

The Confidence in the Game

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On your finger, a diamond is really the tiniest of objects. But its demonic power is beyond all imagination. You may be the handsomest; you may be the smartest. Such qualities might have brought you status and acclaim in times gone by. These days, though, regale yourself as you would with the fanciest of clothes; if a diamond is not gracing that little digit of yours, all you can ever hope to attain is some label like “slick young man.” Dress more plainly and you would not likely escape being dubbed a “poor fellow.” Conversely, should your hand sport a diamond of even four or five carats, “slick” would instantly become “classy,” and “poor fellow” would then be perceived as the scion of a wealthy household. Let’s think about it. A four- to five-carat diamond is only slightly larger than a cherry pit, and not nearly the size of an almond. Yet it can actually determine a person’s worth. And to an even greater extent than a man’s, a woman’s appeal is most intimately connected to these jewels. Is she pockmarked with missing front teeth? Does she have a face that brings on a three-day retch? Never mind! She becomes an instant center of attention once she puts on that glittery, sparkly diamond. Far from suffering nausea, those who see her will drool all over themselves. Psychologically, though, we can’t say that

every one of these people actually covets another's diamond. It's just that once in its presence, their attention is drawn directly to the gem, much as sunflowers to the sun or iron shavings to a magnet. Maybe physicists should look into the principle behind this.

Why am I not getting to my story, but going on and on with this bloated preface? Well, I have my reasons. Here in Shanghai, what's on the surface remains of paramount value. Time and again, people who do not have so much as a day's worth of food in the house are eager to dress themselves properly, in expensive finery from head to toe. They would rather exchange their winter furs for summer silks at pawnshops, claiming all the while that they are saving themselves the trouble of storage. People like that are known as embroidered pillows or, most popularly, con artists.

One such was Wang Sanxin, though *his* "pillow" was stuffed with much more than just straw. While his family did not exactly qualify as "well-heeled," there was always enough food on the table. On the other hand, he was not at all as well-off as he looked in full regalia. He wore a hat of silver-tipped mink, a fur-trimmed gown of dark blue silk with circular patterns, an embroidered vest of dark satin brocade, and dark green satin slip-on shoes with light soles. The attire was matched to a pale-complexioned face smeared regularly with Snow Blossom cream and adorned with two bushy eyebrows and a head of jet-black hair. What was most eye-catching about him, though, was the diamond on the ring finger of his left hand, a stone of perhaps four carats. Seeing that, who would doubt that he was heir to a family fortune of at least forty or fifty thousand?

No third person ever knew the origin of Sanxin's diamond ring. Of the two who did know, one was Sanxin himself; the identity of the other remained locked in Sanxin's heart. He never told a soul, and there was no way for anybody to find out. So we might as well say that only Sanxin knew. Because of that ring, Sanxin was able to close a number of deals. Some people would swear that the hat on his head

and the clothes on his back were all obtained through the diamond. But since the ring continued to be in his possession, how on earth did he manage to acquire the hat and the clothes? *That* was the question that baffled one and all.

Armed with his impressive ensemble and the eye-catching diamond, Sanxin could not very well pass up spending three dollars an hour for a taxicab to show himself off a little during the New Year's festivities. The day was the fifth of this lunar year, when every family was feasting in honor of the god of wealth. Most of the pedestrians on the streets had a trace of ruddiness on their cheeks, as if in competition with the dark-faced immortal. Sanxin's cheeks, however, retained the color of Snow Blossom cream. He was not about to welcome the god of wealth in the ordinary way. The god other people were greeting was dark-complexioned. The human person he aimed to meet up with would be decidedly fairer.

That day, after dinner in some restaurant or other, he emerged to hail a cab for a spin around town. It occurred to him that he'd been spending quite a bit of money on taxis the last few days without getting anything out of it. He'd heard that "Pug-Nose" Mao Lin and "Tea Leaf" Xiao Lu had rented a room in the Hotel Europa; they were getting a large group together for dominoes. With the twenty silver dollars he had with him, he thought he'd go try his luck. His winnings could pay for all that taxi fare, or else he could just chalk up any losses as a business expense. So why not?

Having thus made up his mind, he ordered Ah Liu the driver to take him to the Hotel Europa on the boulevard. It was a familiar destination. Taking the elevator to the sixth floor, he knocked lightly three times on the door of room 99 and announced his name on cue. As the door opened, he saw that the place was already packed. He exchanged greetings with a few of the people he'd known well from similar gatherings. Most of the others he recognized as rather prominent folk — stockbrokers, managers, agents, and such. Having skimmed off money

from everyone as part of their jobs, these people were there to redistribute their wealth. In that sense at least, they were living up to their fancy professional titles.

