

Chapter 15

BEAUTIES ENJOY THE SIGHTS IN THE LANTERN-VIEWING BELVEDERE; HANGERS-ON ABET DEBAUCHERY IN THE VERDANT SPRING BORDELLO¹

As the sun sinks amid the western hills,
the moon rises in the east;

Even the span of a hundred years
is like wind-blown tumbleweed.

Before one knows it, the red-checked lad
one so admires,

In the twinkling of an eye turns into
a white-haired gentleman.

Do not waste the fullness of your youth,
so quickly does it pass;²

Even Heaven-sealing wealth and success
are as evanescent as clouds.

One might as well seek to divert oneself
among scarlet skirts;

Hugging the turquoise and cuddling the red
in houses of pleasure.

THE STORY goes that:

Light and darkness alternate swiftly, and before anyone knew it, the fifteenth day of the first month was at hand. The day before, Hsi-men Ch'ing sent his page boy, Tai-an, to deliver four trays of preserved fruit, two trays of sweetmeats in the shape of birthday peaches, a jug of wine, a tray of birthday noodles, and a set of heavy silk brocade clothing to Li P'ing-erh in honor of her birthday. The gifts were sent in Wu Yüeh-niang's name, accompanied by a card that read, "Respectfully presented with straightened skirts by the lady, née Wu, of the Hsi-men household."

Li P'ing-erh had just gotten up and was still engaged in doing her toilet. Calling Tai-an into her bedroom, she said, "I'm afraid I imposed upon your First Lady's hospitality the other day, and now she has gone to the further

"Mother sends her greetings," said Tai-an, "and Father sends his greetings too. They told me to say, 'It's only a little something for you to give away to someone if you like.'"

Li P'ing-erh told Ying-ch'ün to set up a small table outside in the parlor. There Tai-an was entertained with tea and four little boxes of delicacies. As he was about to leave, she gave him two mace of silver and a handkerchief of shot silk decorated with the symbolic representations of the "eight treasures."

"When you get home," she said, "please convey my greetings to all the ladies of the house. I'll send Old Mother Feng around with written invitations. Whatever happens, I hope they will all condescend to pay me a visit tomorrow."

When Tai-an kowtowed and went outside she also gave him a hundred cash for the two carriers who had brought the boxes containing her presents.

Li P'ing-erh lost no time in dispatching Old Mother Feng with a letter box containing five written invitations, inviting Wu Yüeh-niang, Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, P'an Chin-lien, and Sun Hsüeh-o to visit her on the fifteenth. At the same time she also sent Hsi-men Ch'ing a private note asking him to drop in on her later that evening to help celebrate her birthday.

The next day Wu Yüeh-niang, having told Sun Hsüeh-o to stay behind and look after the house, set out with Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, and P'an Chin-lien in four sedan chairs. All of them were dressed in clothing of figured brocade. Accompanied by the page boys Lai-hsing, P'ing-an, Tai-an, and Hua-t'ung, they arrived in front of Li P'ing-erh's newly purchased house, which was located in the Lantern Market on Lion Street.

The house consisted of a twenty-four-foot-wide frontage and three interior courtyards, receding along a vertical axis. The first part of the building was a two-story structure with windows on the upper floor that opened directly over the street. Inside the ceremonial gate that led into the second courtyard there was a row of three rooms on either side and a formal reception hall. A passageway through an antechamber led into the third courtyard, which contained three bedrooms and a kitchen. The open space behind the third courtyard, abutted directly on the garden of a distaff relative of the imperial family named Ch'iao.

Li P'ing-erh, knowing that Wu Yüeh-niang and the others were coming to see the lanterns, had furnished the second-story room that overlooked the street with standing screens, chairs and tables, and an array of decorated lanterns. She first ushered her guests into the formal reception hall and then, after they had performed the customary exchange of greetings, invited them back to the parlor in the rear courtyard for some tea. When they had finished changing their clothes in her room, tea was served, but there is no need to describe this in detail.

At noontime Li P'ing-erh invited her guests to return to the reception hall

Tung Chiao-erh and Han Chin-ch'uan, had been engaged to entertain them as they enjoyed the feast. After:

Five rounds of wine had been consumed; and
Three main courses had been served,

Wu Yüeh-niang and the others were invited to go up to the second-story room that overlooked the street to enjoy the display of lanterns as they continued their feast.

Hanging blinds of speckled bamboo had been let down under the eaves, from which an array of brightly colored lanterns were suspended. Wu Yüeh-niang was wearing a full-sleeved jacket of figured scarlet material, a stylish green silk skirt, and a sable cloak. Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, and P'an Chin-lien all wore white satin jackets and blue silk skirts, over which Li Chiao-erh also wore a brocaded aloeswood-colored vest, Meng Yü-lou a brocaded green vest, and P'an Chin-lien a brocaded scarlet vest. On their heads:

Pearls and trinkets rose in piles;
Phoenix hairpins were half askew,

while, from just behind the hair over their temples, there dangled innumerable pendant earrings in the shape of miniature lanterns of every description.

