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Translated by David Tod Roy:

The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei, Volume Three

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Chapter 41

HSI-MEN CH'ING FORMS A MARRIAGE ALLIANCE WITH CH'IAO HUNG; P'AN CHIN-LIEN ENGAGES IN A QUARREL WITH LI P'ING-ERH

Equally endowed with wealth and distinction,¹
his inheritance is ample;
Streams of officials, in crimson and purple,
congregate at his door.
His office is high and his position important,
like those of Wang Tao;²
His family is prominent and his estate affluent,
like those of Shih Ch'ung.³
Amid painted candles and brocade curtains,
he whiles away the moonlit night;
Surrounded by silk clothing, rouge, and powder,
he is drunk in the spring breeze.
As indulgence in pleasure, by day and by night,⁴
continues year after year;
How can he ever make the effort to remain
constant from beginning to end?

THE STORY GOES that the clothes for his womenfolk that Hsi-men Ch'ing had engaged the tailor to come to his home to make were all finished before two days were over.

On the twelfth, the Ch'iao family sent someone to remind them of the invitation to their lantern viewing party. That morning Hsi-men Ch'ing had already sent appropriate presents over to their place. That day Wu Yüeh-niang and her sister-wives, along with her sister-in-law, the wife of her eldest brother Wu K'ai, set out together in six sedan chairs, leaving Sun Hsüeh-o behind to look after the house. They were accompanied in two smaller sedan chairs by the wet nurse, Ju-i, carrying the infant Kuan-ko, and Lai-hsing's wife, Hui-hsiu, whose job it was to wait on them and fold their clothes.

Hsi-men Ch'ing remained at home, where he looked on as the fireworks specialist hired by Pen the Fourth prepared the racks of fireworks, and lanterns were hung in the main reception hall and the summerhouse. He also sent a page boy with a calling card to the mansion of Wang the Second, the distaff relative of the imperial family, to engage the services of his troupe of actors, but there is no need to describe this in detail.

That afternoon he paid a visit to P'an Chin-lien's quarters. Chin-lien was not at home, but Ch'un-mei waited upon him, serving him with tea and something to eat, and setting up a table at which he could have some wine.

Hsi-men Ch'ing then said to Ch'un-mei, "On the fourteenth, when we are entertaining the wives of the various officials, it would be a good idea if the four of you senior maidservants would all get dressed up and assist your mistress in serving wine to the guests."

When Ch'un-mei heard this, she leaned nonchalantly on the table and said, "If you call on anyone to do that, call on the other three. As for me, I'm not going to do it."

"Why won't you do it?" asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"The ladies of the household have all had new clothes provided for the occasion," said Ch'un-mei, "so they will look good when entertaining the wives from the official families. As for us, each and every one looks just like a scorched pastry roll. Why should we have to put in an appearance for no good reason, only to make laughingstocks of ourselves?"

"Each of you have clothing and jewelry for yourselves," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "You can come out in full dress, with your cloud-shaped chignons sporting ornamental flowers bedecked with pearls and kingfisher feathers."

"I guess I can make do with my head ornaments," said Ch'un-mei, "but how can I wear that couple of old rags of mine, the only ones that amount to anything? I'd be ashamed to be seen in them."

"I understand you, little oily mouth," laughed Hsi-men Ch'ing. "The ladies of the household have had new clothes made for them, which has put you all in a huff. It doesn't matter. I'll get Tailor Chao to come and make up three articles of clothing for each of the four of you, and my daughter, Hsi-men Ta-chieh, into the bargain. Each of you shall have an outfit consisting of a satin jacket and skirt and a brocade vest."

"I'm not to be compared to them," said Ch'un-mei. "I demand a white satin skirt to wear, along with a vest of scarlet brocade."

"If that's what you want," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "it doesn't matter. But I'll have to provide one for Hsi-men Ta-chieh as well."

"The young lady already has one, but I don't," said Ch'un-mei. "She's got nothing to complain about."

Hsi-men Ch'ing thereupon procured the key, opened the door to the second floor room, and selected five outfits of satin clothing, two brocade vests, and a bolt of white satin, out of which two white satin jackets that opened

down the middle were to be made. Only Hsi-men Ta-chieh and Ch'un-mei were to have vests of scarlet brocade, while those of Ying-ch'un, Yü-hsiao, and Lan-hsiang were all of blue, their outfits consisting of scarlet satin gold lamé jackets that opened down the middle, to be worn over trailing skirts with kingfisher-blue borders. It added up to seventeen items of clothing in all.