Then he noticed Xiao Lu, one of the hosts, presiding over a metal box full of chips. Mao Lin was seated next to the dealer to lay down the tiles. The dealer was a large fellow with a pockmarked face as red as a pig's lungs. Because he was having tremendous success, taking in a lot and giving out very little, he became extraordinarily exuberant. Because he was too occupied to mop up the sweat running down his brow, the pearly beads settled naturally into the flaws in his countenance. Too bad the temperature in the room was too high for the flow to stop; otherwise, it might have turned out to be a rare cure for facial pits.

After purchasing twenty dollars worth of chips from Xiao Lu, Sanxin positioned himself next to the gaming table. But he did not place any bets; he was waiting for the right time. It just so happened that the burly dealer, after winning for a while, began a bad run with consecutive losses. Taking advantage of the downturn, Sanxin threw down five dollars worth of chips on the upper tile, which showed a washout for all bettors when it was turned over. The people there grumbled about his impulsiveness costing them money. Sanxin well knew that especially among gamblers, there was the common tendency to blame somebody whenever money was lost. The best way to handle the situation was to ignore it. Or else, if disputants were hotheaded enough, an actual altercation would follow. For this reason, he kept his mouth shut, responding to all comments with a smile. He put down ten more dollars—and won. More success followed until he was up fifty against the big man. Then the dealer rallied, taking back twenty. The thought occurred to Sanxin that the thirty dollars left to him was gotten after expending much effort and suffering everyone's disdain; he was not about to give the money back. Thus deciding to beat a retreat, he cashed in his chips with Xiao Lu and got out of the place.

At the elevator shaft, Sanxin saw the counterweight dangling be-

low; the car was still taking on passengers up on the seventh floor. He pressed the button and watched as the car slowly descended, coming to a stop in front of him. Sanxin stepped in as the operator opened the gate. Then he saw something flash before his eyes. Inside, there was nothing especially dazzling, just a girl of perhaps twenty. She had on a beige leather padded jacket trimmed with a border of silver and black, a skirt of dark, glittery silk, and a pair of patent-leather high-heel shoes. Her coiffure was styled into a bun. The tendrils over her temples did not require any eau de cologne or pomade to enhance their sheen. There was a diamond-studded hairpin on one side of her head, a pair of hoops with tiny diamonds on her ears. On one wrist was a gold watch, on the other a greenish "imported gold" bracelet. The name aside, this type of bracelet was actually combustible, costing less than a half-dollar to buy. Still, people who were eager to keep up with the latest fads were fond of wearing one. They liked the idea that something so cheap could look so bright and sparkly, especially on a person with whitish arms. (I need hardly mention that the girl's arms were like tender lotus roots in a shallow pond.) It was too bad that she also had on a pair of light-gray silk gloves that shielded all of her slender fingers from view. But her face was powdery and translucent, with shining eyes and gleaming teeth, a nose delicate as jade, and lips like cherries—in every way the very incarnation of an illustration from one of those books on ideal beauties. Even as Sanxin stared at her, she did not stop shooting glances his way. For it appeared that, in both age and appearance, Sanxin and the girl were a perfect match, neither one finding anything to dislike about the other. The attraction, as they say, was mutual and immediate.

Each pair of eyes locked onto the other; electric sparks flew in both. Good thing the wooden and expressionless operator was standing between them in the elevator, becoming a kind of porcelain insulation board blocking the passage of any direct current. In that way, the inevitable combustion which occurs when a negative yin spark meets a positive yang spark was avoided. Soon they were at street

level. Sanxin let the girl get out before him. He was thinking that she was someone unfamiliar, someone he had not seen before in any of the pleasure spots he frequented. Maybe she wasn't a local. It would be hard to figure out where a local might be headed once she left the hotel. Then another thought occurred to him. The seventh floor was where they held those foreign-style banquets for the *filles de joie*; perhaps someone had just taken her there. But, no, he ought not to be thinking uncomplimentary thoughts about such a fine-looking person. From the way she carried herself, she was evidently from a prominent household. But he shouldn't be so hasty. He should see what type of vehicle she got into before jumping to any conclusion. If she hailed a rickshaw, for instance, he could then invite her to share the ride. That could turn out to be a great opportunity for a tête-à-tête.

Next to the Hotel Europa was an alleyway reserved for parking. Numerous automobiles, horse-drawn carriages, and taxis lined up there all hours of the day and night, Sanxin's rickshaw among them. A red sedan from a cab company was there as well. The driver inside had his feet propped up on the dashboard and his head resting on the opened window as he napped. It was difficult to fault the man for doing so. He had only five dollars to show for an entire day's work the day before. Feeling the itch last night, he'd gotten himself into a round of dominoes with his fellow drivers. Not only did he lose all the money in his possession, but he also wound up six dollars in arrears. That he forfeited an entire night's sleep in addition goes without saying. Because he was on duty today, he had to take the car out, but fortunately for him, his passenger had gone inside for dinner, allowing him to catch his forty winks. Anyway, by his napping for an hour, the company would be getting three dollars of income, certainly a nice profit in view of his recent loss of eleven dollars plus a night's sleep after a whole day's work. But his sweet dreams were less than half over when they were interrupted. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was his woman passenger. He stretched his arms back to open a rear door for her and gave his eyes a quick rub. Then he started up the motor.