Leaning out of the windows of the second-story room, they looked down on the Lantern Market below where:

Crowds of people had congregated; and
The merrymaking was at its height.

Several tens of elaborate lantern-stands had been erected in the street, and peddlers were busy hawking their wares on all sides.

The men and women come to see the lanterns;
Were red as flowers and green as willows.

Carriages and horses rumbled like thunder;
Hills of lanterns soared into the Milky Way.⁴

What did this wonderful Lantern Market look like? Behold:

Insinuating themselves among the mountain rocks, a pair
of dragons sports in the water;

Concealed amid the sunset clouds, a solitary crane
ascends to the heavens.

Golden Lotus lanterns,

Tower of Jade lanterns,

Scintillate like a cluster of pearls;

Lotus blossom lanterns,

Hibiscus lanterns,

Scatter a thousand embroidered rosettes.⁵

Hydrangea lanterns,

Are chaste and immaculate;

Snowflake lanterns,

Are tumbled and tossed.

Scholar lanterns,

Bow and scrape, advance and retreat,

Preserving the manners of Confucius and Mencius;
Housewife lanterns,

Display virtuous demeanors and gentle dispositions,
Emulating the fidelity and resolve of Meng Chiang.⁶

There is a Buddhist monk lantern,

Depicting Yüeh-ming and the courtesan Liu Ts'ui;⁷

And an underworld assessor lantern,

Showing Chung K'uei seated with his little sister.⁸

There is a shamaness lantern,

Fluttering her feathered fan,

Pretending to subdue evil spirits;

And a Liu Hai lantern,

Bearing the golden three-footed toad on his back,

As it gobbles its string of cash.⁹

There are camel lanterns,

And green lion lanterns,

Bearing priceless rarities,

Snorting and roaring;

As well as gibbon lanterns,

And white elephant lanterns,

Proffering treasures fit to ransom cities,

Gamboling and playing.

All arms and legs,

Crab lanterns,

Cavort in the clear waves;

With gaping mouths and long beards,

Catfish lanterns,

Gulp down green algae.

Silver moths vie with one another in brilliance,

Snowy willows compete with each other in beauty;

Pair by pair, they follow in the wake of brocade sashes
and dangling pomanders,

Branch by branch, they brush against decorated pennants
and turquoise carriage curtains.¹⁰

Fish and dragons sport on the sand,

As the Seven Perfected Ones and the Five Ancients¹¹
present their vermilion texts;

Tasseled portieres are suspended,

While the Nine Barbarians and the Eight Tribes
come to offer their tribute.

Parading village mummers,
 'Troupe after troupe, drum up a dreadful din;
 Peddlers of toys and knickknacks,
 Item by item, tout the uniqueness of their wares.
 Among the revolving lanterns,
 One comes, the other goes;
 Amid the suspended lanterns,
 One bobs up, another down.
 There are vitreous vases,
 Depicting only a beautiful woman or rare flower;
 As well as mica screens,
 Portraying paradises on both mountains and seas.
 To the east,
 There are bedsteads of carved lacquer,
 And bedsteads of inlaid mother-of-pearl,
 The golds and greens of which blend their hues;
 To the west,
 There are lanterns spangled with gold,
 And lanterns striped with colors,
 Producing brocade effects that dazzle the eye.
 To the north,
 There are exhibited antiques and curios;
 To the south,
 Calligraphy, painting, vases, and incense burners.
 Patrician youths are out in force,
 From beneath low balustrades their kickballs
 rise into the clouds;
 Wellborn young ladies escort each other,
 As within lofty belvederes they show off
 their good looks.

The booths of the fortune-tellers are massed like clouds,
 The stalls of the physiognomists are arrayed like stars;
 They are prepared to expatiate on one's fortune
 in the impending spring,
 Or determine the success or failure of a lifetime
 with sure precision.
 Then there are those,
 Professional storytellers,
 Who, standing on a slope,
 Relate in doggerel and song the exploits of Yang Yeh;¹²
 And see those others,
 Itinerant Buddhist monks,
 Uttering their sounding cymbals

Elaborate upon the adventures of Tripitaka.¹³

'The sellers of Lantern Festival dumplings,
 Make imposing piles of their ingredients;
 'The makers of artificial plum blossoms,
 Attach them ubiquitously to dead branches.
 Paper cutouts of spring moths,
 Stuck rakishly in the hair over the temples,
 quiver in the east wind;
 Gold-flecked gimcrack hairpins,
 Twinkle atop chignons with a glitter
 that rivals the sun's.
 Standing screens depict the extravagant Shih Ch'ung
 and his brocade windbreak;¹⁴
 Beaded portieres display the twin perfections
 of plum blossom and moonlight.
 Though the attractions of the hills of lanterns
 cannot be exhaustively enumerated;
 'They surely must portend a bumper harvest
 and a happy year to come.

