

Chapter 21

WU YÜEH-NIANG SWEEPS SNOW
IN ORDER TO BREW TEA;
YING PO-CHÜEH RUNS ERRANDS
ON BEHALF OF FLOWERS

Troubled in her sorrowing heart,
she murmurs to herself,
“This good affinity has turned out
to be a bad affinity.”¹
In retrospect she rails against
that “willow” in the quarter;²
Though shamefaced to confront
the “lotus” of the Jade Well.³
Only because his spring dalliance
has been carelessly revealed,
Have the phoenix mates been forced
to go their separate ways.
Who is able to dip up the waters
of the River of Heaven,
That they may wash their former sins
completely away?⁴

THE STORY GOES that by the time Hsi-men Ch'ing returned home from the quarter it was already the second watch. When the page boys had succeeded in getting someone to open the front door he dismounted and:

Trampling the scattered fragments of alabaster and jade,
made his way as far as the inner gate which led into the rear compound. He found the gate standing half open though there was:

Not a human sound to be heard,⁵
from the courtyard within.

From his mouth no word was uttered, but
In his heart he thought to himself,
“There's something strange about this.”

4 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

Thereupon Hsi-men Ch'ing stealthily took up a position behind the white-washed spirit screen just inside the gate in order to see what was up. No sooner had he done so than he saw Hsiao-yü come out and set up a table in the courtyard beneath the loggia that ran along one side.

It so happens that Wu Yüeh-niang, ever since the falling out with her husband that had resulted in their no longer being on speaking terms with each other, had been in the habit of fasting on the seventh, seventeenth, and twenty-seventh days of each month. On these occasions she would pay obeisance to the dipper and burn incense at night, praying to Heaven that it would protect her husband and grant him an early change of heart so that he could devote himself to the regulation of the household and the begetting of an heir in order to accomplish:

The plan of a lifetime.⁶

Hsi-men Ch'ing was quite unaware of this. He continued to look on as Hsiao-yü finished setting out the incense table. Before long Yüeh-niang emerged from her quarters, carefully attired, and proceeded into the courtyard where she ignited a full censer of incense.

Looking up at the sky and making a deep bow she prayed, "Your humble servant, née Wu, has been joined in wedlock with Hsi-men Ch'ing. However, because my husband is enamored of the 'mist and flowers'; though yet in the prime of life, he remains without an heir. Wife and concubines, there are six of us in all, but none of us has borne a child, so that we lack anyone to continue the care and worship of the ancestral graves. Day and night I worry about this lest we be left with no recourse. Therefore, without my husband's knowledge, I have sworn an oath that on the seventh, seventeenth, and twenty-seventh of each month, beneath the moon and stars, I shall offer up a prayer to the 'three luminaries,' beseeching them to protect my husband and grant him an early change of heart, that he may abandon his extravagant ways and devote himself wholeheartedly to family affairs. That one of his six consorts, no matter which, should soon bear him a son, in order to accomplish:

The plan of a lifetime,
is my sincerest wish."

Truly:

As she slips out of her chamber
the night air is cool;
Fragrant mist fills the courtyard,
the moon glimmers bright.
Bowing to Heaven, she spills out
all her heartfelt desires;
Quite unaware that anyone might be
listening beyond the wall.

Nothing might have happened if Hsi-men Ch'ing had not overheard this, but having heard Yüeh-niang's prayer:

From his mouth no word was uttered, but

In his heart he thought to himself,

"It turns out I've been mistaken in my resentment toward her all this time. Everything she said was inspired by concern for my welfare. She and I really are husband and wife after all."

Suiting action to words, he strode out from behind the whitewashed spirit screen and embraced Yüeh-niang. His wife, who had just finished with the incense burning and never expected him to show up on such a snowy night, was so startled that her first impulse was to flee back to her room. But Hsi-men Ch'ing prevented this by embracing her with both arms.

"Darling," he said, "I had absolutely no idea that you've really been inspired by concern for me. I've been wrong about you all this time I've been giving you the cold shoulder. By now, I'm afraid, it's rather late to repent."

"You must have lost your way in the snow," said Yüeh-niang. "I dare say these really aren't the quarters you're looking for, anyway. You're barking up the wrong tree. I'm that 'undutiful whore,' remember. Since there's nothing between us, where do you get that stuff about concern for you? What reason should you have to pay any further attention to me? If we were never to see each other again:

For a thousand years or all eternity,
it would be all right with me."

Hsi-men Ch'ing took Yüeh-niang by the hand and pulled her into the room where he proceeded to look her over by lamplight. She was wearing her usual attire: a scarlet jacket of Lu-chou silk that opened down the middle, and a skirt of a soft yellow material. On her head she wore a sable toque over her chignon and, in front of her coiffure, a tiara of gold representing "Kuan-yin in her full glory," setting off to perfection:

Her silver salver face, modeled in plaster,
carved of jade;

The clouds over Ch'u peaks, her cicada chignon
and raven tresses.

How could Hsi-men Ch'ing have been anything but captivated?

Without further ado, he made a deep bow before Yüeh-niang, saying, "I, Hsi-men Ch'ing, have been so deluded for a time that I have failed to heed your sound advice and flouted your good intentions. Truly:

Though I have eyes I have failed to identify
the 'Jade of the Ch'u Mountains';

And have treated it as though it were
no more than an ordinary stone.⁷

6 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

It is after the event that one recognizes a gentleman;⁸

Then and only then does the good man become known.