Watching the woman get into the car, Sanxin could not help letting out a silent cheer. This time, he assured himself, he would surely snare his prey. Still, there he was in a rickshaw and she in an automobile. Not only would that make her impossible to tail, but she might also form a bad first impression of him, making it difficult to get to first base. No, he would not give up his quest merely on account of some motorized vehicle! He jumped into a cab of his own posthaste, barking at Ah Liu behind the wheel to hurry after the red car.

It was just after ten o'clock. The night was very young, Sanxin was thinking. If he could just catch her and get her to a theater, he need not worry about an opportunity for a chat. It would be perfect if he could get her to the Rainbow District for a movie, where he might get to fondle her in the dark. What's more, with his knowledge of smatterings of different foreign languages, she might welcome his ability to fill her in on parts of the plot. Then it would be even easier to get close to her.

Although he had the details mapped out in his head, the girl seemed bent on going against them. She did not take any circuitous cruise, but headed directly west. Her cab turned at the New World Cinemas and then went south along the racetrack straight to Linyin Road in the foreign concession area beyond the West Gate. It stopped at the front entrance of a spacious two-story row house. The woman got out to rap at the door as the driver turned the car around and, with a few honks of his horn, sped off to find his companions for yet another round of dominoes.

When he saw the cab he was tailing come to a stop, Sanxin told his driver to follow suit about two and a half houses back. He watched as the cab door opened, and the girl walked out, head held high; then it slammed shut again. Sanxin could not help feeling distressed that she never looked back, seemingly oblivious that anyone was following her. He got out of the cab to examine the door of the house under the street light. On it was a small brass plaque, engraved in black with Residence of the Zhou Family of Xuancheng. So this really was a

prominent family! Sanxin could not help talking pleasure at his own presence. So what if the girl had yet to show any interest. As the old saying went, "The cure for a proper woman is an ardent man." Besides, she did make eyes at him. It merely remained for him to put out a little; the rest would happen on its own. But since she had already gone inside, he shouldn't be waiting around like a dope right then. Tomorrow evening he'd be back to stake her out.

Having thus settled on his course of action, he took the cab home. At dusk the following day, Sanxin did indeed turn up at the door of the Zhou residence, where he kept watch for over two hours. Not only was there no sign of the girl; the front door did not open even once. Anyone else standing out there all that time would surely have lost patience and gone off. But Sanxin had learned from his experiences over the years. He had developed a remarkable maturity. Sure, he had to be on his feet out there for a long time, but he remained unfazed. The neighbors, though, must think it strange for a well-dressed man to be standing under somebody's eaves like that. Several came out to stare at Sanxin, causing him some discomfort. There had to be a back door to the house, he thought. Perhaps she went out the back way. In that case, wouldn't it be pretty stupid of him to wait out there like that? He wandered down a little alley off to the side to explore. Sure enough, pasted on the door of the first house was a red slip of paper with Zhou Residence, Rear Entry written on it. The door was ajar, with the glare of lightbulbs beyond it. Inside, there was the sound of crackling oil and the pervasive aroma of meat sizzling in a pan. This had to be the family's kitchen. Sanxin felt his stomach gurgling as he stood there. He had started out without any dinner. Even though he had been so intent on his mission that he'd forgotten about the need for food, the smell of the cooking made the roundworms in his belly cry out against their unjust neglect. The cries became so formidable that Sanxin could hardly ignore them. Too bad he did not know the Zhou woman well as yet, he was thinking. Otherwise, he could

have been a drop-in guest and shared in the family's gastronomical delights.

The alley dead-ended, much like the intellect of an illiterate. Sanxin went all the way down it before realizing that he had to retrace his steps. The mouth of the alley was next to the front door. He had been standing across the street, so how on earth could he have missed her had she actually gone out? Perhaps she left earlier, or else she was not going anywhere that day. With nothing in his stomach, he could not very well remain there. He might as well get home, have some dinner, and come back earlier tomorrow. With enough determination, a steel pole can be ground into a needle. He need not doubt that, in time, he would succeed.

Sanxin kept up his watch four days in a row, getting to his post earlier each day. On day four, he was there right after lunch and waited until nine-thirty at night without catching so much as a glimpse of her. His inner resolve began to waver: This was one needle that might never be ground. He would come back again the next day, bringing along some kind of snack so that he need not go home for sustenance. If nothing came of it, then he must have been mistaken in his calculations. Maybe this was the house of her relatives; she might have gone back home after an overnight stay. If he went on looking for her here, then his effort would become a big joke in the history of his amorous adventures.

