs a blade of grass,

all I'd have to do is send a note to Commandant Chou Hsiu and he'd:

Act upon it even in defiance of the law."²⁴

"Why have you been neglecting Mrs. Hua so?" he added. "Has she been given anything to drink, or hasn't she?"

"All of us have been trying our hands at persuading her," said Meng Yü-lou, "but she affects an inability to drink."

"You're not up to the task," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Let me give it a try. She's got no mean capacity."

Although Li P'ing-erh said the words, "I can't handle any more," she made no effort to withdraw.

Thereupon, the maidservants were instructed to reset the table and an elaborate spread of meat and vegetable dishes, along with other dainties of every kind, which had been prepared in anticipation of Hsi-men Ch'ing's return, was laid before them. Sister-in-law Wu, sensing that the time had come to take flight, asserted that she did not wish to have any more wine and withdrew to Li Chiao-erh's quarters to get out of the way.

Thereupon, Li P'ing-erh was seated in the place of honor, Hsi-men Ch'ing drew up a chair across from her and assumed the role of host, Wu Yüeh-niang sat on the k'ang with her feet on the frame of the brazier, and Meng Yü-lou and P'an Chin-lien sat down at the other two sides of the table. As soon as the five of them had taken their places they started to decant the wine. They didn't use small cups either, but called for large goblets of chased silver.

It was a case of:

First a cup for you,
Then a cup for me.

As the saying goes:

Romantic affairs are consummated over tea, and
Wine is the go-between of lust.

As the cups passed back and forth, the woman continued to drink until:

Her painted eyebrows drooped low, and
Amorous glances escaped the corners of her eyes.

Truly:

A pair of peach blossoms bloomed upon her cheeks,²⁵
Her brows and eyes proclaiming her a wanton wench.

When Yüeh-niang saw that the two of them were:

As stuck on one another as sugar candy,²⁶

and that:

The conversation was becoming rather risqué,²⁷

she found it so offensive that she withdrew to her own room and sent for her sister-in-law to keep her company, leaving the other three to entertain their guest.

They continued drinking until the third watch. By that time Li P'ing-erh's:

Starry eyes were all a blur.

Hardly able to stand on her own legs, she asked Chin-lien to accompany her to a part of the compound

Hsi-men Ch'ing, too, was:

Swaying to the east and tumbling to the west,

as he went into Yüeh-niang's room to ask her where they should put their guest for the night.

"Let her sleep in the room of the one whose birthday she came to celebrate," said Yüeh-niang.

"Where shall I spend the night, then?" asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"Spend the night wherever you like," said Yüeh-niang. "Or, better yet, go spend it with her if you want."

"Whoever heard of such a thing?" laughed Hsi-men Ch'ing, and he called for Hsiao-yü to help him off with his clothes. "I'll sleep in here tonight, then."

"Don't be so delirious," said Yüeh-niang. "Or do you want to provoke me into a real tirade? If you stay here, where do you suppose my sister-in-law is going to sleep?"

"Enough! Enough!" said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'll go and sleep with Meng the Third." Whereupon, he went off to Yü-lou's quarters to spend the night.

After she had accompanied Li P'ing-erh to the bathroom, P'an Chin-lien took her up to her own quarters in the front part of the compound, and that night she shared a bed with Old Mrs. P'an.

The next morning Li P'ing-erh got up and was combing her hair in front of the mirror when Ch'un-mei brought her some hot water to wash her face and helped her with her toilet. She noticed how clever Ch'un-mei was and, knowing that she was a maidservant who had enjoyed Hsi-men Ch'ing's sexual favors, she made her a present of a gold chataine with three pendant charms in the shape of three miniature toilet articles.

Ch'un-mei immediately reported this gift to her mistress and Chin-lien was profuse in her thanks, saying, "I've put you to the additional expense of being so generous to her."

"You really are lucky, Fifth Lady, to have such a fine maid," said Li P'ing-erh.

That morning Chin-lien had Ch'un-mei open the gate to the garden and took Li P'ing-erh and Old Mrs. P'an on an extended tour of the entire premises.

Li P'ing-erh noticed that a gate had been opened in the wall that had formerly separated Hsi-men Ch'ing's residence from hers, and asked, "When is Father Hsi-men going to start construction on the new building?"

"Recently he had the yin-yang master come over to give him an appraisal," said Chin-lien. "He's planning to:

Break ground and start construction.

Put it up and top it off,

in the second month. He's going to tear down your old house and combine the two pieces of property into one, erect an artificial hill and a summer-

house in the front, and make a large garden out of it. Then he's planning to build another three-room belvedere, to be called the Flower-viewing Tower, which will be lined up with my own to form one boundary of the grounds."

Li P'ing-erh made a mental note of everything she was told.

While the two of them were still talking together, Yüeh-niang sent Hsiao-yü to invite them back to the rear of the compound for some tea. The three of them then made their way to the master suite where they found Wu Yüeh-niang, Li Chiao-erh, and Meng Yü-lou keeping Sister-in-law Wu company as they waited for them, with the tea things already laid out.

Just as everyone was enjoying the tea and the snacks that accompanied it, who should suddenly appear but Old Mother Feng. When they had offered her a seat and served her some tea, Old Mother Feng pulled an old kerchief out of her sleeve, in which the four pairs of pins in the shape of the character for long life were wrapped, and handed it to Li P'ing-erh. No sooner had she accepted them than she presented one pair to Yüeh-niang, and afterward, a pair each to Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, and Sun Hsüeh-o.

"These must have cost you a pretty penny," said Yüeh-niang. "This will never do."

"My dear First Lady," laughed Li P'ing-erh, "it's not as though they were genuine rarities. I'm only offering them to you to give away to someone if you like."

Yüeh-niang and the others bowed in gratitude before venturing to stick the pins in their hair.

"I hear that your front door opens right on the Lantern Market," said Yüeh-niang. "It must be quite exciting. If we go for a look at the lanterns someday soon, we'll come pay you a visit. Pray don't pretend you're not at home."

"Let me extend an invitation to all of you ladies for that day," said Li P'ing-erh.

"You may not know it, elder sister," said Chin-lien, "but I've heard that the fifteenth is actually our guest's birthday."

"That settles it," said Yüeh-niang. "If it's really your birthday, every last one of us will come to wish you many happy returns."

"My humble abode is scarcely fit to accommodate a snail," laughed Li P'ing-erh, "but if you ladies deign to visit me, consider yourselves invited."

It was not long before they finished their morning repast, after which wine was served and they fell to drinking again. The time passed swiftly as they enjoyed each other's company until the sun began to sink in the west and the sedan chair came back to pick her up. Li P'ing-erh said her farewells, and her sorority of hostesses could not persuade her to stay any longer. Before leaving, she asked if she might be permitted to say good-bye to Hsi-men Ch'ing

"He had to get up early this morning," said Yüeh-niang, "and go outside the city gate to see off the district vice-magistrate." Only then, with:

A thousand thanks and ten thousand expressions of gratitude,

did Li P'ing-erh get into her sedan chair and go home. Truly:

The coupled halves of the peach stone

serve to evoke a chuckle;

Because inside, it will be found, lie

yet another couple.²⁸

If you want to know the outcome of these events, Pray consult the story related in the following chapter.