

## Chapter 81

### HAN TAO-KUO TAKES ADVANTAGE OF A CHANCE TO APPROPRIATE THE GOODS; T'ANG LAI-PAO DEFRAUDS HIS MASTER AND DISREGARDS HIS BENEVOLENCE

All things are determined by Heaven,<sup>1</sup> there is no point in seeking to alter them;<sup>2</sup>  
The Lord of Heaven's control of just retribution is both clear and inescapable.  
Those who give rein to their lascivious thoughts and defile the wives of others;  
Will suffer the ingratitude of subordinates who betray them and steal their goods.  
Not to mention the fact that after one is dead others will be up to their tricks;  
It has ever been true that when one loses power one's servants will be ungrateful.  
It is deplorable that Hsi-men Ch'ing should have accumulated such unfavorable karma;  
That he enabled unscrupulous scoundrels to enjoy his wealth for half their lifetimes.

**T**HE STORY GOES that after Hsi-men Ch'ing had entrusted Han Tao-kuo and Lai-pao with four thousand taels of silver and sent them to the Chiang-nan region to purchase goods, they proceeded along the way:

Imbibing the wind and resting by water.<sup>3</sup>

Stopping by night and traveling by day,  
until they arrived in Yang-chou, where they sought out the home of Miao Ch'ing in order to secure accommodations. When Miao Ch'ing read Hsi-men Ch'ing's handwritten note and remembered how he had done him:

The favor of saving his life,  
he did everything in his power to entertain the two of them, enabling them to spend their days:

Scanning the flowers and inspecting the willows,  
Drinking wine and seeking to gratify themselves.<sup>4</sup>

One day, early in the winter:

2 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

The frigid clouds were austere,  
The crying geese were desolate,  
The trees were shedding leaves,<sup>5</sup>  
The landscape had turned bleak,  
Homesickness was insurmountable.<sup>6</sup>

Thereupon, the two of them exerted themselves to visit one place after another, spending their remaining resources to purchase piece goods, and storing them in Miao Ch'ing's home preparatory to their departure.

Prior to this, Han Tao-kuo engaged the services of a singing girl named Wang Yü-chih from the Old Quarter in Yang-chou, whom he had patronized in the past, and Lai-pao engaged the services of the younger sister of Lin Ts'ai-hung, named Lin Hsiao-hung, to help them entertain the Yang-chou salt merchant Wang Ssu-feng and Miao Ch'ing on a daylong excursion to Pao-ying Lake, which was some distance from Yang-chou.

When they arrived back in the licensed quarter, it turned out to be the birthday of the madam of Wang Yü-chih's establishment, and Han Tao-kuo invited them all to a party to celebrate Auntie Wang the First's birthday. For this purpose, he sent his young employee Hu Hsiu to purchase wine and comestibles for the occasion, and also to invite the traveling merchants Wang Tung-ch'iao and Ch'ien Ch'ing-ch'uan to join them. Who could have anticipated that the two of them, along with Wang Ssu-feng, duly showed up, but Hu Hsiu did not return until sunset.

Han Tao-kuo, who was already somewhat inebriated, took him to task, saying, "Who knows where this rascal has been guzzling wine, only to show up now? He is reeking with alcohol, and our guests have already been here for what seems like half a day. Who knows where you have come from, but you can be sure I'll reckon with you tomorrow."

Hu Hsiu looked askance at him and left the room, muttering as he went, "You have some nerve to take me to task when at home your wife is:

Lying down with spread legs to solicit trade,  
and you are here:

Clambering on top in order to drop your load.  
Your master back at home is patronizing your wife and fucking the life out of her, which is the only reason he has entrusted capital to you to do business out of town. Meanwhile, you are enjoying yourself here while your wife is suffering who knows what at home. It's only because no one has exposed your true state of affairs that you are still able to play the role of a decent human being."

He said all this in the presence of Wang Yü-chih's madam, who took him outside and admonished him, saying, "Master Hu, you are drunk. You'd better go into your room and sleep it off."

Hu Hsiu, however:

Making all kinds of threatening noises,  
refused to go into his room.

Who could have anticipated that Han Tao-kuo, who was engaged in entertaining his guests, formally garbed in a white satin robe cut like that of a Taoist priest, over an undergown of green wool, felt shoes, and woolen socks, should have overheard the way in which Hu Hsiu was:

Letting off his hot stinking farts of protest,<sup>7</sup>  
and become enraged.