Now, Wang Sanxin was a man of determination. He got up bright and early the following day, just as he'd planned. Then he spent thirty cents at the Wing On Company for a box of tea snacks and went back to the side of the street across from the Zhou's, where there was a little store selling cigarettes and dry goods from Beijing. The proprietor had gone away on business and his daughter was manning the counter. While hanging around the last three days in order to carry out his noble resolve, Sanxin had become acquainted with her, occasionally going in for cigarettes and casual conversation. When she

saw him there once more, she thought that the plainclothes policeman had come back again. "You're even earlier today," she said as she greeted him with a dimpled smile.

Sanxin nodded as he returned the smile. "I have something to leave with you," he said, handing her the box of snacks for safekeeping even though he had no intention of venturing beyond the immediate environs of the Zhou residence.

This time, the old adage that all good things come to those who wait finally came true. He had been there since early morning. Around five in the afternoon, he saw someone who looked like a servant come out of the Zhou house to get rickshaws. The man hailed five in all, lining them up in front of the house. Sanxin's heart throbbed even as he feigned nonchalance with the shop girl. Who were the people across the street, he was asking her. Why would they order so many rickshaws? The girl was not at all dense and had by then guessed what Sanxin was up to. She gave him the straightforward answer that she knew he was looking for. "The Zhou's moved here only last year, so we don't know much about them. I heard that the head of the household works for the government in Beijing. His immediate family includes quite a few women—daughters and concubines, all really pretty. They are fond of going out for movies and other kinds of amusement. I don't know why they haven't left the house these last few days. The rickshaws mean that now they are about to go out again."

Before she finished, seven or eight females in heavy makeup emerged from the house, looking like flowers draped with brocade. It goes without saying that the group included the someone who had occupied Sanxin's every thought for an entire week. Seeing her now, he could not contain himself and bounded out of the shop, no longer interested in what the shop girl was telling him. The larger women sat alone in the rickshaws; the slimmer ones shared. That girl was paired with a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old. As she was getting in, her gaze drifted in Sanxin's direction until she caught sight of him. Her face instantly took on a startled expression. She shot him a glance, and

then another. Sanxin never bothered to acknowledge her eyes with his own. He was too occupied with getting a rickshaw for himself, to go after the entourage as if his life depended on it. He didn't hear the shop girl calling after him about the snack box he was leaving behind.

As they sped along, the girl turned her head again and again to look at Sanxin—unmistakable evidence of her interest. Sanxin's joy knew no bounds. The pullers ran extremely fast, and Sanxin momentarily forgot he was in a rickshaw. Instead, he felt he was flying on a cloud, chasing after a coterie of immortal maidens. Only when they reached the entrance of the First-Class Fragrance Restaurant did he regain his orientation. Realizing that the women were going in as a group, he quickly paid his fare and followed them upstairs. They had evidently reserved a private room. A placard with The Family Zhou written on it was hanging on the door. The rooms immediately adjoining had also been spoken for. Fortunately, the hour was still early, well before the arrival of the dinner crowd. Well acquainted with the waiters in the main dining hall, Sanxin was able to get them to slip him into a room right next door. He ordered his meal, all the while listening to the scattered sounds of happy chatter from the other side of the wall; he could not tell which of the birdlike chirps came from her. All he could do as he ate was wait for the women to finish and leave the restaurant—whereupon he tagged along as before. This aroused the suspicions of those in the girl's entourage. One after another they turned in their rickshaws to look at him. The most suspicious of them was the girl's young seatmate, who was aware that she was turning to look at him time and again. Now she was saying something to the girl, who Sanxin could see was shaking her head. Obviously, the younger girl was asking whether she knew the person following them and was getting a negative answer. He smiled to himself at the thought that most young ladies nowadays loved to meddle in someone else's business, even while worrying that someone else might meddle in theirs. How ludicrous they were!

Soon the rickshaws arrived at the Second Theater, coming to a

stop in front of it. Sanxin could not help letting out a moan. Business at the place had really picked up the last few days, and the women undoubtedly had reserved seats. Having come unprepared, all he could hope to get after queuing up would be a hard seat high up among the rafters; he would not even be able to have eye contact with them. What was he to do? Well, since he was already there, he would make the best of the evening. He was acquainted with a number of the functionaries at the theater. Still, he got the expected answer as to available seats: There were none. He walked around on the second level, from where he saw the women filing one by one into the seats of a reserved box up front. Sanxin was beside himself and urged one of the ushers to think of something. But while people like him might have done all they could to accommodate customers during bad times, the bustling business they were now enjoying had given them inflated opinions of themselves. The man kept shaking his head. There was nothing he could do; Sanxin ought to get there earlier tomorrow. At his wit's end, Sanxin could only say, "I don't want a seat anymore. Just tear off a ticket stub for me." The man did as he was asked, and Sanxin found a square foot of space for himself among the hired help. He was indeed far away, but there was nothing cutting off the line of sight between him and the reserved box with the women seated inside. That girl had no inkling that Sanxin would be situated up where he was, and even though she looked around again and again, her gaze never turned in his direction. Unable to call to her, Sanxin could only agonize in silence.