All I can do is hope that you'll forgive me."

"I'm not the one you've set your heart on," said Yüeh-niang. "No matter what I do, I don't seem to be able to suit your fancy. Since when did I ever offer you any sound advice? Just leave me alone in my room here to:

Fend for myself.⁹

There's no need for you to pay any attention to me. There isn't room for you in here, anyway. You'd better get out of here before I have the maids throw you out."

"I've had:

A bellyful of anger,¹⁰

out of the blue today," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "and came home through the snow just to tell you about it."

"Whether you get angry or not is no concern of mine," said Yüeh-niang. "Far be it from me to try to control your conduct. Why don't you go tell it to someone who does?"

When Hsi-men Ch'ing saw that Yüeh-niang refused to give him so much as a look, he bent his knees, adopted the posture of a dwarf, and knelt down on the ground before her.

Sticking out his neck like a chicken

on the chopping block,¹¹

he began to plead with her, saying, "Darling this," and, "Darling that."

Yüeh-niang could abide it no longer and said, "If you're really going to carry on that shamelessly, I'll call the maid."

As good as her word, she called out for Hsiao-yü.

When Hsi-men Ch'ing saw Hsiao-yü coming in, he promptly leapt to his feet and, casting about for an excuse to get her out of the room, said, "The snow outside must have covered the incense table by now. Why don't you go bring it inside?"

"I've already brought it in," said Hsiao-yü.

Yüeh-niang couldn't help laughing. "What a shameless character," she said. "Even the maids have to put up with your barefaced effrontery."

Hsiao-yü went out and Hsi-men Ch'ing once again got down on his knees to plead with his wife.

"If I didn't care for the opinion of the world,"¹² said Yüeh-niang, "it would serve you right if I paid you no heed for another hundred years."

Only after this speech did Yüeh-niang consent to sit down with her husband and order Yü-hsiao to serve him some tea. Hsi-men Ch'ing thereupon told her the whole story, how that day, after the meeting of the club at Ch'ang Shih-chieh's place had broken up, he had allowed himself to be persuaded by Ying Po-chüeh and the others to pay a visit to the Li family establishment, and how, thus and so, they had gotten into an altercation.

"I had the page boys tear the Li place apart," he said. "If the others hadn't intervened, I would have done worse. I've sworn an oath never to cross the threshold of the quarter again."

"Whether you go there or not is no concern of mine," said Yüeh-niang. "I wouldn't presume to tell such a simpleton what to do. But as long as you're shelling out the hard cash to maintain her as your mistress, if you don't even bother to visit her, you can be sure she'll manage to take on someone else. Where people in that profession are concerned:

You can tie up their bodies, but
You can't tie up their hearts.

Do you really think you can put your seal on her and make it stick?"

"What you say is true enough," said Hsi-men Ch'ing.

Thereupon, he started to undress, sent the maids out of the room, and proposed to go to bed with Yüeh-niang and seek his pleasure with her.

"If I let you into the kitchen,
You'll only make a pig of yourself,"

said Yüeh-niang. "It's concession enough if I allow you into my bed tonight. If you've got anything else in mind, forget it."

Hsi-men Ch'ing responded by exposing his organ to Yüeh-niang.

"It's all your doing," he joked. "You've made him so angry he's having a dumbstruck fit."

"What do you mean 'he's having a dumbstruck fit'?" demanded Yüeh-niang.

"If he's not having a dumbstruck fit," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "how come his eye is bulging so wide, but he can't get a word out?"

"You must be delirious," responded Yüeh-niang. "What makes you think I've got even half an eye for the likes of you?"

At this point Hsi-men Ch'ing:

Without permitting any further explanation,
lifted Yüeh-niang's two fresh white legs onto his shoulders, inserted his organ into her vagina,¹³ and gave free rein to:

The oriole's abandon and the butterfly's pursuit,
Entranced by the clouds and intoxicated by the rain,
They are not yet willing to call a halt.¹⁴

Truly, it is a case of:

Among the crab apple boughs, orioles
dart quickly to and fro;
Between the halcyon hued rafters, swallows
parley incessantly.¹⁵

Before they knew it they arrived at that stage in which:

The transfusing touch of the magic rhinoceros horn
Produces a pleasure that cannot be exceeded.
Her musky tongue is partially protruded,
The fragrance of her rouge pervades his lips.

8 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

When Hsi-men Ch'ing's excitement was at its height he softly besought Yüeh-niang to call him "Daddy." Yüeh-niang accordingly:

Beneath lowered curtains, on their shared pillow,¹⁶

Responded as voluptuously as anyone could ask,¹⁷

calling him "Darling" without cease.

That night the two of them indulged:

The passions evoked by clouds and rain,

Joining their heads and twining their necks,

within the bed curtains. Truly:

When feelings converge, one is apt to forget

what happens to a brocade girdle;

When overcome by excitement, who cares about

the dropping of a golden hairpin?

There is a poem that testifies to this:

Coiffure in disarray, hairpins askew,¹⁸

she is deeply stirred;

Her passions in full sway, she dreads

the interminable night.

At evening, all alone, she stands

before her dressing mirror;

Not bothering to paint her eyebrows

into pale spring peaks.¹⁹

That evening husband and wife enjoyed themselves together. But no more of this.