Striding outside, he gave him two swift kicks and cursed him, saying, "You lousy uncouth slave! As long as I can afford to pay you five cash a day, I will have no trouble finding a replacement. You can get out of here immediately."

But Hu Hsiu refused to leave; standing in the courtyard and raising his voice, he said, "What right have you to drive me out? I haven't been remiss in handling the accounts, while you are patronizing whores, yet you want to get rid of me. Just see if I don't report what you've been up to when I get home."

Lai-pao endeavored to pacify Han Tao-kuo and pulled Hu Hsiu aside, saying to him, "Dog bone that you are, you're altogether too hard-nosed when you're drunk."

"Uncle Pao," Hu Hsiu responded, "Don't you interfere. What have I had to drink? Let me have it out with him."

But Lai-pao persisted in pushing him into his room and putting him to bed. Truly:

Wine does not befuddle people, they  
befuddle themselves.  
Beauty does not delude people, they  
delude themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Lai-pao succeeded in getting Hu Hsiu back to his room and putting him to sleep. But no more of this.

Han Tao-kuo was apprehensive lest the traveling merchants he was entertaining would laugh at him, so he and Lai-pao returned to the party where:

Drinking vessels and game tallies lay helter-skelter,  
and proceeded to offer wine to his guests and help them to amuse themselves. The three singing girls, the two sisters Lin Ts'ai-hung and Lin Hsiao-hung, along with Wang Yü-chih:

Played their instruments and sang and danced,  
as the company enjoyed themselves:

Amid clustering blossoms and clinging brocade,  
Gaming at forfeits and playing at guess-fingers,  
until the third watch before the party broke up.

The next day, Han Tao-kuo wanted to give Hu Hsiu a beating, but Hu Hsiu protested, saying, "I don't remember a thing about it."

Lai-pao and Miao Ch'ing:

Resorting to both appeals and threats,<sup>9</sup>  
succeeded in persuading him to desist.

To make a long story short, one day, when they had finished making their purchases of piece goods and had packed them up and loaded them onto

their boat, Miao Ch'ing presented them with some parting gifts, and a copy of their accounts, and saw the two of them off, together with Hu Hsiu. Wang Yü-chih, along with Lin Ts'ai-hung and her sister, also saw fit to serve them with drinks at a farewell party on the dock. They set out on the tenth day of the first month, but of the events of their trip there is nothing to tell.<sup>10</sup>

One day, as they approached the Lin-ch'ing customs station, Han Tao-kuo was standing on the prow of the boat when he happened to see a neighbor of his named Yen the Fourth sitting on the deck of a boat that was coming downstream toward him on the way to pick up an official in Lin-ch'ing.

Upon catching sight of Han Tao-kuo, he raised his hand in greeting and shouted to him, "Han Tao-kuo, your master passed away during the first month."

By the time he finished speaking, his boat, which was moving fast, had shot past him.

When Han Tao-kuo heard these words, he kept the information to himself, keeping Lai-pao in the dark by not telling him about it.

It so happened that at that time the provinces of Honan and Shantung were suffering from a severe drought. The land was scorched for thousands of li, the cultivated fields and mulberry groves were unproductive, and the price of cotton goods had become temporarily inflated to the point that a bolt of cotton fabric cost a third more than its normal price. The local merchants from the countryside were compelled to take their money with them and travel as far as the docks at Lin-ch'ing in order to buy directly from the itinerant merchants.

Han Tao-kuo consulted with Lai-pao, saying, "The piece goods on our boat are worth something over four thousand taels. At present, since the going price for such merchandise has gone up by one-third, we might as well sell off half our cargo. That would facilitate our payment of the duty at the customs station, and were we to wait until we get home to sell the goods, we would not do any better. Not to sell when the market is favorable would really be deplorable."

"Although what you say may be true enough," said Lai-pao, "I fear that if we proceed with the sale, when we arrive home it may elicit the disapproval of our master who is the owner of the goods. What would we do then?"

"If the master should object," responded Han Tao-kuo, "I will take responsibility for it."

Since Lai-pao was unable to dissuade him, they proceeded to sell off a thousand taels worth of piece goods on the dock.

At this point, Han Tao-kuo said, "Lai-pao, why don't you and Hu Hsiu remain on the boat to take care of paying the duty, while I and my young servant Wang Han pack the thousand taels into saddlebags and go home by the overland route in order to tell our master about the situation."