Things remained that way for over an hour before a minor opportunity presented itself. The girl, having had too much tea, needed to visit the restroom. She was leaving her seat by herself! At last, thought Sanxin with glee. He would wait for her by the ladies' room. Before she could go in, he would invite her to come by herself for a performance the next day. But alas, even before she started off toward her destination, her young partner from the rickshaw suddenly told

her to wait up; she, too, was going along. Seeing all this, Sanxin could only curse his luck.

Nevertheless, what was transpiring was not really unlucky for him after all. For even though his location was remote, anyone going from the reserved box to the ladies' room had to pass by it. The two women, their heads down, were talking to each other as they walked along. When they got to where he sat, nothing in the world could have made him forgo the chance for personal contact. He let out a loud cough. Startled, the girl turned and could not help betraying a bit of elation on seeing him. She smiled broadly, as if to say that she was delighted to find him. Sanxin felt extremely fulfilled at this. He was particularly glad that the other girl, who was walking very fast, had gone on ahead without noticing the exchange; no one else could know what passed between them. It was only after the two girls were on their way back that the younger one saw him in his seat, wedged between two old, unwashed amahs. She chuckled, then said something to her companion, who turned around to look again at Sanxin, flashing him another smile and a quick wink. Sanxin was in seventh heaven. The misery he had been feeling for the past hour or so quickly vanished into the clouds.

Now that the girl knew his location, she kept looking up at him, her eyes full of tender feelings. Sanxin could tell that she was still inexperienced, that it would not be difficult to win her over. It was just that there were too many people around her; he would be wise not to be too rash. For the moment, there remained the chance of getting to her when the show was over. If he somehow failed to take advantage of it, his only recourse would be to play stakeout detective again tomorrow—in which case, he could not guess how many days would go by before he'd get to see her again. After the performance, however, he'd have to rub shoulders with the crowd, and with everyone looking on, he couldn't very well speak freely. He would be forced to hand her a written note and hope his luck would hold out. He did not

know whether she could read, but from all indications, she should not be illiterate. Anyway, he'd at least make the attempt and then see what would happen.

So he took out a cigarette wrapper and scribbled the following message on it with a pencil:

Please come here by yourself for the matinee tomorrow. If you are not interested, then don't bother. Otherwise, do not miss the appointment under any circumstances.

The message was brief and simple. He crumpled it into a ball and hid it in the palm of his hand. When the show was over, he stationed himself at the top of the stairs, where the girl quickly spotted him. She deliberately let her companions get ahead while she lagged some distance behind. Sanxin could hardly contain his joy. Then, noticing that she carried a fox-fur muff, he knew what to do. He waited until she drew near before walking down the stairs alongside her; then he slipped the balled-up message surreptitiously into the muff, his fingertips brushing against her jadelike wrist as he did so. She made no sound. Sanxin would have encouraged her to say something, but that younger girl up ahead was looking back and urging her to catch up. At that, Sanxin lost his nerve. He kept silent as he made straight for the front entrance, pretending to wait for a taxi, while keeping his eyes fixed on the girl's every move. He watched her come down the stairs, take out the note, flatten it out, and read it under a light; then she stuffed it nonchalantly back into the muff before any of her companions noticed. Sanxin could only be impressed by her cool composure. Since she did not throw the note away, he was sure she would not reject him. Anyway, everything would come out in the wash the following day. As she got into her rickshaw, he saw her roll her eyes flirtatiously at him before going off. The happiness this brought Sanxin is beyond anything I, the storyteller, have ever felt; I cannot therefore describe it to you.

First thing the next morning, Sanxin went to the Second Theater

to reserve a couple of seats, then returned there right after lunch. He also bought generous quantities of melon seeds, pastries, and fruit. How pleasant it would be to munch and chat together, once the girl showed up! His anticipation was so keen that he never expected to have to wait and wait. From twelve-thirty to four o'clock—a couple of lifetimes—he waited, before he concluded that she was not coming. That in itself might not much matter. He had clearly written on the note yesterday that she should not bother to come if she was not interested. But wasn't she interested in him after all? The thought that all the emotional turmoil of the last few days was going for naught was just too much to bear. He was becoming greatly distressed, when suddenly from behind him came a fragrant breeze. He spun around and saw the girl, standing outside his reserved box with a grin on her face. For Sanxin, that moment was like coming upon a rare treasure. He jumped up quickly and escorted her to her seat. When he asked her why she was late, she only smiled. Her fragrance invaded his nostrils in waves, working like an anesthetic. He had a whole slate of questions ready for her, but now nothing escaped his lips. To tell the truth, Sanxin was, as the old Shanghainese saying goes, like a soft clay Buddha in a jar of hot water. He was already falling to pieces.