To resume our story, the next day, bright and early in the morning, Meng Yü-lou paid a visit to P'an Chin-lien's quarters. Before going in she called out, "Is that slavey, Number Six, up yet?"

"Mother's just gotten up. She's doing her hair," said Ch'un-mei. "Won't you come in and sit down, Third Lady?"

Meng Yü-lou went inside and found Chin-lien sitting in front of her dressing mirror combing her fragrant clouds of hair.

"I've come to tell you about something that's happened," she said. "Do you know about it yet?"

"In an out-of-the-way corner like this," said Chin-lien, "how would I ever hear about anything? Really, what's up?"

"When Father got home last night during the second watch," said Yü-lou, "he went into the master suite and made it up with Mistress Wu. He spent the night in her room."

"We tried so hard to persuade her," said Chin-lien, "and she kept repeating that she'd never make it up with him in a hundred or two hundred years. Now she's wantonly taken the initiative by foisting herself upon him without any further urging."

"I only found out about it this morning," said Yü-lou. "My senior maid, Lan-hsiang, overheard the page boys talking about it in the kitchen. It seems that yesterday Father and Ying the Second were having a drink at Li Kuei-chieh's house in the quarter when they caught the whore out at something and smashed the place to pieces. He came home through the snow in high dudgeon and when he reached the inner gate found the First Lady burning night incense. He must have overheard something that brought about a reconciliation between them.

"According to her maid, the two of them talked away the night together. She said Father got down on his knees to the First Lady, calling her 'Mother,' and that the First Lady herself put on such a show it was enough to give you the creeps. I guess if she chooses to carry on that way there's nothing more to be said about it. But if it had been anyone else, you can be sure she would have been ticked off for her wantonness."

"It's lucky for her she's a principal wife," said Chin-lien, picking up where Yü-lou had left off. "Who knows what she's capable of?"

She's such a practiced old hand.

If you're going to burn night incense you ought to do your praying silently. Whoever heard of making a performance out of it only in order to attract your husband's attention? The very idea! Without any urging, to go and make it up with your husband on the sly. It would have been more becoming of her to tough it out with him. She's forever hypocritically protesting her own virtue."

"It's not just a case of hypocritically protesting her own virtue," said Yü-lou. "She really wanted to make it up with him, but couldn't bring herself to admit it. She may have claimed to be:

A crazy wife who will never give in,
but that was only because she was afraid that if she allowed us to intercede
we might:

Engage in idle tittle-tattle,²⁰

at her expense after the fact, saying that, 'when the two of you had that altercation it was only thanks to our intervention that you were reconciled.' Instead of which, the one of them happened to come home in high dudgeon from the quarter just when the other was burning night incense. A perfect coincidence! Truly:

In seeking a match they dispensed with
both go-between and witness;
Secretly tying their love-knot together
all by themselves.

"Right now you and I must contrive some way to prevent her from hogging all the credit. As soon as you've done with your hair, go tell Li P'ing-erh about it. If the two of us each come up with five mace of silver, we ought to be able to get Li P'ing-erh to contribute a tael, since she was the occasion of the whole to-do in the first place. Then we can throw a party today. On the one hand,

10 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

it will give us a chance to offer a toast to the couple, and on the other hand, it will provide a fitting occasion for the master and mistress of the household to appreciate the snow and enjoy themselves for a day. Why not?"

"You're right," responded Chin-lien. "I wonder if Father has any prior commitments today."

"During a heavy snow like this, what commitments could he have?" said Yü-lou. "When I came over here the two of them hadn't even stirred. The door to the master suite had just been opened and Hsiao-yü was taking in the water."

Chin-lien hastily finished doing her hair and accompanied Yü-lou over to Li P'ing-erh's quarters. They found her still in bed.

"The Third Lady and the Fifth Lady have come to see you," Ying-ch'un reported.

Yü-lou and Chin-lien went inside, saying, "Sister Li, you've really got it made. Still abed at such an hour."

The lazy dragon is just beginning to uncoil itself."

Chin-lien stuck her hand in under the quilt and discovered an incense burner for fumigating the bedclothes in the shape of a silver globe.²¹

"Sister Li has laid an egg," she said, pulling aside the covers as she spoke and revealing the white flesh of the body that lay within.

Li P'ing-erh made haste to get into her clothes.

"That's enough of your tricks, Fifth Sister," said Yü-lou. "Sister Li, it's time you got up. There's something we've come to tell you about. Yesterday, thus and so, Father and our elder sister were reconciled. Each of us is going to put up five mace of silver. You ought to give a little more since you were the occasion of the trouble between them in the first place. It's snowing heavily today and we really ought to do something to appreciate the snow. So we thought we'd throw a party and invite Father and our elder sister to spend some time with us. What do you say?"

"I'll be happy to contribute whatever you suggest," said Li P'ing-erh.

"A tael ought to be sufficient," said Chin-lien. "Weigh it out so we can go back to the rear compound and see what we can get from Li Chiao-erh and Sun Hsüeh-o."

Li P'ing-erh put on her clothes and bound her feet, telling Ying-ch'un, in the meantime, to open the trunk and get out the silver. She came up with a piece which Chin-lien put in the scale and found to weigh one tael, two mace, and five candareens.

Yü-lou suggested that Chin-lien stay and keep Li P'ing-erh company while she did her hair. "I'll go back to the rear compound myself and see what I can get from Li Chiao-erh and Sun Hsüeh-o," she said.