"When you get home," said Lai-pao, "whatever you do, get our master to send a letter to His Honor Ch'ien Lung-yeh at the customs house asking him to reduce the transit duty on our cargo and let our boat through before the others."

Han Tao-kuo nodded in assent and, together with his young servant Wang Han, proceeded to pack their saddlebags and set out for Ch'ing-ho district. But no more of this.

One day, they entered the city through the protective wall outside the South Gate just as:

The sun was beginning its gradual descent.

Who could have anticipated that on the street they happened to encounter Chang An, the caretaker of Hsi-men Ch'ing's ancestral graveyard, who was propelling a pushcart full of wine, rice, and food boxes on his way out the South Gate.

When he caught sight of Han Tao-kuo, he called out, "Uncle Han, you have returned home."

Han Tao-kuo noticed that he was wearing mourning and asked him the reason for it, to which he replied, "His Honor has passed away, and tomorrow, the ninth day of the third month, is the day of the seventh weekly commemoration of his death. The First Lady has asked me to transport this load of wine, rice, and food boxes to the graveyard in preparation for the ceremony of burning paper money there tomorrow."

When Han Tao-kuo heard this, he remarked, "How regrettable! How regrettable! To be sure:

The mouths of the pedestrians on the road  
are like memorial tablets.

The story is not untrue."<sup>11</sup>

As he whipped up his donkey and proceeded into the city, it was already getting dark. Behold:

The teeming crossroads are all ablaze with  
the light of burning lanterns;

The Temple of the Nine Stars is enhanced by  
fragrant mist and tolling bells.

The wheel of the bright moon is suspended  
above the sparse woodlands;

A handful of scattered stars<sup>12</sup> serves to  
light up the azure firmament.

Within the camps of the Six Imperial Armies,  
The wailing of painted bugles frequently resounds;

On the upper floors of the five drum towers,

Water drips in the bronze tanks of the clepsydras.

On all four sides the evening fog,

Darkly encompasses the dancing pavilions  
and singing platforms;<sup>13</sup>

In the three markets a cloak of mist,

Faintly enshrouds the green gauze windows  
and vermilion gates.<sup>14</sup>

Pair by pair, the strolling beauties  
return to their boudoirs;  
One by one, the young scholars close  
the blinds in their studies.<sup>15</sup>

As Han Tao-kuo entered the crossroads of the city he debated with himself whether or not to go, as he had originally intended, straight to the house of Hsi-men Ch'ing. But since he had learned that Hsi-men Ch'ing was already dead, and it was also late in the day, he decided, instead, to go to his own home to spend the night and consult with his wife before going to Hsi-men Ch'ing's place the next day. Thereupon, he and Wang Han, whipped up their donkeys and proceeded straight to their house on Lion Street. The two of them dismounted their donkeys, dismissed the bearers that had come with them, and called for the door to be opened, after which Wang Han proceeded to carry their luggage and saddlebags inside.

When the maidservant caught sight of them, she reported to Wang Liu-erh, saying, "Father has come home."

The woman welcomed him inside, where he paid obeisance to the Buddha and the spirit tablets of his ancestors, brushed the dust from the journey off his clothes, and saw to the disposition of the saddlebags and luggage in the parlor. Wang Liu-erh helped him off with his outer garments, and saw him into a seat, while the maid provided him with a serving of tea.

Han Tao-kuo first told her about the events of his journey and then went on to say, "I ran into Brother Yen the Fourth along the way, who told me that the master has died; and just now, as I arrived at the city wall, I also ran into Chang An, the caretaker of the master's ancestral graveyard, who was propelling a pushcart loaded with wine and rice on his way to the graveyard. He told me that tomorrow is the day for the seventh weekly commemoration of his death. So the report turns out to be true. He seemed well enough when I left, so tell me, how did he happen to die?"

Wang Liu-erh said:

"Weather is characterized by unexpected storms;  
Man is subject to unpredictable vicissitudes.  
Who can be sure that nothing will happen to him?"

Han Tao-kuo then proceeded to open up the saddlebags, which contained clothing and other valuables that he had purchased while in Chiang-nan, and emptied the two pouches containing the thousand taels of silver. One sealed packet at a time, he dumped them on the surface of the k'ang, and when he opened them, they were seen to contain nothing but glistening "snowflake" silver.

Turning to his wife, he said, "These are the thousand taels of silver that I realized by selling off part of the cargo on the road. In addition to which, there are two packets containing a hundred taels that I made for myself on the side. It's already late today, but I can deliver them to his place tomorrow morning."