THEY REMAINED THERE from four o'clock until the play ended. It was not an especially long time, but long enough for them to have had a good conversation. Sanxin learned that she was the eldest daughter in the Zhou family. The girl with her yesterday was her youngest sister. She had another sister living in Beijing. The other women were all her father's concubines. Little wonder they all seemed so coquettish, with their shiny hairdos and powdered faces. Sanxin noticed that she seemed less than experienced when she talked. Then he remembered how difficult it was to get her there. He knew he could not just let her off his hook or she might be gone forever. So he decided to abandon his false mask of propriety and asked her directly to get a

room with him at the Hotel Europa afterward. Miss Zhou replied that she wouldn't go to the Hotel Europa—there were many who'd recognize her. They might tell her father, and then there would be hell to pay. Sanxin suggested several alternatives, all of which she vetoed. A place was either too shabby or too likely for her to bump into someone she knew. But these were the most prominent hotels in Shanghai, Sanxin thought, even though none seemed satisfactory. The only other possibility would be Paradise Villa on Bubbling Well Road. He didn't know if she'd be willing to go way out there, but he made the suggestion anyway. Miss Zhou appeared to be somewhat persuaded. "Let's just do that," she said as she flashed him another smile.

The Villa was a place frequented by persons of status and wealth, as its extraordinarily steep prices indicated. For an overnight stay, including food, the tariff always exceeded twenty dollars. Sanxin of course knew this, but in the discussion, his sole concern was to secure Miss Zhou's assent. Cost was not something he remembered to take into account. Now that she'd said yes, however, he naturally began to think about what he must spend. Whatever that would be, since he'd asked her, he had to grin and bear it. It's like going out to catch rare crabs with a golden hook: You had to put up the capital. He then thought of the great distance between where they were and the Paradise Villa. It just would not look right for them to go by rickshaw. No way could he save the three-dollar cab fare. As long as he had to spend all that money, he ought to do it right. So he asked an usher to get him a taxi from the company next door and to have it wait for them at the theater entrance. When the play ended, they got into it together and ordered the driver to head toward the Paradise Villa.

As to the propriety of getting a room at a hotel under those circumstances, it does not really matter whether or not you readers understand. I'm not going to take the trouble to explain it for you. In any case, the two of them had a scrumptious meal, then confessed to each other the anguish of their passion in recent days. "That diamond ring on your finger is really rather impressive," said Miss Zhou

to Sanxin as she leaned against a pillow. "Won't you take it off and let me have a look?"

As filled with happiness as he was at that moment, Sanxin could never have refused the request; he slipped the ring right off. Taking it in her hand, Miss Zhou examined it over and over before asking Sanxin how many carats the diamond weighed. Sanxin actually did not know. His answer was that it was roughly four-and-a-half carats. "Then it could be worth one thousand eight hundred dollars?" she wanted to know.

"A good guess," said Sanxin. "Even at four hundred dollars a carat, it would be worth that much."

Miss Zhou nodded, then quickly slipped the ring on her own finger. Smiling, she asked Sanxin whether it looked good. The question made Sanxin's heart skip a beat. He was concerned that if he answered yes, she might very well then have just asked him to let her keep it. That would be catastrophic. As for no, it was more than the fact that he simply could not bring himself to say it. There was no reason in the entire universe for someone to put on a diamond ring and then disprove of its looks. In the current situation, he could only swallow hard and tell her that it looked fine.

Luckily for him, Miss Zhou did not respond to the remark. She merely pressed her powdered cheek against his. "Are you cold?" she asked as he shook his head. This should have been their supreme moment, their time of sheer ecstasy. For Sanxin, however, the inner happiness that should have filled his being had left him, along with those four-and-a-half carats, settling now into Miss Zhou. All he had left was a wildly beating heart.

Miss Zhou became greatly animated. She prattled on and on about one subject or another. Sanxin did not know where she found so much to talk about. Of all she was saying, however, not a word touched upon the subject of the diamond ring. In his anxiety, Sanxin could manage only vacant responses. The ring was securely around her finger; he didn't dare tell her to take it off. As if in a trance, he

waited for her to return it to its rightful owner. Neither of them made a move until long after midnight. "Aya, it's gotten late," Miss Zhou exclaimed with a glance at her watch. "They'll be questioning me when I get home. I still have lots to talk to you about, so let's just keep the room another day. I'll see you here again in the evening. You have to take me home now. I live so far away and it's so late. The way back is frightful."

When he heard all this, Sanxin saw another twenty dollars fly out the window. But she had the diamond ring, which she might return to him at the next meeting. This, therefore, was money he could not avoid spending. He also heard her asking him to escort her home. What could he have done but tell the bellhop to phone for a taxi to do just that? The taxi came shortly thereafter, and Sanxin got into it with the girl for the long trip outside the West Gate. All along the way, he said nothing. He was still thinking she might just return the ring to him when she got home. How really wonderful that would be! But she was oblivious to his thoughts as she left the cab, merely reminding him not to forget their appointment. She knocked on the door, smiling at him again before going into the house. With eyes wide open, Sanxin watched as she took the four-and-a-half carats in with her. The door slammed shut, leaving him alone on the roadside with the cab. The scene was not unlike that of a week ago, when he'd tailed her to that very spot.