Wu Yüeh-niang contemplated the spectacle for a while, after which, observing that the crowd below was getting rowdy, she and Li Chiao-erh withdrew to the table and sat down to enjoy their wine. P'an Chin-lien and Meng Yü-lou, however, along with the two singing girls, continued to lean out over the windowsills and gaze at the scene below. P'an Chin-lien went so far as to tuck up the sleeves of her white satin jacket, revealing the brocade lining and exposing her ten slender fingers, which sported six gold stirrup-shaped rings. Leaning halfway out the window, she cracked melon seeds with her teeth and spit the empty shells onto the heads of the people below. All the while she and Meng Yü-lou maintained a steady stream of laughter and banter. One minute she called out, "Elder Sister, come and see. Look at the two hydrangea lanterns hanging from the caves of the house over there:

One comes, the other goes;
 Bobbing up, bobbing down.
 They're really something to see."

The next minute she said, "Second Sister, come and see. On the stand just across the street there's a big fish lantern with all kinds of small fry, turtles, shrimp, crabs, and so forth, tagging at its heels. They're really fun to watch."

A minute later she called to Meng Yü-lou, saying, "Third Sister, just look at the old lady lantern and the old man lantern over here."

As she spoke, a sudden gust of wind blew up and tore a gaping hole in the abdomen of the old lady lantern. When Chin-lien saw what had happened she laughed uproariously.

This had the effect of attracting the attention of the sightseers below.

Rubbing shoulders and nudging backs,

Lifting their heads and gazing upward;

Jammed together into an indivisible mass,

Treading on one another's heels,

in no time at all a considerable crowd of onlookers had gathered. Among them were to be found some dissolute young scamps who were not averse to offering their own assessments of the situation.

One said, "They must be dependents of some princely or noble household on an outing."

Another hazarded, "They must be the seductive concubines of some relative of the imperial family, come to see the lanterns. Otherwise, what are they doing dressed in palace style?"

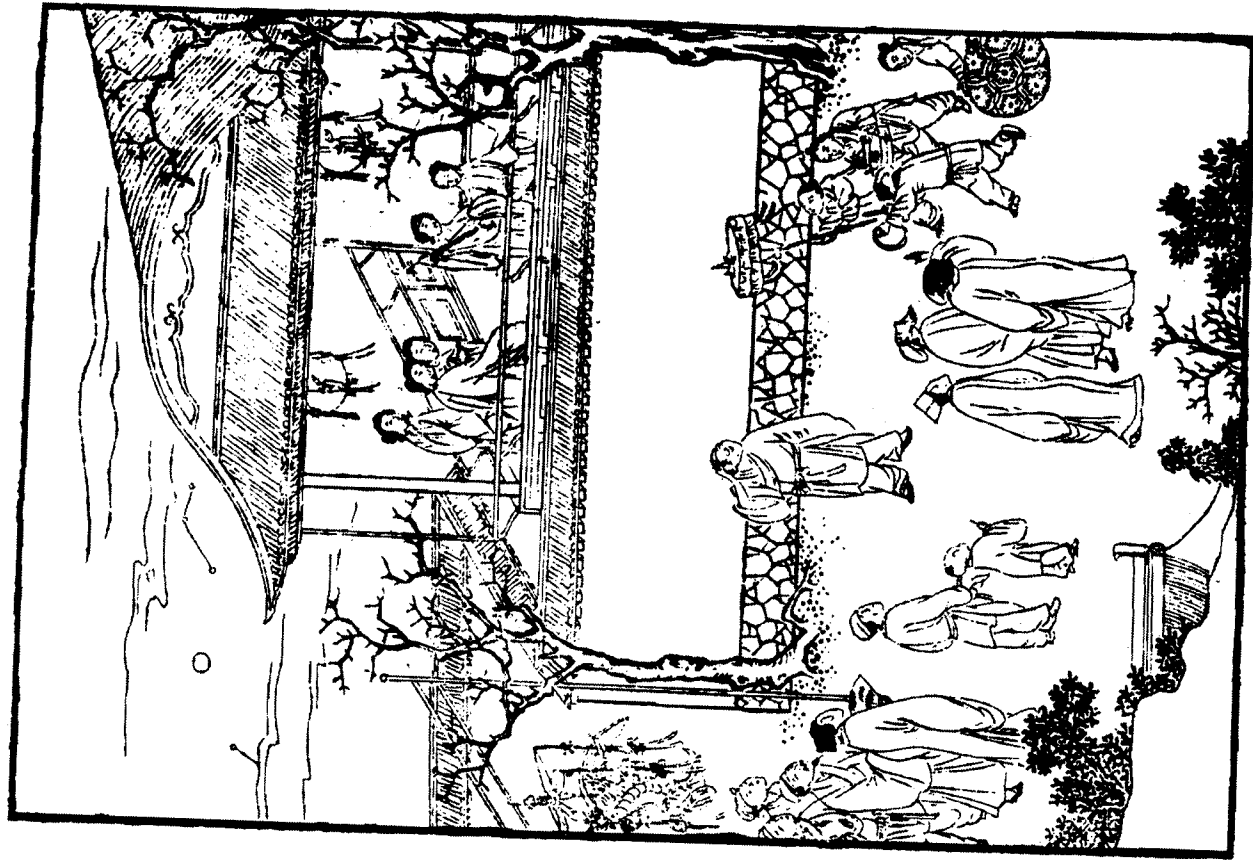
Another ventured, "They must be whores from the licensed quarter that some big spender has engaged to entertain him while he enjoys the lanterns."