Chin-lien looked on as Li P'ing-erh washed her face and worked on her hair. Nearly two hours elapsed before Yü-lou returned from the rear compound.

"If I'd only known, I never would have undertaken this business," she complained. "It's something that concerns us all, and yet you'd think I was trying to get something for nothing out of her. The little whore said, 'I'm so out of favor our husband doesn't bother to come into my room anymore. Where would I get any silver from?' When I insisted, she wouldn't come up with so much as a mace. I pled with her for half the day before she produced this silver hairpin. Put it in the scale and see how much it weighs."

Chin-lien did as she was told and it was found to weigh only three mace and seven candareens.

"What about Li Chiao-erh?" she asked.

"At first she said, 'I don't have anything of my own,' " reported Yü-lou. " 'Although the money for household expenses may pass through my hands every day, everything has to be accounted for. I only receive enough to defray actual costs. There isn't anything left over.' I had to argue with her half the day before I got anywhere. 'How can you say you don't have any money to spare when you're in charge of the household expenses,' I demanded. 'It's not as though the rest of us are any better off. Are you claiming that:

The summer sun just happened to skip your door?

It's something that concerns us all, but you're just not going to cooperate. So much for that!' I had to stalk off in a huff before she was embarrassed enough to send the maid after me and come up with something at last. All this trouble for no reason at all!"

Chin-lien took Li Chiao-erh's contribution and put it in the scale. It came to just four mace and eight candareens.

"That simulating whore!" she cursed. "No matter what happens, even without any other funny business, she simply will not give full value, but is always just a little short."

"She's quick enough to get out the big scale with its yellow yard and weigh out the money²² when it's for herself," said Yü-lou, "but if you want to get anything out of *her*, it's like trying to extract it from her bones. Nobody has a good word to say for her."

When they had toted up the money, which came to three taels and one mace in all, including the contributions of Yü-lou and Chin-lien, they sent Hsiu-ch'un to fetch Tai-an.

Before anything else, Chin-lien asked him, "When you were out with Father yesterday, what was the altercation at the Li place all about?"

Tai-an told them the whole story. "They had a meeting of their club at Ch'ang Shih-chieh's house, but it broke up early, and Father ended up accompanying Messrs. Ying and Hsieh to Li Kuei-chieh's place. The madam reported that she was not at home, having gone to her fifth maternal aunt's house to celebrate her birthday. Who would have thought that, some time later, when Father went to the back of the establishment to relieve himself,

12 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

he found the painted face and a Southerner drinking wine together and realized she had been giving him the slip. He was so enraged that:

Without permitting any further explanation, he ordered us to tear the whore's place apart and would have had the Southerner and the painted face locked up together in the gatehouse had Ying the Second and the others not intervened. Father then got on his horse and came home in a huff, swearing along the way that he would take steps to settle the whore's hash."

"That lousy whore!" exclaimed Chin-lien. "I'll bet she thought she had:

A permanent grip on the honey jar,
but now, somehow or other:

It's ended up smashed to pieces."²³

"Did Father really say that?" she asked Tai-an.

"Would I have the nerve to deceive you?" he replied.

"You lousy jailbird," said Chin-lien. "Even if he does neglect her, she is your master's mistress, after all. Since when are you entitled to curse her? I remember how it was at the outset, whenever I asked you to do anything you used to claim you were too busy. 'Father has sent me to deliver some money to Auntie Kuei's place,' you used to say, giving such a sweet inflection to the words 'Auntie Kuei.' Now that she's fallen out of favor and your master's angry with her, even you start calling her a whore. Just wait and see if I don't tell your father about it the next chance I get."

"Ai-ya, Fifth Lady," exclaimed Tai-an.

"The sun must have risen in the West today,"²⁴

that you should be taking her part for a change. If Father hadn't called her a whore on the way home, do you think I would have dared do so?"

"If your father cursed her, that's his business," said Chin-lien. "Does that entitle you to do so?"

"If I'd known you were going to give me such a hard time about it, Fifth Lady," said Tai-an, "I never would have mentioned it to you."

"That's enough out of you, you little jailbird," said Yü-lou. "Here are three taels and one mace of silver, with which we want you and Lai-hsing to go buy some things for us, thus and so. We're planning to give a party today and invite your father and the First Lady to join us, so we can enjoy the snow and have a drink together. If you can manage to give us a break on the squeeze, I'll get the Fifth Lady not to tell your father what you said."

"If you send me on an errand," said Tai-an, "would I have the nerve to take any squeeze?"

Thereupon, together with Lai-hsing, he went off to buy the provisions.

To resume our story, Hsi-men Ch'ing had just gotten up and was performing his ablutions in the master suite when he saw Lai-hsing coming through the snow on his way to the kitchen with a chicken, a goose, and other comestibles, while Tai-an came in carrying a jug of Chin-hua wine.

"Who's that stuff for, that the servants are bringing in?" he asked Hsiao-yü.
"The ladies of the house are giving a party today," said Hsiao-yü. "They're going to invite you and the First Lady to join them in order to enjoy the snow."

"Where does that Chin-hua wine come from," asked Hsi-men Ch'ing.

"The Third Lady gave me the money to buy it," said Tai-an.

"Ai-ya," exclaimed Hsi-men Ch'ing. "We've got plenty of wine in the house already. What need is there to go out and buy any more?"

"Take the key to the anteroom on the west side of the front courtyard," he instructed Tai-an, "and bring back two jugs of the high-quality jasmine wine you'll find there. We can mix some of this wine in with it."