Hsi-men Ch'ing sent for Tailor Chao and had them all duly made to order. Ch'un-mei also demanded that a bolt of yellow silk be used to make the linings for the skirt waists, all of which were to be of Hang-chou silk. Only then did Ch'un-mei profess satisfaction and agree to spend the rest of the day drinking wine with Hsi-men Ch'ing. But let us put the situation at home aside for the moment and say no more about it.

To resume our story, Wu Yüeh-niang and her sister-wives duly proceeded on their way to the home of Ch'iao Hung. It so happens that on that day Ch'iao Hung's wife had invited the wife of Provincial Graduate Shang Hsiao-t'ang, the wife of her next-door neighbor Censor Chu, her husband's elder sister Mrs. Ts'ui, her nephew Ts'ui Pen's wife Big Sister Tuan, and her niece Third Sister Cheng, the wife of Wu Shun-ch'en, and had also engaged two singing girls to entertain the gathering.

When she heard that Wu Yüeh-niang and her sister-wives, along with Yüeh-niang's sister-in-law, the wife of her elder brother Wu K'ai, had arrived, she hastened out to the ceremonial gate that led into the second courtyard and ushered them into the reception hall in the rear compound, where the usual amenities were observed. She addressed Yüeh-niang as Aunt, and Li Chiao-erh and the others as Second Aunt, Third Aunt, and so forth, adopting the terms of address she had heard employed in the home of Wu K'ai's wife. When the newcomers had finished exchanging greetings with the wives of Provincial Graduate Shang and Censor Chu, Big Sister Tuan and Third Sister Cheng came forward to pay their respects, and everyone sat down in order of precedence.

When the maidservants had finished serving everyone with tea, Ch'iao Hung himself came out to greet them, and to thank them for their presents, after which his wife invited her guests into the master suite where they could loosen their formal clothing and relax. A table was set up for tea, at which the fare consisted of fancy steamed and deep-fried appetizers, stuffed pastry treats, preserved fruits, sweetmeats, and every kind of delicacy, all set out in a most elegant fashion. The guests were invited to sit down and partake of the repast, while the wet nurse, Ju-i, and Hui-hsiu looked after Kuan-ko in another room, where they were separately entertained.

In a little while, after the guests had finished their tea, they moved into the reception hall, where:

Screens display their peacocks' tails, and
Cushions conceal their hibiscus blossoms.

There were four tables arranged along the upper end of the hall. Yüeh-niang

was seated in the place of honor, followed in order of precedence by the wife of Provincial Graduate Shang, Wu K'ai's wife, the wife of Censor Chu, Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, P'an Chin-lien, and Li P'ing-erh, while Ch'iao Hung's wife assumed the role of hostess. Another table was set up to one side to accommodate Big Sister Tuan and Third Sister Cheng, making a party of eleven in all.

The two singing girls, situated to one side, played and sang for their entertainment. After soup and rice had been served, the chef came out to present the first course, which was jellied goose, and Yüeh-niang rewarded him with a tip of two mace of silver. The second course was slow-boiled pig's trotters, for which Yüeh-niang rewarded him with a tip of another mace of silver. The third course that he presented was roast duck, for which Yüeh-niang rewarded him with yet another mace of silver. Ch'iao Hung's wife then left her place in order to serve wine to her guests. After serving Yüeh-niang first, she went on to serve Provincial Graduate Shang's wife.

At this point, Yüeh-niang got up and retired to the inner room to change her clothes and redo her makeup. Meng Yü-lou also followed suit. When they arrived in their hostess's bedroom, what should they see but the wet nurse Ju-i who was looking after Kuan-ko. She had put him down on a little sleeping mat that was spread out on the k'ang frame, where he was lying right next to Chang-chieh, the newborn daughter of their host. The two of them were playing happily at:

You hit me a blow and I'll hit you one back,
which tickled Yüeh-niang and Yü-lou no end.

"The two of them are just like a couple," they exclaimed.

On seeing Wu K'ai's wife come in after them, they said to her, "Come and take a look. The two of them are really like a little couple."