Still another strolled over and said, "I'm the only one who can identify them. None of you will ever guess right. If you take them for whores, how do you account for the other four at the back? I'll tell you who they are: those two women don't belong to just anybody. They might as well be mates of King Yama himself or concubines of the General of the Five Ways. They're the womenfolk of the Honorable Hsi-men Ch'ing who owns the wholesale pharmaceutical business on the street in front of the district yamen and engages in moneylending to both officials and functionaries. You'd be well-advised to leave them alone. They must have come here along with his wife to see the lanterns."

"The one wearing the brocaded green vest I don't recognize, but the one wearing the brocaded scarlet vest with the turquoise beauty patch on her face looks like the wife of Wu the Elder who used to peddle steamed wheat cakes on the street. When Wu the Elder tried to catch her in the act of adultery in Dame Wang's teashop, the Honorable Gentleman just mentioned gave him such a kick that he died of the effects, after which he took her into his household as a concubine. Later on, her brother-in-law, Wu Sung, came back from the Eastern Capital and lodged a complaint against him, but ended up killing the lictor, Li Wai-ch'uan, by mistake, so that Hsi-men Ch'ing was able to get his assailant condemned to military exile, while he himself got out of the affair completely unscathed. She hasn't shown herself in public for the last year or two, but she's looking better than ever."

At this point another busybody chimed in, saying, "What's the point of wasting our time talking about the likes of them? Let's move along."

When Wu Yüeh-niang, from her vantage point in the upstairs room, became aware that a large crowd had assembled below, she told Chin-lien and



Beauties Enjoy the Sight in the Lantern-viewing Belvedere

Yü-lou to come back and join her at the table, where they listened to the two singing girls perform songs in celebration of the lantern festival while they drank their wine.

After a while, Yüeh-niang indicated that she was ready to make her departure by saying to her hostess, "I've had enough to drink. The Second Lady and I will go ahead home, but we'll leave our two sisters behind to keep you company a little longer and show our appreciation for your hospitality. Our husband isn't at home today, so there's no one to look after the place. When only the maidservants are there, I can't help worrying about it."

Li P'ing-erh could hardly let them go without a protest.

"My dear First Lady," she said, "I've scarcely had a chance to show my respects to you. Since your arrival today I haven't even had the opportunity to help you to a proper serving of anything. It's a festival occasion, after all, and yet you want to go home before the lanterns are lit or dinner is served. Even if Father Hsi-men is out today, as long as the young ladies are there, what is there to worry about? Wait until the moon rises, at least, and I'll see you all home myself."

"It's not that," said Yüeh-niang. "It's just that I'm not accustomed to drinking so much. If I leave my two sisters behind it will be just as though I were here myself."

"Even if you don't want any more yourself," said Li P'ing-erh, "that's no reason why the Second Lady shouldn't have another cup. The other day, at your house, I accepted cup after cup without demur, and you ladies refused to let me off. Now that you've been good enough to visit these cramped quarters of mine, though I have nothing to offer, you must let me do the best I can."

Thereupon, she took a large silver goblet and handed it to Li Chiao-erh, saying, "Second Lady, you must have a cup, no matter what. I know the First Lady has had enough, so I don't dare offer her a big one, but only a little one."

So saying, she filled a cup to the brim and offered it to Yüeh-niang, and then did the same for Li Chiao-erh, encouraging her as she did so with the words, "Second Lady, do drain this cup."

Yüeh-niang gave two mace of silver to each of the singing girls, and then, after waiting for Li Chiao-erh to finish her wine, got up to go.

Turning to Yü-lou and Chin-lien, she said, "The two of us will go on ahead. When we get home, I'll send a page boy back with a lantern to fetch you. Do come home then; there's no one to look after the place."

Yü-lou assented to this suggestion. Li P'ing-erh then saw Yüeh-niang and Li Chiao-erh out the door and into their sedan chairs before returning upstairs to keep Yü-lou and Chin-lien company as they continued to drink wine. Gradually, as it grew late:

The jade hare rose in the east,¹⁵

and the lanterns on the second floor were lit. The singing girls entertained them with songs as they drank their wine. But no more of this.