He then went on to ask his wife, "After I had left, did he continue to patronize you or not?"

"While he was still alive," she said, "everything was all right. But are you really planning to deliver this silver to his place?"

"That's just what I want to discuss with you," Han Tao-kuo responded. "How would it be if we kept some of it for ourselves, and sent the other half to his place?"

"Phooey!" his wife exclaimed. "What a simpleton you are! It's time to stop being so foolish. Now that he's already dead, and no one from here is still over there, what further connection do we have with him? Rather than delivering half of the silver to his place and running the risk of their raising a ruckus over the whereabouts of the rest, it would be better to be:

Once ruthless, ruthless to the end,  
and use this thousand taels of silver to hire mules for ourselves and abscond to our daughter's place in the Eastern Capital with it. There's no reason to worry that our kinsman's place in the grand preceptor's mansion will be unable to accommodate us."

"That would require us to abandon this house of ours," said Han Tao-kuo. "It won't be possible to dispose of it on such short notice. How about that?"

"What a feckless creature you are!" retorted his wife. "Why don't we get your younger brother Han the Second to move in, and leave him with some silver to look after the place? Then, if anyone from Hsi-men Ch'ing's household comes looking for you, he can tell them that our daughter in the Eastern Capital has sent for the two of us. They would hardly have the:

Seven heads and eight galls,  
to come looking for us in the grand preceptor's mansion. And even if they did, we would have no reason to be afraid of them."

"But I have always been favorably treated by His Honor," said Han Tao-kuo. "To exhibit such a change of heart would constitute a violation of Heavenly principle."

"It has always been the case that:

To abide by Heavenly principle is  
to face starvation,"

responded his wife. "Given the way he has taken advantage of me in the past, for us to make use of these few taels of his silver is hardly wrong. I remember how, when his body was lying in state in the coffin chamber, I prepared an offertory table, replete with the meat of the three sacrificial animals, and went with the best of intentions to burn paper money on his behalf. But his principal wife, that undutiful whore, refused to come out and greet me for what seemed like half a day, while she kept to her room insulting me egregiously, and putting me in a predicament in which I could neither leave, on the one hand, nor sit down, on the other. Later his third wife came out and offered to sit down with me, but I refused to stay and came home in my sedan chair. When I think of that situation, it seems only right that I should spend a few taels of his silver."

This single conversation had the effect of reducing Han Tao-kuo to silence. That evening the two of them settled on their plan. The next day, at the fifth watch, they summoned Han Tao-kuo's younger brother, Han the Second, arranged with him, thus and so, to look after their house, and provided him with ten or twenty taels of silver to cover his expenses.

This Trickster Han expressed himself to be:

Willing a thousand times if not ten thousand times,  
saying, "Elder brother and sister-in-law, go your way. You can leave everything to me."

Han Tao-kuo decided to take his young servant Wang Han and the two maidservants with them to the Eastern Capital and proceeded to hire two large carts, onto which they loaded their trunks and other valuables. After waiting until daybreak, they went out the West Gate of the city and headed for the Eastern Capital. Truly:

Breaking to pieces the jade cage,  
the phoenix flies away;  
Smashing apart the metal padlock,  
the dragon breaks free.

We will say no more at this point about how Han Tao-kuo and his wife set out for the Eastern Capital, but return to the story of Wu Yüeh-niang.

The next day, she took her son, Hsi-men Hsiao-ko, along with Meng Yü-lou, P'an Chin-lien, Hsi-men Ta-chieh, the wet nurse Ju-i, and her son-in-law Ch'en Ching-chi, and set out for their ancestral graveyard to burn paper money on behalf of Hsi-men Ch'ing. While they were there, the caretaker Chang An told Yüeh-niang how he had run into Han Tao-kuo the day before.

On hearing this, Yüeh-niang remarked, "If he is back, why hasn't he reported in at our place? No doubt he will do so today."

After burning the paper money at his grave site, and sitting there for a short time, they headed back home, and she sent Ch'en Ching-chi to Han Tao-kuo's house to ask him where he had left the boat.

The first time he knocked at the gate there was no response, but the second time, Han the Second came out and said, "My niece in the Eastern Capital has summoned my elder brother and my sister-in-law to come visit her. I don't know where the boat is located."

When Ch'en Ching-chi reported this to Yüeh-niang, she was not able to let it go at that and sent Ch'en Ching-chi on a donkey to ride along the side of the canal and try to locate the boat. Three days later, he arrived at the dock in Lin-ch'ing and found Lai-pao on the boat.