Sanxin returned to his own house with a heavy heart. He kept his left hand hidden in his sleeve, as if it had committed some sort of crime; he did not dare let his wife see it. Luckily for him, she did not notice a thing. In any case, she could never have imagined a wise veteran like him suffering a setback like that. The night passed quickly, and Sanxin had no choice but to go to the Paradise Villa the next evening and wait for Miss Zhou. A dark fear continued to gnaw at his insides. What would he do if she simply went off with the ring and never showed up? It was a good thing then that Miss Zhou proved to be a woman of her word: She was there before it got dark—even in-

terrupting his dinner—and treated him with great affection. The diamond ring was indeed on her finger. She acted as if she'd forgotten about it, however, making no reference to it at all. In spite of his deep anxiety, Sanxin could only carry on with her as if nothing had happened. This rendezvous was identical to that of the night before. Around one-thirty, she again wanted Sanxin to take her home, as well as to hold on to the room for another try the day following.

The same story repeated itself for nearly a week. The ring aside, Sanxin's total expenses now exceeded one hundred dollars. Poor man. In the very beginning, he was spending the money he had won. By the second day, he was already digging down to where it hurt. After that, he became completely broke and had to pawn his dark brocade vest and his mink hat for the necessary funds. It was fortunate for him that the weather was cooperating. The February temperatures remained mild, and so he could get away with wearing a gown and a small chapeau without anybody suspecting anything. Still, this little adventure of his was turning out to be the costliest of his life. But even though he now felt regretful and resentful in the extreme, the diamond ring was still in the girl's clutches. He had no choice but to continue expending capital to keep her happy. None of this bothered Miss Zhou, who asked to see him day after day without so much as thinking about returning the ring. At his wit's end, Sanxin now sought out a friend of his, a Mr. Resourceful, for a solution to his problem.

Mr. Resourceful let out a guffaw when he heard about all that had transpired. "I never thought I'd see the day when you, thirty years a midwife, would wrap a baby butt-side up. This woman's a real schemer. She saw that you were rather openhanded when she got hold of your ring. She thinks that she can get more out of you, not minding getting together with you day after day. To her, you're a steady bank account. She never suspected that you'd turn out to be someone with zero reserves. Now that things have come to this pass, there is no way out for you except to use her own scheming against her. But don't ever, under any circumstances, let her see through to what you'll be doing.

I have a friend in town who's a jewel merchant. He told me the other day that there is now a kind of pseudodiamond made from chemicals. While new, the stuff is indistinguishable from the real thing, losing its coloring only with time. It's not cheap, either, retailing for ten dollars a carat. Didn't you tell me that your diamond weighs four-and-a-half carats? Well, then, let's make a chemical diamond of a little over six carats and set it onto a ring." Then he gave Sanxin the details of the plan. "You'll also need to have seven hundred dollars in bills available at a moment's notice. If you can't come up with that amount, I'll lend it to you for the short while we'll be needing it. If we carry out the whole plan, as greedy a female as she is, there is no way she can help taking the bait. When everything's over, don't forget you'll be owing me a few gourmet foreign meals in posh restaurants."

Sanxin clapped his hands together in delight upon hearing this. He begged this Mr. Resourceful to go with him into town, find the jeweler friend, and set up everything according to plan. All that happened subsequently will be revealed as the rest of the story unfolds.

Three days later, Sanxin again had dinner at the Paradise Villa with Miss Zhou. They had just entered their room to relax and chat when the bellhop brought in a name card. "Someone here to see Mr. Wang," he announced. Sanxin gave the card a once-over. "Do you know who this person may be?" he cheerfully inquired of Miss Zhou. She saw the name Huang Hucheng on the card, along with Huang-Hu Company, Jewel Merchant in small print in the right corner; she admitted that she was not acquainted with the person. "The man owns a jewelry firm which does a lot of business," Sanxin said. "Even my wife buys from him regularly. This is about the diamond ring I gave you the other day. It belongs to my wife, who was letting me wear it for fun. A day or so ago, she saw that it was missing and demanded to know its whereabouts. I almost let the cat out of the bag then, so I had no choice but to ask the boss of this company to get me a ring with a slightly larger stone. If it suits your fancy, I'll just make a present of it to you. Let me take that smaller one back to my wife to save

myself a lot of explaining. I've been meaning to tell you all this before. Now that he's here to look for me, I guess he's got the goods with him." At that, he nodded to the bellhop. "Ask Mr. Huang to come in."