To resume our story, that day Hsi-men Ch'ing had invited Ying Po-chüeh and Hsieh Hsi-ta to dine with him at home, after which they set out together to enjoy the sights in the Lantern Market. When they arrived at the eastern end of Lion Street Hsi-men Ch'ing, because he knew that Yüeh-niang and the others were being entertained in the front second floor room of Li P'ing-erh's house and he didn't want his companions to see them, did not proceed to the western end of the street where the big lanterns were displayed, but came to a halt when he had gotten no further than the shop that sold gauze lanterns.

No sooner had he turned around than he ran into Blabbermouth Sun and Sticky Chu, who saluted him with the words, "We haven't seen you for ages, Brother, but you've been very much in our thoughts."

Seeing that he was accompanied by Ying Po-chüeh and Hsieh Hsi-ta, they upbraided them, saying, "A goddamned fine couple of fellows you are; going out on the town with our elder brother without giving us the word!"

"Brother Chu," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "you're doing them an injustice. We've only just run into each other on the street."

"Well now, where are you headed, then, after you've seen the lanterns?" asked Sticky Chu.

"We might as well go to the Great Tavern right here on Lion Street and have a few drinks together," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'd invite you all home with me if it weren't for the fact that my womenfolk are all out at a party today."

"Rather than letting you treat us to a round at the tavern," said Sticky Chu, "why don't we all go into the licensed quarter together and pay a visit to Li Kuei-chieh? It's only appropriate on a festival occasion like this that we should go wish her a happy new year and have some fun together. The other day when we were over at her place she appealed to us, and actually broke down and cried, saying that ever since she became indisposed last month not even your shadow has been into the quarter to see her. All we could do was to say that you must be busy in order to cover up for you. Since you're free today, we'll be happy to accompany you inside to pay her a visit."

Hsi-men Ch'ing, who was preoccupied by his assignation with Li P'ing-erh later that evening, tried to excuse himself, saying, "I'm afraid I can't make it today; I've got something to do. How about tomorrow?"

But he was quite unable to withstand the urgings of his cronies who:

Dragged him off, dead or alive.

Thereupon, he consented to go into the licensed quarter with them. Truly:

The shadows of the flowers under the willows
hold down the dust on the road;

Each time one sets out to enjoy them

one's pleasure is renewed.

If one could only assess the sums spent for a smile
in the metropolis;

Who knows how many commoners' households
they would serve to support?¹⁶

When Hsi-men Ch'ing and his companions arrived at the Li family establishment they found Li Kuei-ch'ing, all made up, standing in the doorway. She ushered them into the main room and greeted each of them in turn.

Sticky Chu then called out in a loud voice, "Invite Auntie Li the Third to come out at once! It's only thanks to our combined efforts that we've induced the Honorable Gentleman to pay you a visit."

Before long, the old procuress made her appearance, hobbling along with the aid of a stick.

After they had finished with the appropriate amenities, she said to Hsi-men Ch'ing, "I hope we haven't been remiss in the entertainment we've provided you, Kinsman. How is it that you haven't dropped in to see my daughter for such a long time? You must have taken up with a new sweetheart somewhere else."

"You've hit the nail on the head, madam," interjected Sticky Chu. "The Honorable Gentleman has recently had his eye on another tart of incomparable beauty and has been spending all his free time at her place. He doesn't give a thought to your Kuei-chieh any longer. In fact, if the two of us hadn't run into him in the Lantern Market just now and dragged him along with us, he wouldn't be here now. If you don't believe me, just ask Blabbermouth Sun here." Then, pointing at Ying Po-ch'ieh and Hsieh Hsi-ta, he continued, "And this goddamned pair, for their part, are:

Deities of the same persuasion."¹⁷

When the old procuress heard these words she cackled out loud, saying, "Well, Brother Ying, we've never done anything to get on the wrong side of you. Why don't you use your good offices to put in a word for us with our kinsman here? However complicated his affairs in the quarter may be, as the saying goes:

A practiced profligate doesn't confine his attentions
to a single whore;

A practiced whore doesn't reserve her blandishments
for a single patron.

The hole in the cash has much the same shape
wherever you find it.

There's no need for me to boast about our Kuei-chieh's looks. The gentleman has eyes of his own and doesn't require anyone to point out the obvious to him."

"To tell the truth," interposed Blabbermouth Sun, "this new tart that Brother's taken up with isn't even an inhabitant of the quarter. She's an outsider who doesn't give a fuck for the insiders."

When Hsi-men Ch'ing heard this he chased Blabbermouth Sun around the room, pretending to hit him, exclaiming as he did so, "Madam, don't pay any attention to this:

God-damned and man-condemned,¹⁸

old oily mouth! All he ever does is plague people to death."