Lai-pao asked, "Hasn't Han Tao-kuo arrived yet? He set out for home ahead of me with a thousand taels of silver."

"Who has seen anything of him?" responded Ch'en Ching-chi. "Chang An encountered him on his way into the city, and the next day, after leaving the graveyard, the First Lady sent me to ask after him. It seems that the two of them have absconded to the Eastern Capital, taking their possessions and



Han Tao-kuo Appropriates the Goods and Flees Far Away

the silver with them. At present, Father is dead, and the seventh weekly commemoration of his death has been concluded, but the First Lady is unable to let it go at that and sent me out to look for the boat.”

As for Lai-pao, though:

From his mouth no word was uttered,

In his heart he thought to himself,

“That god-damned creature! It turns out he was deceiving me into the bargain. No wonder he sold off a thousand taels worth of goods along the way. He was up to his nefarious schemes. Truly:

Though our faces may be only inches apart,

Our hearts are separated by a thousand li.”

At this juncture, Lai-pao, on learning that Hsi-men Ch'ing was already dead, decided to take the same course as Han Tao-kuo. He therefore proceeded to entice the young scamp Ch'en Ching-chi into drinking with him in the various entertainment places on the dock and enjoying himself with the courtesans there. Meanwhile, he surreptitiously removed eight hundred taels worth of merchandise from the boat and arranged to store it under seal in a local inn.

One day, after the customs duty had been paid and the boat had been allowed to proceed through the barrier to the port on the New Canal, the remainder of the cargo was transhipped and loaded into carts to be transported to Ch'ing-ho district, where it was duly unloaded into an anteroom on the eastern side of the courtyard. At that time, after Hsi-men Ch'ing's death, the silk floss store on Lion Street had been closed, and Kan Jun and Ts'ui Pen had sold off the remaining merchandise in the silk goods store across the street from the Hsi-men residence, turned the proceeds over to Yüeh-niang, and returned to their homes. The house there was also sold, and only the pawnshop and the pharmaceutical shop at the front of the Hsi-men residence remained open, under the management of Ch'en Ching-chi and Fu Ming.

Lai-pao's wife Hui-hsiang had a four-year-old son named Seng-pao, and Han Tao-kuo's wife Wang Liu-erh had a niece who was three years old. The two families had betrothed them to each other by exchanging cuttings from the lapels of their blouses<sup>16</sup> without Yüeh-niang knowing anything about it.

When Lai-pao had finished unloading the merchandise, he put the blame for the missing silver entirely on Han Tao-kuo, saying, “He first sold off two thousand taels worth of goods and then set out ahead of me to take them home.”

Yüeh-niang repeatedly urged him to go to the Eastern Capital and question Han Tao-kuo about the whereabouts of the silver, but he adamantly refused, saying, “I can't do something like that. Who could presume to force his way into the grand preceptor's mansion, and:

Devote himself to stirring up trouble,

without running the risk of retaliation? You would do better to recite the Buddha's name, rather than:

Inviting lice onto your own head to scratch.”

“But kinsman Chai Ch’ien is beholden to us for arranging his match with Han Tao-kuo’s daughter,” protested Yüeh-niang. “Surely he would be inclined to respond favorably to us.”

“His daughter is now the favorite in his household,” said Lai-pao, “and she is far more likely to side with her own parents than with us. We would do well to keep this matter to ourselves. If word of it should leak out, it would not redound to our credit. As for these few taels of silver, the best thing to do would be simply to write them off and forget about it.”

Yüeh-niang, consequently, urged him to get together with the potential purchasers and dispose of the remaining piece goods to them. When he did so, Yüeh-niang had Ch’en Ching-chi take charge of the scales and bargaining, but the buyers rejected the proposed prices, took their money, and left.

Lai-pao then said to Ch’en Ching-chi, “Son-in-law, you don’t yet understand the vicissitudes of trade, but I have considerable experience traveling on the rivers and lakes and understand how the markets work.

It is better to sell at a loss,  
Than it is to forfeit the sale.

Now that these goods are here, we might as well settle for whatever price we can get for them. If you insist on:

Pulling your bow all the way taut,  
You risk the loss of your customer,

and only show that you don’t know how to conduct business. I’m not being pretentious, but you’re still young, and:

Don’t perceive the way things work.<sup>17</sup>

I’m not sticking my elbow into other people’s business, but it seems to me that the best we can do is to sell off the goods and make an end of it.”