"That's true," said Wu K'ai's wife with a smile. "The way the children on the k'ang are:

Reaching out their hands and kicking their feet,
playing at:

You hit me and I'll hit you,
makes them look like a predestined little couple."

When Ch'iao Hung's wife and the other female guests came into the room, Wu K'ai's wife repeated what she had said, thus and so.

"Distinguished kindred, listen to me," responded Ch'iao Hung's wife. "Such mean folk as ourselves would hardly dare aspire to a marriage alliance with the household of such a one as our aunt."

"My dear kinswoman, how can you say such a thing!" Yüeh-niang protested. "What sort of person do you take my elder brother's wife to be? What sort of person is Third Sister Cheng? It is wholly appropriate that you and I should:



The Interplay of Two Infants Leads to a Marriage Alliance

Cement the bonds of affection with the bonds of marriage.
After all, the little boy from my household is unlikely to disgrace the daughter of your house. How can you say such a thing?"

Meng Yü-lou nudged Li P'ing-erh, saying, "Sister Li, what have you got to say?" But Li P'ing-erh only smiled.

"If my kinswoman, Mrs. Ch'iao, does not consent," said Wu K'ai's wife, "I'll be upset."

The wife of Provincial Graduate Shang and the wife of Censor Chu chimed in, saying, "Mrs. Ch'iao, in response to the generous sentiments of your kinswoman, Mrs. Wu, you really ought not to decline."

They then went on to ask, "Your girl Chang-chieh was born in the eleventh month of last year, wasn't she?"

"Our little boy was born on the twenty-third day of the sixth month," said Yüeh-niang, "so he is the older by five months. They truly would make a couple."

Thereupon:

Without permitting any further explanation, the whole group insisted on dragging Ch'iao Hung's wife, Wu Yüeh-niang, and Li P'ing-erh to the front reception hall, where the matrons of the two households formalized the betrothal of the children by exchanging cuttings from the lapels of their blouses,⁵ while the two singing girls played and sang to entertain them.

Once the situation had been explained to Ch'iao Hung, he brought out boxes of candied fruit, along with the customary three strips of red bunting, and proceeded to serve his guests with wine. Yüeh-niang, for her part, ordered Tai-an and Ch'in-t'ung to return home immediately in order to let Hsi-men Ch'ing know about it, and they subsequently returned bearing two jugs of wine, three bolts of satin, artificial flowers made of stiff velvet and gold thread, with red petals and green leaves, and four boxes, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, containing candied fruit.

The members of the two families then proceeded to hang up the red bunting and celebrate the occasion with a drinking party. Within the reception hall:

Painted candles are elevated on high,
Decorated lanterns flare resplendently,⁶
The fragrance of musk is luxuriant,
The sound of joyous laughter resounds.

In front of the gathering, the two singing girls:

Opened their ruby lips,
Exposed their white teeth,
Lightly plucked their jade mandolas, and
Casually grasped their balloon guitars,

as they sang the song suite that begins with the tune "Fighting Quails."⁷

Inside kingfisher-hued window gauze,
 Underneath mandarin duck azure tiles,
 Hidden by peacock-adorned silver screens,⁸
 Amid hibiscus-decked embroidered couches,
 Curtains of gossamer silk are rolled up,
 Incense smolders in duck-shaped censers,⁹
 Lamps are suspended above,
 Blinds are lowered below.
 This is the residence of a Minister of the
 Department of State Affairs,
 The son-in-law of the reigning emperor.

To the tune “Prelude to Purple Blossoms”

The soldiers in his entourage are clad in red,
 bearing painted halberds;
 The officers of his command wear “Hooks of Wu”
 hanging from brocade belts;¹⁰
 The guest at his feast sports an embroidered cap
 adorned with palace flowers.¹¹
 The entertainment accords with that of the Music Office,
 The extravagance compares with that of the Palace Garden.
 The tempo is provided by clappers of red ivory,¹²
 The strains of a classic melody are
 about to be performed.
 Two rows of beauties as pretty as pictures
 stand to either side.
 Powdered faces about silver psalteries,
 Jade fingers pluck at balloon guitars.¹³

To the tune “Golden Plantain Leaves”

All I can see is crimson candles burning brightly
 in silver candlesticks,
 As slender fingers raise aloft
 jade goblets.
 Noting that his demeanor is both dignified
 and elegant,
 I go over under the lamplight so I can
 take a good look at him.