This exhibition only caused Blabbermouth Sun and the rest to collapse in a heap with laughter.

Hsi-men Ch'ing then proceeded to pull three taels of silver out of his sleeve and hand them to Li Kuei-ch'ing, saying, "On this festival occasion I'd like to stand my friends a treat."

"I really couldn't agree to such a thing," Kuei-ch'ing affected to reply. "Give it to my mother."

"How now?" Auntie Li responded. "My kinsman must think so little of us that he doesn't think we can afford to furnish a feast, even on a festival occasion, for the entertainment of his distinguished friends. If you have to reach into your own pocket to defray the expenses, it will look as though we denizens of the licensed quarter are only interested in money after all."

At this juncture Ying Po-ch'ieh interrupted her, saying, "Auntie, if I were you I'd take what you're offered. As the saying goes:

Don't risk your luck by refusing the first gleanings
of the New Year: stash them away.

Just bring on the wine, now, as quickly as you can."

"That will never do," said the procuress, but even as she persisted in her protestations she accepted the silver and slipped it into her sleeve.

Making a deep bow, she said, "Thank you for your generosity, Kinsman." "Wait a minute, Auntie," said Ying Po-ch'ieh. "I've got a story for you. A certain young man was having an affair with a prostitute in the licensed quarter. One day, just for the fun of it, he disguised himself as a pauper and paid a visit to his regular establishment. When the madam saw how shabby his clothing was, she paid him no attention and let him sit there for some time without even offering him a cup of tea. The young man said, 'Auntie, I'm hungry. If you've got any rice, please bring me something to eat.' To which the old procuress replied, 'The bin is completely dry. Where would I get you any rice from?' 'Since you're out of rice,' the young man said, 'If you have any water, please bring me a little to wash my face with.' To which the old procuress replied, 'We haven't been able to pay the water carrier, so he

hasn't delivered any water the last few days.' At this, the young man reached into his sleeve, pulled out a silver ingot weighing ten taels, put it on the table in front of him, and told her to buy rice and order water with it. This flustered the old procuress so much that she blurted out, 'Kinsman, would you rather eat your face before washing your rice, or wash your rice before eating your face?'

Everyone laughed uproariously at this.

"I see you're still as quick to make fun of people as ever," said Auntie Li. "It so happens that, as the saying goes:

Such a thing may be said, but

It ain't necessarily so."

"Lend an ear," said Ying Po-chüeh, "I've got something else to tell you. The Honorable Gentleman has recently engaged the services of Brother Hua the Second's former sweetheart, Wu Yin-erh, from the back alley of the quarter. He isn't interested in your Kuei-chieh any longer. If we hadn't dragged him along with us today, do you think he'd be here now?"

"I don't believe you," laughed the procuress. "Our Kuei-chieh can be said, without exaggeration, to be superior to Wu Yin-erh in every way. Our establishment and our kinsman's family are bound together by ties that:

The sharpest knife could never sever.

What do you take our kinsman for, anyway? He's seen enough of the world, if you get right down to it, to know the value of true gold when he sees it."

When they had finished with their palaver, four folding armchairs were set up in the parlor, on which Ying Po-chüeh, Hsieh Hsi-ta, Sticky Chu, and Blabbermouth Sun sat down, in the positions of honor, while Hsi-men Ch'ing assumed the place of host, across from them. The old lady then excused herself in order to supervise the preparation of the wine and accompanying delicacies for the party.

Sometime after her departure, Li Kuei-chieh herself finally appeared. Her hair was done up in a casual "bag of silk" chignon in the Hsiao-chou style, fastened in place with a gold filigree pin. Her coiffure was further augmented by plum-blossom-shaped ornaments with kingfisher feather inlays, a pearl headband, and gold lantern earrings. She was wearing a white satin jacket that opened down the middle, with purpled edging and green brocade sleeve linings, over a red silk skirt. Indeed, she was so made up as to look as though she were:

Modeled in plaster, carved of jade.

After having:

Neither correctly nor precisely,

made a bow to the company and uttered a word of greeting, Kuei-chieh sat down with Kuei-ch'ing at the two unoccupied ends of the table. Before long, one of the girls of the establishment brought in seven cups of tea on a square tray of painted lacquer. The teacups were the color of snowy linen, the silver

teaspoons were in the shape of apricot leaves, and the tea itself, which was flavored with attar of roses and the kernels of melon seeds, was of a bewitching fragrance. Kuei-ch'ing and Kuei-chieh served a cup to each of their guests and kept them company until the tea was finished and the raised saucers were cleared away.

A servant then came in to wipe off the table and began to lay out the delicacies to go with the wine. Just at this juncture, from behind the hanging blind over the door, a number of slabbily dressed young men, known to the trade as "cribbers," were observed:

Sticking out their heads and craning their necks,

awaiting the right moment to make their way inside and kneel down in front of the company.