Upon hearing this, Ch’en Ching-chi, in a fit of pique, simply decided to wash his hands of the matter. Lai-pao, accordingly, without waiting for instructions from Yüeh-niang, reached over and grabbed the abacus out of his hands, called back the customers, and sold off the remaining goods for something over two thousand taels of silver. He then handed the proceeds, one packet at a time, to Ch’en Ching-chi to turn over to Yüeh-niang and saw to the removal of the merchandise from the premises.

Yüeh-niang offered to reward him with twenty or thirty taels of silver for his household expenses, but he ostentatiously refused to accept it, saying, “You had better keep it for yourself ma’am. Now that your husband is dead, you are like stagnant water, without any source of livelihood. What reason is there to dispose of your property this way? Keep it for yourself. I really don’t need it.”

One night, when Lai-pao had been outside drinking himself into a stupor, he walked into Yüeh-niang’s room, leaned on the bedrail of the k’ang, and addressed her, saying, “Ma’am, you have lost your husband while still in the springtime of your youth and are left alone with no one to care for but your infant son. Do you not feel lonely?”

Yüeh-niang said not a word in response to this overture.

One day, a letter arrived from Majordomo Chai Ch'ien in the Eastern Capital, indicating that he had learned of Hsi-men Ch'ing's death. He also said that Han Tao-kuo had informed him that there were four attractive young women left in the household who were adept at playing musical instruments and singing, and he offered to purchase them for whatever price might be asked so they could be transported to the Eastern Capital to wait upon the grand preceptor's elderly wife.

This letter reduced Yüeh-niang to a state of panic, and she summoned Lai-pao to consult with him about whether he thought it would be better to comply with this request or not.

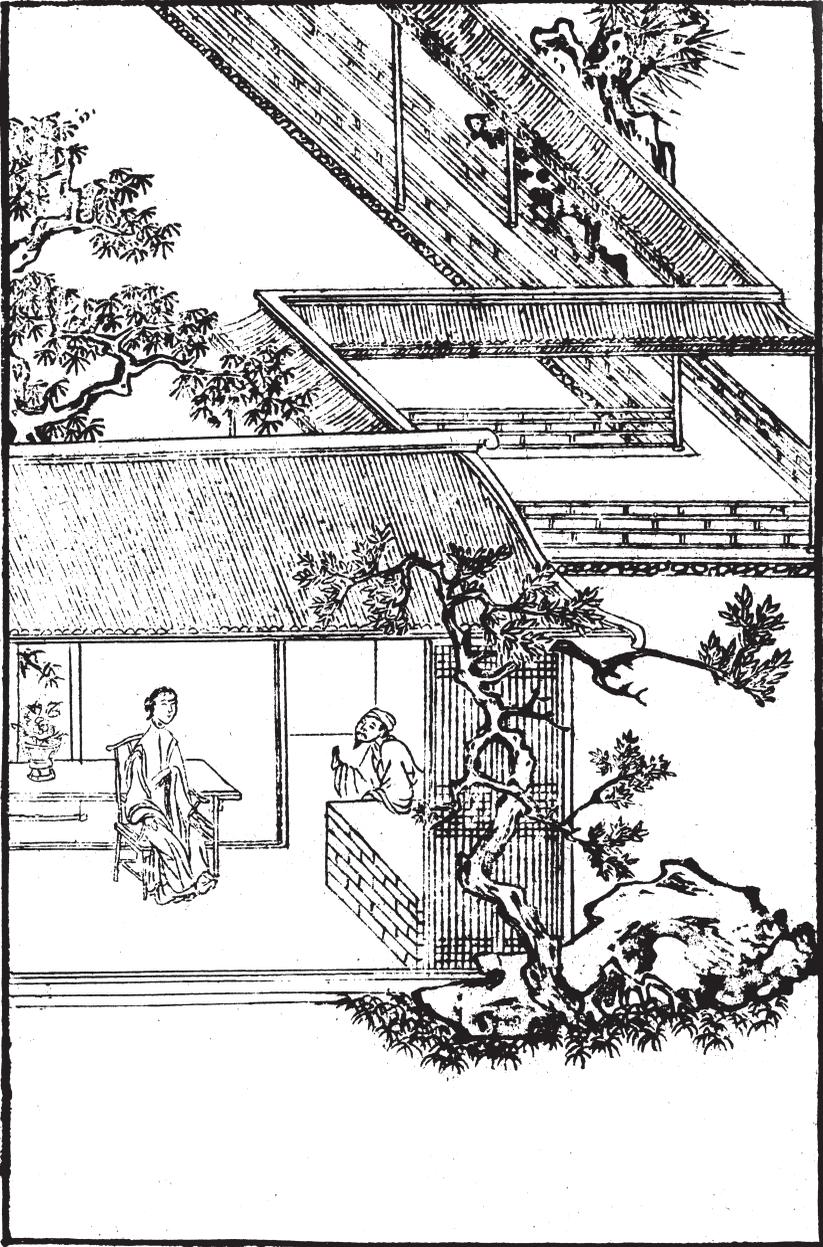
When Lai-pao came into her room, he did not address her with appropriate respect but said, "You are only a woman, and don't understand how things stand. To fail to comply with this request would be to invite disaster. This is all due to the heedlessness of your dead husband, who was given to showing off his munificence. Whenever he invited people over for a drink he would call out the household musicians to entertain them, a fact that could not but become widely known. It is hardly surprising that Han Tao-kuo's daughter, in the course of waiting upon the elderly wife of the grand preceptor in her mansion, should mention it to her. The situation is just as I said it was the other day. And now, sure enough, this problem has come up. If you don't agree to his request, he'll have the prefectural or district yamen send people to demand them by name. By that time it will be too late for you to do anything but hand them over to him with both hands. The best thing to do at present, without having to surrender all four of them, is to compromise by sending off two of them, as a means of saving your face."