Thereupon, in the living room of the master suite that opened onto the rear courtyard:

Standing screens and brocaded windbreaks like Shih
Ch'ung's²⁵ were set up;
Warming drapes of oiled paper sprigged with plum
blossoms were suspended.
Braziers were filled with animal-shaped briquettes;
All the appurtenances of a feast were duly arrayed.

It was not long before the necessary preparations in the kitchen were completed and Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, P'an Chin-lien, and Li P'ing-erh came to invite Hsi-men Ch'ing and Yüeh-niang to join them.

Thereupon, Li Chiao-erh served the drinks, Meng Yü-lou held the flagon, P'an Chin-lien proffered the side dishes, and Li P'ing-erh also got down on her knees beside them. The first drink was offered to Hsi-men Ch'ing.

Taking the cup in his hand, Hsi-men Ch'ing said, with a laugh, "My children, you've gone to a lot of trouble just to please the old man. A bow will suffice."

P'an Chin-lien, who was always quick on the uptake, interjected, "That's enough of your airs, my son. Do you think anyone here is going to kowtow to you while you remain on your feet? You're just like:

The ramshorn scallion that grows by the southern wall;
The longer it stays there the hotter it gets.²⁶

If you don't get down on your knees you'll:

Forfeit a myriad years worth of fodder.²⁷

If it weren't for our elder sister, who do you think would be kowtowing to you today?"

Thereupon, after Hsi-men Ch'ing had been offered the first drink, the cup was refilled to the brim and Yüeh-niang was asked to assume the place of honor so that a drink could be offered to her in turn.

"None of you spoke a word about it," said Yüeh-niang. "Who would have thought you would go to so much trouble on my account?"

"It doesn't amount to anything," laughed Yü-lou. "We just thought we'd offer a cup of watery wine to our patriarch and matriarch after this heavy

14 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

snow, to help them dispel their gloom. Sister, please be seated and accept our salutations.”

Yüeh-niang refused to permit this and insisted on kowtowing to them in return.

“Unless you agree to be seated,” said Yü-lou, “the rest of us will refuse to get up from our knees.”

They bickered back and forth about it for some time before Yüeh-niang agreed to accept half a kowtow from them.

“Elder Sister,” said Chin-lien, in jest, “it’s only right that you should be forewarned. You may consent to forgive him this once, out of consideration for us, but if he should do anything of the kind to offend you again, we’ll wash our hands of the whole affair.”

Then, turning to Hsi-men Ch’ing, she continued, “What do you think you’re doing, remaining in your seat up there:

Playing the fool and putting on airs?

Why aren’t you down on your knees, offering Sister a cup of wine, and apologizing for your misconduct?”

Hsi-men Ch’ing merely laughed but did not move from his seat.

After Yüeh-niang was finally induced to accept the proffered drink, she got up from her place, ordered Yü-hsiao to hold the flagon, and poured a drink in return for each of her sisters. Only Sun Hsüeh-o received the wine on her knees. The others all accepted theirs with the ceremony appropriate to sisters of equal standing.

Thereupon, Hsi-men Ch’ing and Yüeh-niang occupied the seats of honor at the head of the table, while Li Chiao-erh, Meng Yü-lou, P’an Chin-lien, Li P’ing-erh, Sun Hsüeh-o, and Hsi-men Ta-chieh ranged themselves on either side.

“Sister Li,” said Chin-lien, “you really ought to offer our elder sister a cup of wine yourself, since you were the occasion of the whole to-do in the first place.

You hardly have to be as stiff as wood, like Old Lin.”²⁸

Li P’ing-erh actually rose from her seat and was going to follow Chin-lien’s suggestion, but Hsi-men Ch’ing stopped her, saying, “Don’t pay any attention to that little whore, she’s only fooling. We’ve already been presented with a round of drinks. There’s no need for any more.”

Only then did Li P’ing-erh desist.

Thereupon, Ch’un-mei, Ying-ch’un, Yü-hsiao, and Lan-hsiang, the four household musicians, struck up a tune on their instruments, the *p’i-p’a*, psaltery, three-stringed banjo, and mandola. They sang the southern-style song suite that begins with the tune “Pomegranate Blossoms” and opens with the words:

It was the night of their assignation,²⁹

etc., etc.

When Hsi-men Ch'ing heard this, he asked, "Whose idea was it to sing this particular suite?"

"The Fifth Lady told us to sing it," said Yü-hsiao.

Hsi-men Ch'ing gave P'an Chin-lien a look, saying, "You little whore! You can't resist the temptation to:

Fool with the branches and tug at the leaves,³⁰
can you?"

"Who am I to tell them what to sing?" said Chin-lien. "You're just picking on me again."

"Why don't we ask our son-in-law to join us for a bit?" said Yüeh-niang, and, suiting her action to her words, she dispatched a page boy to the front compound to convey the invitation.

Before long Ch'en Ching-chi showed up and bowed to each member of the party before taking a seat next to Hsi-men Ta-chieh. Yüeh-niang ordered Hsiao-yü to provide him with a place setting. Now that the whole family was assembled:

Animal-shaped briquettes replenished golden braziers;
The finest wine of Yang-kao vintage was decanted.³¹

As they enjoyed the wine, Hsi-men Ch'ing glanced outside the rolled-up bamboo blinds and saw that the snow was falling heavily. It looked just like:

Shredded cotton wadding,³² or
Wildly dancing pear blossoms.³³

Truly, it was a magnificent snow. Behold:

Initially resembling willow catkins,
Gradually it turns into goose down.