They held three or four pints of melon seeds in their hands, which they presented to the host with the words, "A humble offering to Your Honor on this festival occasion."

Hsi-men Ch'ing recognized their leader as a fellow called Yü Ch'un, or Stupid Yü, and asked him, "Which of you are here today?"

"Tuan Mien, or Half-baked Tuan, Sha San, or Yokel Sha, and Nieh Yüeh, or Tiptoe Nieh, are just outside," replied Stupid.

Half-baked Tuan and the others then came inside and, noticing that Ying Po-chüeh was one of the company, kowtowed to him, saying, "Master Ying, you're here too."

Hsi-men Ch'ing stood up, announced that he would take the melon seeds, and then, rummaging in his purse for a tael's worth of silver, tossed it on the floor.

When Stupid Yü had picked it up, he and his companions kowtowed on their hands and knees, saying, "Thank you for your generosity, sir," and beat a hasty retreat.

There is a song to the tune "Imperial Audience" that describes the conduct of these "cribbers."

Assembling at one place,

Congregating at another,

Their status may be low, but their pretensions are great.

If you rub them the wrong way, they'll give you a hard time.

No part of the licensed quarter is off their beat.

At parties they'll join the fun,

Ever ready with idle conversation;

Only after doing their turn will they disperse.

The money they make isn't much,
 So why do they make such a fuss?
 They live off the spittle licked from
 the tiger's mouth.¹⁹

As soon as Hsi-men Ch'ing had gotten rid of the "cribbers," wine was served and the party settled down to drink. Kuei-chieh:
 Filled the golden cups to the brim,
 Dangling her pair of red sleeves.
 Dainties were prepared of the rarest kind,
 Fruits were provided just in season.
 Hugging the turquoise and cuddling the red,
 The flowers were gorgeous and the wine heady.

After:

Two rounds of wine had been consumed,
 Kuei-ch'ing and Kuei-chieh, one playing the psaltery and the other the *p'i-p'a*, accompanied themselves as they sang the song suite on the beauties of spring, the first number of which, to the tune "Flowers in Brocade," begins with the words:

The fair weather is balmy.²⁰

Just as they were in full voice, three young men appeared, wearing black clothing and brown leather boots, who were known to the trade as "ball clubbers."

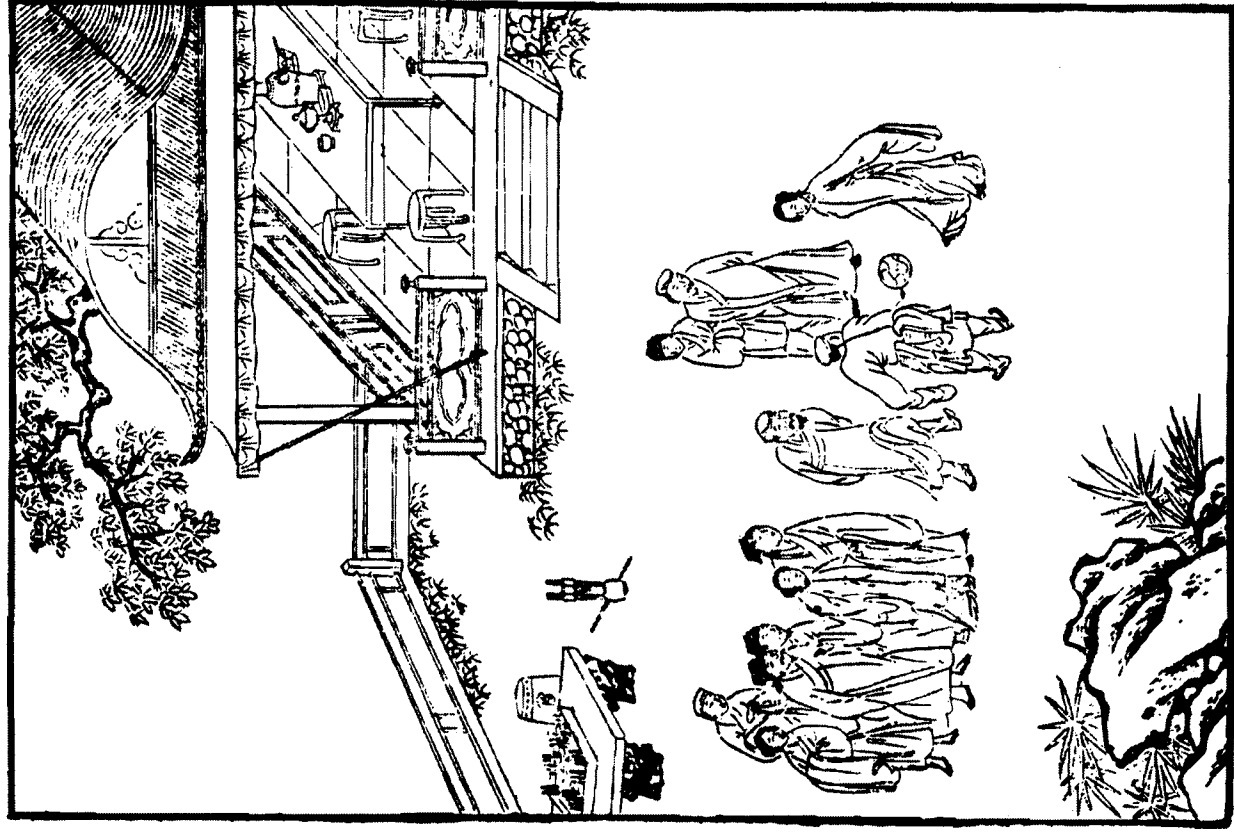
They held a gift box containing a roast goose and two bottles of vintage wine in their hands, which they presented to the company, after making a half obeisance, with the words, "A humble offering to Your Honor and his distinguished friends on this festival occasion."