To the tune “Flirtatious Laughter”

This gentleman is surely someone I have
 seen somewhere before.

8 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

Can it be that my eyes are deceiving me?
Ah! Putting my hand to my teeth,¹⁴
I try to remember.
Once having set eyes on him, I can't help being
disturbed at heart.
Could he turn out to be my adversary in delight¹⁵
from five hundred years ago?¹⁶
Before whose house has he tethered his horse
to the green willows?¹⁷
It must have been no more than a dream vision of
clouds and rain in Witch's Gorge.¹⁸

To the tune "Impatiens Blossoms"

Having played through the melody on the jade flute¹⁹
under the verdant peach trees,
A single moment was worth a thousand pieces of gold.²⁰
Under the lamplight he is looking me over
out of the corners of his eyes,
In such a way that my face is suffused with
the glow of sunset clouds.
My master is afraid I am remiss in letting
your wine cup remain empty.
I am just seventeen, and have not been betrothed,
A budding peony, delicately nurtured²¹
by my master.

To the tune "The Spectral Triad"

He has uttered but a handful of
disconsolate words,
Which cause my tears to fall in
incessant cascades.
I cannot control the monkey of my mind
and the horse of my will.²²
I am no more than a delicate
Lo-yang flower,
In danger of becoming a target
of romantic gossip.²³
These words may sound like a joke,
but they're not a joke;
This allegation may seem to be false,
but it isn't false.

That one is trying to pull up the trees
 to investigate the roots,
 While this one is pointing to a deer
 and calling it a horse.²⁴

To the tune “Shaven-Pated Rascal”

My efforts to admonish him are as futile as
 trying to immerse a melon in water;²⁵
 His staring at me is about as effective as
 gazing at flowers in a mirror.
 It is said that young scholars have always been
 frivolous in their affections;
 And here he is flirting with a dainty maiden
 from a good family.

To the tune “Sacred Bhaiṣajya-Rāja”

How am I to rescue the situation?
 My master is difficult to placate.
 As in the receptions of Kung-sun Hung, there is
 a hubbub in the Eastern Vestibule.²⁶
 The feast on tortoiseshell mats is disrupted.
 The parrot-beak-shaped conch goblets are discarded.
 The silver candlesticks and crimson silk lamp shades
 have been kicked over.
 He has drawn his three-foot sword from its scabbard.

CODA

It has always been true that scholars possess
 lustful daring as big as the sky,²⁷
 Which frightens this fainthearted Cho Wen-chün
 half to death.²⁸
 It's a case of a too hot-tempered Cho Wang-sun,
 And an overly ardent Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju of the Han.²⁹

Thereupon, the assembled guests saw to it that Wu Yüeh-niang, Ch'iao Hung's wife, and Li P'ing-erh stuck the artificial flowers in their hair, while red bunting was hung up, drinks were offered to them, and they formally saluted each other. When this ceremony was completed, the feasting was resumed, and everyone sat down to continue drinking together.

The chef first presented a course consisting of little molded cakes of glutinous rice flour, with a sweet stuffing, and the character for long life embossed on their surfaces, along with a lotus pod soup filled with auspicious ingredi-

ents, such as double-headed lotus blossoms, that suggest the beauty of a summer pond, after which he proceeded to carve a dish of roast marbled pork.

Yüeh-niang, who was seated in the place of honor, was utterly delighted by all this and, calling Tai-an over, instructed him to award the chef with a bolt of crimson fabric, and to give one to each of the two singing girls as well, for which gratuities they all kowtowed in gratitude.

Ch'iao Hung's wife was still unwilling to let her guests go, but invited them back to the rear hall to sit down a while longer. A profusion of serving dishes, along with partitioned boxes of assorted delicacies, were laid out for them there. The party continued until the first watch before Yüeh-niang finally said her farewells and prepared to go home.

"Kinswoman," she said to her hostess, "tomorrow, whatever you do:

Deign to drop in on our humble abode,
and visit with us for a while."

"Kinswoman," replied Ch'iao Hung's wife, "I appreciate your generous hospitality. But my husband has said that it might not be appropriate for me to join you on this occasion. I'll come and visit you another day."

"My dear kinswoman," protested Yüeh-niang, "it's not as though there will be anyone else there. You're just being standoffish."