Scarcely audible, it reminds one of crabs
moving across the sand;³⁴

In rich profusion, it is like shattered alabaster
piled on the pavement.³⁵

With every move one makes,
One's clothes catch six-pointed stars;
At every other moment,
One must brush away the bee's whiskers.³⁶

Now it flurries, now it stops;
The Dragon Lord is yet rehearsing
the steps of his dance.

The power of spring remains weak;
The Jade Maiden is still entranced
producing her whirlwind.

Enhancing jasper terraces,
Jade dragon's-scales appear to
pervade the firmament.³⁷

Brushing powdered foreheads,

16 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

White crane's-feathers seem to
settle gently to earth.³⁸

Truly:

Congealing upon "towers of jade,"
its cold raises goose bumps;
Wavering before "silver seas,"
its dazzle creates a blur.³⁹

When Wu Yüeh-niang saw how much snow had accumulated on the T'ai-hu rockery⁴⁰ in front of the spirit screen, she got up from her place, told Hsiao-yü to fetch the tea jar, and proceeded in person to sweep up enough snow to brew some Phoenix Tablet Sparrow Tongue tea from Chiang-nan for the company.⁴¹ Truly:

Foaming whitecaps of brick tea,
break in white jade cups;
The pure bouquet of vintage wine,
bursts from the golden flagon.⁴²

As they were enjoying the tea, who should come in but Tai-an, who reported, "Li Ming has come. He's waiting in the front compound."

"Tell him to come in," said Hsi-men Ch'ing.

Before long, Li Ming appeared. After performing a kowtow to the assembled company, he made a leg as well, and then stood deferentially to one side.

"You've arrived in the nick of time," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Where've you been?"

"Nowhere in particular," said Li Ming. "I've been teaching a couple of youngsters at Eunuch Director Liu's house near Wine Vinegar Gate in the Northern Quarter. I thought I'd look in on them today, but then remembered that the young ladies at your place haven't got some of their songs quite right yet, so I came over here to see what I could do."

Hsi-men Ch'ing handed him what was left of the cup of tea, flavored with osmanthus and kumquats, that he had been drinking from, saying, "When you've finished with that, stick around and perform a song suite for us."

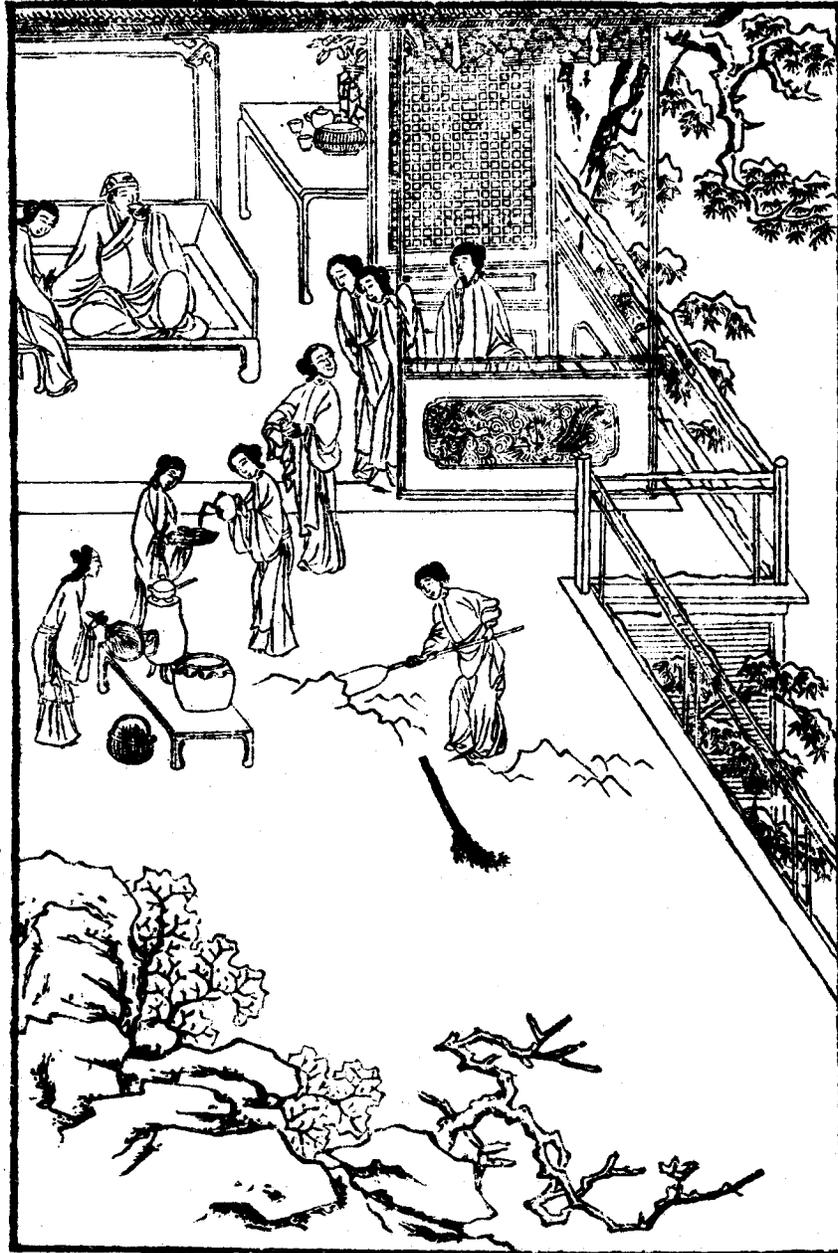
"Whatever you say," said Li Ming, retiring an appropriate distance to drink his tea.