Miss Zhou was quickly impressed by Huang Hucheng's resplendent attire and by his elegant demeanor. He surely looked like the head of a jewelry firm. Once in the room, he showed unusual deference to Sanxin, repeatedly inquiring about his health. He also wanted to send his regards to the young madame at the Wang residence, asking why it had been so long since she had been to see them at the store. "It's the New Year's holidays," smiled Sanxin. "She's been busy playing games for petty stakes or going to the theater. She simply hasn't the time to go shopping for jewelry. Have you got the stuff with you?"

"I've got it here! I've got it here!" Huang Hucheng repeated as he fished out a small, brocade-covered box from his pocket. He handed it over with the cover open. Sanxin took out the ring to inspect it with Miss Zhou. The "diamond," large as a fingertip, dazzled the eyes with its sparkle under the lights. The other stone on Miss Zhou's hand not only appeared smaller; it also seemed to be less brilliant. Huang Hucheng then took out an invoice, showing that the stone weighed 6.2 carats and had a value of \$2,480. It took Miss Zhou no time at all to remove those four-and-a-half carats and to return them to Sanxin without waiting for him to ask. Then she put on the new stone, which glittered and glowed as if on fire. Huang Hucheng put in a few words of praise as Miss Zhou's countenance betrayed her joy.

"Now that you've decided on the purchase, I must beg your forgiveness concerning an unpleasant matter," said Huang to Sanxin. "Because our company has benefited from doing so much business with your wife in the past, we should not be concerned even with a sum of twenty or thirty thousand, much less ten percent of that amount. But this is the beginning of the year, and the first entry on our ledgers. Also, this is not a transaction with the young madame

herself. Then, too, speaking frankly, this piece of merchandise is not from our company, but is something taken on consignment from another firm. We've had to put down some deposit money on it. Even so, I cannot presume to ask you to settle the entire amount right away. But please remit a thousand dollars to me first, so that I can begin to take care of my immediate expenses. As for the remainder, I can easily put it on the young madame's account and bill her at the proper time."

Sanxin appeared to take offense at this. "Is it possible that you distrust me?" he asked, the anger evident in his voice.

Huang Hucheng tried to be conciliatory. "I would never, never dare do that," he said. "As I was saying, the merchandise is not ours, but taken on consignment from elsewhere only after we paid a deposit. If you don't believe that, then consider why I would be asking for only a thousand for something worth over two thousand dollars."

This calmed Sanxin down. "In that case, just wait a while," he said. "I'll go home and get you the thousand dollars." He rushed off, telling Miss Zhou to stay put. A half-hour or so later, he was back with a fistful of paper currency. "It's late right now, and the banks are all closed," he said to Huang Hucheng. "I have no more than seven hundred dollars cash in the house. I simply cannot come up with the whole amount tonight. So how about just taking seven hundred for now? Come back tomorrow. I'll withdraw another three hundred from the bank for you."

Huang Hucheng kept shaking his head. "I must beg your pardon," he said. "My firm is strapped for cash at the moment and we cannot advance the difference. The choice is clear: If you want to take the merchandise, you'll have to put down the thousand and not a dollar less. If you're short right now, I'll have to take the diamond back. We'll see about the deal on another day."

Sanxin's face showed hesitation. Without saying anything, he looked over at Miss Zhou. Having listened intently to the exchange, Miss Zhou was thinking that she would not give back the ring in a million

years, now that she had it in her possession. Recognizing Sanxin's problem with the seller, she interjected a solution. "No problem," she said to him. "The pair of diamond earrings I have on cost five hundred dollars to buy. Just tell him to hock them for three hundred, and then redeem them for me tomorrow." As she spoke, she unhooked the diamond-studded hoops from her ears to hand over to Sanxin. Sanxin then handed them over to Huang Hucheng, telling him to get to a pawnshop.

Huang Hucheng was not shy. He went off with the jewelry, returning with four hundred and fifty dollars. He turned the pawn ticket and the cash over to Sanxin, who then took out three hundred to combine with the seven hundred he had with him for the thousand-dollar total, which Huang Hucheng accepted. As for the invoice, Sanxin struck a match and burned it up. Taking out the one hundred fifty that was left, he asked Miss Zhou whether she needed any cash. "Fifty dollars will be enough for me," Miss Zhou said. "You keep the hundred and the pawn ticket with you. That way, you won't have to go through much trouble tomorrow getting my earrings back."

From that day on, the Paradise Villa never saw another trace of Sanxin. Miss Zhou did show up quite a few times to look for him there. Some time afterward, she went searching around the various theaters without knowing what she would say to him if she found him. At the very time she was doing that, Sanxin was dining tête-à-tête with his wife. "Diamond earrings are the rage right now," his wife was saying. "I want to get myself a pair to wear around."

"That's easy enough," said Sanxin, smiling. "I've had my eye on a pair costing four hundred fifty at a jeweler's. Too bad I only have a couple hundred on hand right now. Wait until I scrape together another two hundred fifty. I will definitely get them for you to put on and show off."