She then suggested that her sister-in-law, Wu K'ai's wife, should remain overnight, saying, "If you don't go home today, you can accompany Kinswoman Ch'iao to our place tomorrow."

"Kinswoman Ch'iao," said Wu K'ai's wife, "it doesn't matter if you don't go on any other day, but you surely mustn't fail to pay a visit on the fifteenth, which is your new kinswoman's birthday."

"If the fifteenth is my kinswoman's birthday," said Ch'iao Hung's wife, "how could I presume not to go?"

"If my kinswoman fails to come," said Yüeh-niang, "I've turned the responsibility over to you, Sister-in-law, and I'll hold you accountable."

Thereupon, after insisting that Wu K'ai's wife remain behind, Yüeh-niang and her entourage said goodbye and got into their sedan chairs. Two orderlies preceded them, holding large red lanterns, and shouting to clear the way, while two page boys, also holding lanterns, brought up the rear. Wu Yüeh-niang's sedan chair went first, followed by those of Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, P'an Chin-lien, and Li P'ing-erh, in single file, while the chairs of Ju-i and Hui-hsiu followed in their wake. Inside her sedan chair, the wet nurse saw to it that Kuan-ko was tightly wrapped in a little red satin coverlet, to protect him from the cold, while she propped her feet on a brass warmer below. With the two page boys following behind, they arrived in due course at the front gate and dismounted from their sedan chairs.

Hsi-men Ch'ing was drinking wine in the master suite when Yüeh-niang and the others came in, exchanged salutations, and sat down, after which the maidservants came in and kowtowed to them. Yüeh-niang wasted no time in telling him all about the betrothal that had been arranged at the feast that day.

When Hsi-men Ch'ing had heard her out, he asked, "Who were the other female guests at the party today?"

"There were the wife of Provincial Graduate Shang," said Yüeh-niang, "along with the wife of Censor Chu, our host's elder sister, Mrs. Ts'ui, as well as her two nieces."

"If you've made a betrothal," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "I guess that's that. But it's not an entirely appropriate match."

"The fact is, it was all my sister-in-law's doing," said Yüeh-niang. "When she saw their newborn baby daughter and our child reclining on the k'ang frame together, under the same coverlet, and playing at:

You hit me a blow and I'll hit you one back,
she thought they looked just like a little couple and called us over to see. She brought the possibility up, and right at the party:

Without premeditation or forethought,³⁰

we agreed to this marriage alliance. It was only then that I sent the page boys over to tell you about it, and to arrange for the delivery of the artificial flowers, red bunting, and boxes of candied fruit."

"Since you've made this betrothal, I guess that's that," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. But it's not an entirely appropriate match. Although the Ch'iao family is wealthy enough at present, he is no more than a well-to-do householder in the district, of commoner status. Whereas, in our case, I currently occupy this official position and manage affairs in the yamen. In the future, at the betrothal celebrations, he will only be entitled to wear the informal skullcap of a commoner. How will he be comfortable associating with an official family such as ours? It really won't look right.

"Just the other day, Military Director-in-chief Ching Chung sought the aid of our relative Chang Kuan of the local garrison, in repeatedly suggesting to me a marriage alliance with his family. He said that their daughter was just five months old, so that she would be the same age as our child. But I was concerned that she didn't have a proper mother, having been born to a concubine, so I refused the offer. I scarcely anticipated that we would end up making such a marriage alliance after all."

P'an Chin-lien, who was standing to one side, picked up on this, saying, "If you object to someone's having been born to a concubine, who among the parties involved was not born to a concubine? This child of the Ch'iao family was also born to a concubine. Truly:

When the Spirit of the Perilous Paths runs into
the God of Longevity,³¹

If you refrain from commenting about my height,
I'll not complain about that shortness of yours."

When Hsi-men Ch'ing heard these words, he was enraged and cursed at her, saying, "You lousy whore! Mind your own business. While we're talking here, for you to:

Stick your beak in and wag your tongue,
is completely out of place.”

Chin-lien's face turned crimson with embarrassment, and she beat a hasty retreat, muttering as she went, “Whoever said I had the right to speak? It's obvious I haven't the standing to say anything.”