Yüeh-niang pondered this suggestion for some time and decided that Lan-hsiang from Meng Yü-lou's quarters and Ch'un-mei from P'an Chin-lien's quarters could not be spared, and that Hsiu-ch'un, who was looking after Hsiao-ko, also could not be dispensed with. But when she asked Yü-hsiao and Ying-ch'un from her own quarters, they expressed a willingness to go. Consequently, she had Lai-pao hire a pair of vehicles to accommodate the two maidservants and accompany them to the grand preceptor's mansion in the Eastern Capital. What she could not have anticipated was that the rascal Lai-pao would seize the opportunity to rape the two girls en route.

One day, when they arrived in the Eastern Capital and met with Han Tao-kuo and his wife, Lai-pao filled them in on everything that had happened first and last.

Han Tao-kuo thanked Lai-pao, saying, "If my kinsman had not looked after our interests by dissuading them from pursuing us, even though we have nothing to fear, they might well have sent someone to the Eastern Capital to seek us out."

When Chai Ch'ien saw that the two girls, Ying-ch'un and Yü-hsiao, were both attractive young women, one of whom was adept at playing the psaltery,



Lai-pao Cheats His Master and Ignores His Benevolence

and the other at playing the samisen, and that they were only sixteen or seventeen years old, he had them move into the mansion in order to wait on the grand preceptor's elderly wife and agreed to pay for them with two ingots of silver worth fifty taels apiece. Lai-pao pocketed one of these ingots for himself and turned only one of them over to Yüeh-niang when he arrived home.

He also endeavored to intimidate Yüeh-niang, saying, "If I had not agreed to accompany them, not even this ingot of silver would have been forthcoming. You don't have any idea of what wealth and distinction Han Tao-kuo and his wife are enjoying in the grand preceptor's mansion. They are housed in a dwelling of their own where they have:

Slaves and maidservants at their beck and call, and  
Are always waited on by five or three servants.

Majordomo Chai Ch'ien addresses Han Tao-kuo as Your Honor, and their daughter, Han Ai-chieh, goes into the mansion every day to wait on the grand preceptor's elderly wife:

Not straying by so much as an inch from her side.<sup>18</sup>  
Whatever she asks for, she receives tenfold;  
She is free to eat anything that she chooses,  
And dress in whatever outfits she may prefer.<sup>19</sup>

At present, she has also learned how to write characters and do arithmetic, demonstrating that:

Good fortune serves to stimulate the intelligence.

She has grown up to be:

Large and tall in stature,<sup>20</sup>  
With an alluring demeanor.

When she came out to see me the other day, she was adorned as resplendently as:

A tree of jade in a forest of alabaster.

She is as clever as can be and insisted on addressing me as Uncle Pao. Now that these two household musicians of ours are there, they will be dependent on her for their needles and thread."