Hsi-men Ch'ing was already acquainted with them. The first was called Pai T'u-tzu, or Baldy Pai, also known as Mohammedan Pai, the second, Hsiao Chang Hsien, or Trifler Chang, and the third, Lo Hui-tzu, or Mohammedan Lo.

"Wait outside a little while," he said to them, "until we've finished our wine. Then we'll come out and kick three rounds with you."

So saying, he sent them on their way with four plates of delicacies from the table, a large jug of wine, and a saucerful of savories for their refreshment.

When the "ball clubbers" had eaten their fill and inflated their ball, Hsi-men Ch'ing came outside and played a round of kick-about with them in the courtyard. After him it was Kuei-chieh's turn, and she joined a pair of them to form a triangular threesome in which the other two faced off as receivers to field her endeavors. As she did her best to "hook" and "chip" with her kicks, they were lavish with meretricious praise, and whenever she made a mistake they were quick to retrieve the ball for her.



When they were through, they made up to Hsi-men Ch'ing in the hope of reward, saying, "Kuei-chieh's 'ball-handling' is more professional than ever. When she 'volleys' with a 'flick pass' or a 'chip kick' we hardly know what to do with ourselves. In another year or two she and her sister will rank among the best 'ball-handlers' on this side of the quarter. There won't be another 'hooker' or 'chippy' in the same league. Already they're ten times better than the girls from the Tung establishment on Second Street."

By the time Kuei-chieh had kicked two rounds:

Dust had settled about her eyebrows,

Sweat had moistened her cheeks;

She was panting and puffing, and

Her limbs ached with exhaustion.

Extracting a folding fan from her sleeve, she endeavored to cool herself with it while she stood hand-in-hand with Hsi-men Ch'ing and watched Kuei-ch'ing engage Hsieh Hsi-ta and Trifler Chang in the same three-cornered game of kick-about. Baldy Pai and Mohammedan Lo stood on the sidelines, emptily gesturing with their feet and running back and forth to retrieve the ball when any of the players made an error.

There is another song to the tune "Imperial Audience" that describes the conduct of these "ball clubbers."

Idle when at home,

Forever on the make,

No honest trade for them,

Yet their kickballs are never

far from their sides.

Every day they haunt the street corners,

Paying no heed to the poor,

But toadying to the rich.

From early morning till late at night,

They seldom eat a full meal.

Though they never make much money,

They make ends meet by hiring out

the favors of their wives.

Hsi-men Ch'ing was still in the licensed quarter, looking on at his companions as they challenged each other to backgammon, played at kickball, and drank wine, when Tai-an arrived on horseback to fetch him.

Approaching his master as inconspicuously as possible he:

Whispered into his ear in a low voice,

"The First Lady and the Second Lady have already gone home. Mrs. Hua told me to ask you to come over as soon as you can."

On hearing this message, Hsi-men Ch'ing gave Tai-an whispered instructions to take the horse around to the back door and wait for him there.

Then, without even taking another drink, he accompanied Kuei-chieh back to her room and sat down with her for only a few minutes, after which, feigning the need to answer a call of nature, he came out to the back door, jumped on his horse, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Before he had made good his departure, Ying Po-chüeh sent the servant of the house out to intercept him, but Hsi-men Ch'ing merely said, "I've got something to attend to at home," and refused to return.

He did remember, however, to leave Tai-an a tael and five mace of silver with which to take care of the three "ball clubbers." The proprietors of the Li family establishment were so worried lest Hsi-men Ch'ing be on his way to visit Wu Yin-erh's place in the back alley that they sent a maidservant after him who tailed him all the way to the gate of the quarter before coming home. Ying Po-chüeh and the rest continued drinking, and it was not until the second watch that the party finally broke up. Truly:

If any curse me, curse away;

I'll have my pleasures anyway.

If you want to know the outcome of these events,

Pray consult the story related in the following chapter.