Gentle reader take note: When Chin-lien observed the way in which Yüeh-niang and Ch'iao Hung's wife agreed to the betrothal at the party that day, with the result that Li P'ing-erh was draped in red fabric and had artificial flowers stuck in her hair, while wine was presented to her, she became very sore at heart. The fact that Hsi-men Ch'ing saw fit to curse at her this way on her return home only made matters worse, and she withdrew to Yüeh-niang's inner chamber to cry.

Hsi-men Ch'ing then asked, “How come your sister-in-law didn't come back with you?”

“Kinswoman Ch'iao,” explained Yüeh-niang, “on learning that so many wives of officials would be at our place tomorrow, declined my invitation, and I suggested that my sister-in-law stay on at their place, so she could bring her along with her on the morrow.”

“Just as I said,” remarked Hsi-men Ch'ing, “the seating plan at the party tomorrow is going to be awkward to arrange. I don't know how we're going to handle it when we get together in the future.”

They talked for a while longer, after which Meng Yü-lou came into the inner room and found Chin-lien crying there.

“What are you so upset about?” she asked. “Let him have his say, and forget about it.”

“Fortunately you were there to hear it with your own ears,” said Chin-lien. “What did I say that was disparaging of him? But I had a point to be made. He said that the other family's child was born to a concubine. I said, ‘Was the Ch'iao family's child not born to a concubine? She was also born to a concubine.’ Does he think that:

By wrapping it in a paper bag,
He can fool anyone?

You'll come to a bad end, you lousy ruffian! Then he opened his eyes wide and started cursing at me in a way that was so:

Unfeeling and unjustifiable.

Why shouldn't I have the right to say what I think? He's had a change of heart, and, in the days to come, he'll:

Suffer the consequences before my very eyes.³²

What I didn't say was that that infant relative of the Ch'iao family's at least came into this world with something of Old Man Ch'iao's spunk in her, whereas that child of your's:

Has strayed out of familiar territory.

Who knows whose seed he was sired by? If people want to play the game of seeking marriage alliances in order to enhance their social standing, what right does that give you to take out your annoyance on me? What's my cunt got to do with it that you should start in cursing me? How old is your son, anyway? He's nothing but a puny armload of a bladder's spawn. And you're already putting him on the marriage market for no good reason.

You've got so much money you don't know
what to do with it.

If you tug on the sheet until it's torn,
you'll have no cover.

The dog who bites the inflated bladder,
will find his excitement deflated.

Right now the relationship may be wet enough, given the age of the parties involved, but, in the future, if you don't watch out, it may turn out to be no more than an arid pseudo relationship.

If you blow out the lamp and close your eyes,
You can hardly expect to see what is to come.

People may feel well disposed toward each other at the time they make such alliances, but, more often than not, they end up feeling differently three or five years later."

"As disingenuous as people may be nowadays," said Meng Yü-lou, "they seldom go in for this sort of thing. If you stop to consider it, it's early days yet. For children who are hardly out of the womb, what's the point of exchanging cuttings from your lapels? It's no more than playing the game of seeking marriage alliances in order to enhance one's social standing, that's all."

"Even if that wife of yours is so wantonly anxious to play the marriage alliance game," said Chin-lien, "what right does that give the lousy refractory ruffian to start cursing at me for no good reason? It seems that:

All you get for raising toads is dropsy.

What's the point of it all?"

"Whoever told you to blurt out your thoughts in such an imprudent way?" said Yü-lou.

"If he doesn't curse you,
Should he curse the dog instead?"

"It would have been awkward for me to say it right out," said Chin-lien. "Was I supposed to pretend that the child was not born to a concubine, but to the principal wife? Even though the Ch'iao family's child was born to a concubine, at least it came into the world with something of Old Man Ch'iao's spunk in her, whereas that child of your's:

Has strayed out of familiar territory.

Who knows whose seed he was sired by?"

When Yü-lou heard this, she sat for a while without saying another word, until Chin-lien went back to her quarters.

On noticing that Hsi-men Ch'ing had gone outside, Li P'ing-erh, once again:

Like a sprig of blossoms swaying in the breeze, kowtowed to Yüeh-niang, saying, "Elder Sister, in this matter of the child today, I thank you for all the trouble you went to."

Yüeh-niang, with a smile, knelt down and returned her salutation, saying, "Congratulations to you."

"And to you, too, Elder Sister," said Li P'ing-erh.

When they had finished kowtowing to each other, Li P'ing-erh got up and sat down to chat with Yüeh-niang and Li Chiao-erh.