When he had finished speaking, Yüeh-niang felt as though:

Her gratitude knew no bounds,

and provided wine and delicacies for his consumption. She also offered him some silver, but he refused it as before, and she ended up rewarding him with a bolt of satin fabric for his wife, Hui-hsiang, to make a dress out of. But no more of this.

One day, Lai-pao, together with his wife's younger brother, Liu Ts'ang, went to the dock at Lin-ch'ing and sold off the piece goods that he had stored there in the inn for the sum of eight hundred taels of silver. With these proceeds he secretly bought a house for himself, some distance from the Hsi-men home, to the right side of Liu Ts'ang's residence, where he opened a general store and also used the premises to convene conclaves and tea gatherings every day. His

wife Hui-hsiang, whenever she felt so inclined, took to asking Yüeh-niang for time off in order to visit her mother's family and would then go to their new house, where she would change her head ornaments and clothing, put on a pearl headband, and thus:

Studded with gold and decked with silver,  
proceed to the home of Wang Liu-erh's sister-in-law, Sow Wang, to discuss the marriage alliance between the children in their families and exchange favors. After going to see Sow Wang's daughter, she would ride back to their new home in a sedan chair, change back into her everyday clothes, and return to the Hsi-men residence, without Yüeh-niang's knowing anything about it.

The rascal Lai-pao would often get himself drunk and then go right into Yüeh-niang's room, where he would engage her in:

Suggestive and flirtatious conversation.

This happened at least two or three times. If Yüeh-niang had not been the virtuous and honorable person that she was, she might well have succumbed to temptation and allowed herself to be seduced by his overtures.

Some of the household servants and gardeners also mentioned in Yüeh-niang's presence the fact that Lai-pao's wife, Hui-hsiang, had been seen to venture abroad in order to arrange the betrothal of her son, Seng-pao, to Sow Wang's daughter, Wang Liu-erh's niece, and had been:

Studded with gold and decked with silver,

While attended by three or five servants,

for the occasion. P'an Chin-lien also reported this to Yüeh-niang a number of times, but Yüeh-niang did not believe it. When Hui-hsiang heard about this, she proceeded to kick up a storm in the kitchen:

Cursing the high and the low alike.

Lai-pao, thereupon:

Puffing himself up and playing the fool,  
resorted to boasting about himself to the other servants, saying, "The rest of you can stay at home and engage in your bedtime gossip if you like. But it was I who took the trouble to brave the waters and bring all this silver and merchandise safely home. Had it not been for me, Han Tao-kuo, that:

Old ox with his rapacious snout,

would have made off to the Eastern Capital with the whole bundle.

With no more than a squeak,

it might well have:

Sunk softly into the water.

But so far, I have not received so much as a word of gratitude and have even been falsely accused of purloining the master's money. Truly:

He who donates his flesh is not acknowledged,

He who furnishes incense is not acknowledged.

It has always been the case that:

To defer when you differ,

Is to give up the dipper."

His wife, Hui-hsiang, continued the diatribe, saying, "That lousy backbiting whore! She may claim that the two of us have purloined a large sum of money, and that I've been running around:

While attended by three or five servants,  
attempting to arrange the betrothal of our son. The fact is that I merely went out to borrow some clothes and a few hair ornaments from my elder sister, but she alleges that I used money purloined from the master to buy them. She's just trying to get rid of the two of us, but it doesn't matter. Even if we are forced to leave:

Heaven will hardly prohibit a starving  
crow from eating grass.

I'm going to rinse my eyes, the better to keep track of the lot of you whorish slaves, incarcerated as you are in the Hsi-men Ch'ing household."

When Yüeh-niang saw the way in which she was:

Cursing the high and the low alike,  
seeking pretexts for quarreling with people, and threatening to hang herself, as well as the way in which her husband had, at least two or three times, approached her indecorously when no one else was about, she became so angry she scarcely knew what to do with herself and felt compelled to expel the two of them from the household. Consequently, Lai-pao, as cool as you please, proceeded to open up a piece goods store together with his brother-in-law and offer a variety of fine fabrics for sale, convening conclaves and forging connections on a daily basis. But no more of this. Truly:

When prestige is lost, slaves abuse their master,  
When the times are bad, ghosts manipulate people.<sup>21</sup>

There is a poem that testifies to this:

I would implore the people of this world,<sup>22</sup>  
Never to conduct yourselves dishonorably.  
To act dishonorably is to deceive Heaven,  
Don't assume that Heaven will not see it.<sup>23</sup>  
Heaven is situated right above your head,  
It sees precisely and cannot be deceived.

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