When he had finished, he came forward, tuned the strings of his psaltery, and:

Commencing to sing in full voice;
Facing forward with his feet together,
launched into the song suite on winter that begins with the tune "Spring in the Metropolis" and opens with the words:

A cold wind has overspread the land,⁴³

etc., etc.



Wu Yüeh-ning Sweeps Snow in Order to Brew Tea

18 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

When Li Ming had finished singing, Hsi-men Ch'ing called him over in order to reward him with a drink of wine. He told Hsiao-yü, who was holding a round-handled chicken-crop flagon with a curved spout, to pour a full measure into a peach-shaped cup of silver-mounted cloisonné. Li Ming knelt on the ground and drank off three full cups. Hsi-men Ch'ing also selected from the delicacies on the table a saucerful of bulging white steamed buns, a bowl of clam broth flavored with leeks and marinated bamboo shoots, a platter of large slices of fat jellied goose, as well as saucersful of savory cured coney, steamed dried shad, and squab baked in junket, and handed them to Li Ming on a tray.

Li Ming retired an appropriate distance and gobbled it all down in:

Three mouthfuls and two swallows.⁴⁴

When he had licked the platter clean and wiped his lips with a napkin, he came back and stood at attention beside the latticework partition.

Hsi-men Ch'ing then told him all about what had happened at Li Kuei-chieh's place the day before.

"I didn't hear a word about it," said Li Ming. "I haven't been over there very often recently. If you stop to think about it though, it's not really Kuei-chieh's fault. It's all the doing of our old madam, Li the Third. You mustn't be too upset about it. I'll give her a real telling off the next time I see her."

That day, the party continued until the first watch, and the wife and concubines of the household had a good time together. Ch'en Ching-chi and Hsi-men Ta-chieh were the first to leave, going straight back to their quarters in the front compound. After that, when the wine was about to run out, Hsi-men Ch'ing rewarded Li Ming with another drink and sent him on his way.

"If you go over there," said Hsi-men Ch'ing in parting, "don't say anything about having been here today."

"I understand," replied Li Ming.

Hsi-men Ch'ing ordered a servant to see him to the door and the front gate was closed for the night. Wife and concubines then went their separate ways, but Hsi-men Ch'ing spent another night with Yüeh-niang in the master suite. There is a poem that testifies to this:

A marriage affinity bound with red cord⁴⁵
is not to be doubted;
Having had to burn their door-bars for fuel,
they are of one mind.⁴⁶
Like fish and water, perfectly suited,⁴⁷
from this time forth;
Their mutual feelings will surely sustain
a lifetime of bliss.⁴⁸

To resume our story, by the next day the snow had cleared. Ying Po-chüeh and Hsieh Hsi-ta had been induced by the offer of a roast goose and a jug of

wine to act as emissaries for the Li family establishment, which was worried that Hsi-men Ch'ing might be moved by anger to attempt the ruination of their house. They therefore showed up in order to respectfully invite Hsi-men Ch'ing to accompany them into the quarter and accept the proffered rites of propitiation.

Yüeh-niang had finished her morning toilet and was eating a breakfast snack with Hsi-men Ch'ing when who should come in but the page boy, Tai-an, with the report that Master Ying and Master Hsieh had come to visit and were waiting in the reception room out front.

Hsi-men Ch'ing put down the piece of pastry in his hand and was halfway out the door when Yüeh-niang stopped him, saying, "Who knows what those two ghost-snatching demons have come for? You might just as well finish your breakfast before rushing off to meet them. Let them cool their heels outside a while. What are you in such a fearful hurry to get out of here for, anyway? There's no telling where they'll drag you off to in the snow."

"Tell the page boy to bring the pastry out front," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "I'll share it with the two of them."

So saying, he got up and started out of the room.

"When you're through eating," Yüeh-niang instructed him, "don't allow yourself to be inveigled into going off somewhere with those two. After a heavy snow like this, you really ought to stay home and relax for a change. Tonight we're going to celebrate the eve of Meng Yü-lou's birthday."

"I understand," said Hsi-men Ch'ing.

Thereupon, he went out to meet Ying Po-chüeh and Hsieh Hsi-ta, who greeted him with a bow, saying, "Brother, after you went home in a huff the other night, we really gave them a hard time. 'All this while,' we said, 'our brother's been:

Spending his money and wasting his goods,
here in your house. Even if he hasn't been around much lately, that's no reason for you to change your tune. After all, if you let your painted-face take up with some Southerner on the sly:

Enemies are apt to meet in narrow straits.⁴⁹

If he catches them red-handed, how could he be anything but angry? And, quite aside from our brother's anger, we can hardly be expected to countenance such goings on ourselves.'

"Mother and daughters alike, we really told them a thing or two. They're all thoroughly embarrassed about the whole thing. Early this morning they invited us over to their place and got down on their knees to us with a good deal of weeping and wailing. They're so worried about what you might do in your anger that they've prepared a cup of watery wine and want you to come back so they can make it up to you."