What should they see at this juncture but Sun Hsüeh-o and Hsi-men Ta-chieh, who came in to kowtow to Yüeh-niang and greeted Li Chiao-erh and Li P'ing-erh in turn. Hsiao-yü served them with tea.

As they were drinking their tea, what should they see but Hsiu-ch'un, the maidservant from Li P'ing-erh's quarters, who came to fetch her mistress, saying, "The little fellow is looking for you in your room, and Father has sent me to ask you to return there."

"The wet nurse hurried off without anyone's knowing it," said Li P'ing-erh, "and carried him back to the room. It would have done just as well for us to go back together. As it is, there was probably no lantern for the child."

"When we came in the gate just now," said Yüeh-niang, "I told her to take him back to your room. I feared it was getting late."

"Ju-i took him back just a while ago," said Hsiao-yü. "Lai-an carried a lantern and escorted them on the way."

"That's all right then," said Li P'ing-erh, who, thereupon, took her leave of Yüeh-niang and returned to her quarters, where she found Hsi-men Ch'ing and Kuan-ko, who was asleep in the arms of the wet nurse.

"So there you are," she said. "Why didn't you speak to me before carrying him off that way?"

"The First Lady saw that Lai-an was there with a lantern," said Ju-i, "so I took advantage of that fact to bring him home. The little fellow cried for a while, and I only now managed to pat him back to sleep."

"He clamored after you for some time," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "before finally going to sleep."

When Li P'ing-erh had finished asking about the baby, she turned to him with a simpering smile and said, "Today the child has been betrothed, for which I'd like to express my gratitude to you with a kowtow."

Thereupon:

Just as though inserting a taper in its holder, she knelt down and made him a kowtow. This pleased Hsi-men Ch'ing so much that his face became wreathed in smiles, and, hastening to help her to her feet, they sat down together, and she told Ying-ch'un to serve them with wine. The two of them then proceeded to drink wine together in her room.

To resume our story, P'an Chin-lien returned to her quarters in a huff and was not in the best of moods, knowing perfectly well that Hsi-men Ch'ing was at Li P'ing-erh's place.

As a consequence, when Ch'iu-chü was slow about opening the gate, no sooner was she inside than she boxed her ears twice and cursed her in a loud voice, saying, "You lousy slave of a whore! How is it that I've had to call all day long before you opened the gate? What have you been up to? I'll not have anything more to say to you today."

Thereupon, she went into her room and sat down.

When Ch'un-mei came in to kowtow to her and serve her with tea, the woman asked her, "That lousy slave! What was she doing in here?"

"She was just sitting in the courtyard," said Ch'un-mei. "When you called for her I urged her to get a move on, but she didn't pay any attention."

"I'm perfectly aware," said Chin-lien, "that when he and I have a falling out, it's just like the way:

Defender-in-chief Tang Chin learned
to eat steamed dumplings,

By imitating the way other people did it.³³

She thinks she, too, can take advantage of me."

Chin-lien wanted to give her a beating there and then but was afraid that Hsi-men Ch'ing, who was in the adjacent quarters, would hear her, so she kept her anger to herself. Meanwhile, she took off her fancy attire, had Ch'un-mei lay out her bedding, got into bed, and went to sleep.

The next day, when Hsi-men Ch'ing had gone off to the yamen, the woman made Ch'iu-chü balance a flagstone on her head and kneel down in the courtyard until she had finished combing her hair. She then told Ch'un-mei to pull down her trousers and bring her a heavy bamboo cane with which to flog her.

"What a filthy slave!" complained Ch'un-mei. "If you have me pull down her pants, it will only dirty my hands."

She then went up front and called for the page boy Hua-t'ung to come and pull down Ch'iu-chü's drawers for her.

The woman then proceeded to cane her, cursing as she did so, "You lousy slave of a whore! Since when did you become so uppity? Other people may see fit to favor you, but I'll never favor you. Sister:

You know it and I know it.

You'd do better to slack off a bit. What need is there for you to stick your neck out and put on airs for no good reason? Sister, you'd better give up any such presumptions. From now on, I'm going to keep my eyes peeled where you're concerned."

As she vilified her, she continued to beat her, and as the beating continued, she gave vent to further vilification. The caning continued until Ch'iu-chü:

Howled like a stuck pig.



P'an Chin-lien Punishes Ch'iu-chü to Get at Li P'ing-erh

Li P'ing-erh, in her adjacent quarters, had just gotten up and looked on as the wet nurse suckled Kuan-ko and then put him back to sleep. He was startled back awake, however, by the commotion next door. She overheard perfectly clearly everything that Chin-lien had to say while caning her maidservant, as she blurted things out:

Without any consideration for the consequences.

Rendered quite speechless, in her consternation, she merely covered Kuan-ko's ears and told Hsiu-ch'un, "Go over and say to the Fifth Lady, 'Don't beat Ch'iu-chü any more. The baby has just had some milk and has gone back to sleep.'"

When Chin-lien heard this, she beat Ch'iu-chü all the harder, cursing as she did so, "You lousy slave! You'd think someone were sticking ten thousand knives into you, the way you scream for mercy. Well, it's just my temperament, but the more you scream, the harder I'll beat you. You've already succeeded in arresting the attention of a passerby, who's come to contemplate the sight of a maidservant being beaten. Well, my good Sister, you can always tell your husband about it, and get him to give me a hard time."

Li P'ing-erh, from her vantage point next door, understood perfectly well that Chin-lien's abuse was really directed at her. She was so upset by it that her two hands turned cold, but she chose to:

Swallow her anger and keep her own counsel.

Though she dared to be angry,

She dared not speak.

That morning she didn't even have a drop of tea but clasped Kuan-ko in her arms and went back to sleep on the k'ang.

When Hsi-men Ch'ing returned home from the yamen, he came into her room to see Kuan-ko and found that Li P'ing-erh was lying on the k'ang, and that her eyes were red with weeping.

"How come you still haven't combed your hair or straightened yourself up?" he asked. "The lady in the master suite would like to have a word with you. What have you been rubbing your eyes for, until they're so red?"

Li P'ing-erh made no reference to the way in which Chin-lien had vilified her, but simply said, "I'm not feeling very well."

"Our kinfolk of the Ch'iao family have sent birthday presents for you," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "A bolt of fabric, two jars of southern wine, a tray of sweetmeats in the shape of birthday peaches, a tray of birthday noodles, and four kinds of savories. They've also sent some holiday gifts for Kuan-ko, consisting of two trays of Lantern Festival dumplings, four trays of candied fruit, four trays of premium grade nuts, two beaded hanging lanterns, two folding-screen-shaped lanterns spangled with gold, two bolts of crimson government-grade satin, a black satin cap with gold pins representing the eight auspicious sym-

bols³⁴ attached to it, two pairs of boy's shoes, and six pairs of women's shoes. Before we have even paid them a formal visit, they have sent these holiday gifts for our child.

"Right now, the lady in the master suite would like you to go and discuss the situation with her. They have sent the go-between, Auntie K'ung, to represent them, along with their servant, Ch'iao T'ung, who is in charge of delivering the gifts, and our sister-in-law, the wife of Wu K'ai, has come ahead to say that Kinswoman Ch'iao will not be able to come tomorrow but will pay a visit the following day.

"Their family also has a relation, Madame Ch'iao, who is the widow of that distaff relative of the imperial family, Ch'iao the Fifth. When she heard that they were forming a marriage alliance with us, she was pleased as could be, and she would also like to visit us on the fifteenth. We'll have to send her an invitation."

When Li P'ing-erh had heard all this, she finally got up, reluctantly, to comb her hair and set off for the rear compound to pay her respects to Sister-in-law Wu and Auntie K'ung. She found that tea was being served to them in Yüeh-niang's room, and that the presents were on display in the parlor. After looking them all over, she arranged to send back the boxes in which they had come, gave gratuities of two handkerchiefs and five mace of silver apiece to Auntie K'ung and Ch'iao T'ung, wrote a thank-you note, and also sent someone to deliver an invitation to Madame Ch'iao. Truly:

Only inclined to entertain their favorites
with bells and drums,
Would they have herded with dogs and sheep
for the nation's sake?³⁵

There is a poem that testifies to this:

Hsi-men Ch'ing, enjoying his singular wealth,
is altogether too complacent;
Agreeing to a marriage alliance for his son,
while he is still in diapers.
Not only does he squander his property
as though it were mere muck;
But he ought to pay more attention to
the fate of his posterity.

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