"I'm no longer angry," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "but I'm not going back into the quarter anymore."

"It's only right that you should be annoyed," said Ying Po-chüeh. "If you stop to think about it though, it's not really Kuei-chieh's fault. That Ting the Second was actually a patron of her elder sister, Li Kuei-ch'ing, and never made any overtures to Kuei-chieh. It all originated out of the fact that his father's boatload of goods was moored next to the boat of a National University student, named Ch'en, who is a fellow townsman of his. This Ch'en, whose sobriquet is Liang-huai, only arrived two days ago. He's the son of Administration Vice Commissioner Ch'en who formerly served in the Palace Library.

"This Ting the Second had engaged to pay ten taels of silver for a party at the Li place in order to entertain his fellow townsman Mr. Ch'en. He had just stopped by to deliver the money when we showed up, and Kuei-chieh, unable to think of any other means of avoiding an awkward situation, concealed the presence of the Southerner by hiding him in the rear part of the compound, where you happened to catch sight of him.

"The truth of the matter is that he has never laid a hand on Kuei-chieh. Today, mother and daughters alike:

Swearing by the gods and uttering oaths,

Kowtowing and performing obeisances,

begged the two of us to do whatever we could to induce you to pay them a visit so they could explain this misunderstanding to you themselves and perhaps alleviate some of your anger."

"I've already made a vow to my wife that I would never set foot in the place again," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "It's not that I'm still angry or anything like that. You can tell them that they have no cause for further concern. I've got some matters to attend to at home today, so I really can't go."

This reply threw his two visitors into such consternation that they fell to their knees and spoke with one voice, saying, "Brother, how can you say such a thing? It may not matter for you not to go, but since they have asked us to intercede on their behalf, it would look as though we had so little influence with you that we couldn't even get you to accede to an invitation. All you have to do is show up and sit for a while and then come home if you like."

By the time the two of them finished with their pitch:

As though their lives depended on it,

they had talked Hsi-men Ch'ing into giving his assent.

Before long, a table was set up and their host invited them to share the remainder of his breakfast pastry with him. When they had finished eating, soon thereafter, Hsi-men Ch'ing sent Tai-an to fetch his outdoor clothes.

Yüeh-niang, who was sitting with Meng Yü-lou when he came in, asked Tai-an, "Where's your father off to?"

"I have no idea," said Tai-an. "He only told me to come fetch his clothes."

"You lousy jailbird!" Yüeh-niang railed at him. "You think you can keep me in the dark, do you? If your father gets home late today, I'll hold you

personally accountable. We're celebrating the eve of the Third Lady's birthday tonight, so you'd better get him home in plenty of time. If you wait until:

The sky is black and the earth is dark,
I'll see that you get a good beating, you lousy jailbird, if I have to do it myself."

"Why should you beat me, Mother?" said Tai-an. "What have I got to do with it?"

"I don't know why it is," said Yüeh-niang, "but as soon as he heard those two gaffers had come, he took off as though his life depended on it. We were eating breakfast at the time, but he dropped his bowl and headed out the door on the spot. Who knows where they may drag him off to:

Parading the campground and disturbing the dead,
or when he'll ever get home."

It was the twenty-sixth day of the eleventh month, the eve of Meng Yü-lou's birthday, and a family party had been prepared for the occasion. But no more of this.

To resume our story, Hsi-men Ch'ing accepted the invitation of his two friends to accompany them into the licensed quarter. The Li family establishment had already prepared a regular feast in their main reception room and engaged two singing girls to help with the entertainment. Li Kuei-chieh and Li Kuei-ch'ing, all dressed up for the occasion, met their guests at the door. The old procuress came out and knelt down to offer her apologies for the misunderstanding. The two sisters served the wine and Ying Po-chüeh and Hsieh Hsi-ta stood to either side, keeping up a steady stream of jokes and wisecracks.

"I wore away half the skin on my lips in getting your lover to come see you," said Ying Po-chüeh to Kuei-chieh. "And now you've no further use for me and don't even offer me a cup of wine. You've only got eyes for your lover, I can see. If he'd kicked up a fuss and refused to come, just now, not only would you have cried yourself blind and been reduced to making your living as an itinerant singer, but nobody would have cared a straw about you anymore. It's only my skills as a mouthpiece that have saved you from such a fate."

"You crazy beggar!" Kuei-chieh railed at him. "You're delirious. I'd only be wasting my breath on you. So you think I'd be reduced to being an itinerant singer, do you?"

"Just look at the way the lousy little whore carries on," said Ying Po-chüeh.

"After the sutra has been recited,

She takes the stick to the monk.⁵⁰

At this rate, she won't acknowledge anyone in the future. When he wouldn't come, you were all aflutter; but now that he's here:

Your wing feathers are dry enough for flight.⁵¹

Come over here and give me a kiss to fend off the cold."



Ying Po-chüeh Runs Errands on Behalf of Flowers

Thereupon:

Without permitting any further explanation,
he embraced her by the neck and gave her a kiss.

“You crazy chunk of knife-bait!” laughed Kuei-chieh. “Don’t knock the wine all over Father.”

“Little whore!” said Ying Po-chüeh. “I can see through your tricks. Right now you’re so concerned about your lover, ‘Don’t knock the wine all over Father,’ you say, giving such a sweet inflection to the word ‘Father.’ Am I nothing but a stepchild, that you haven’t a word for me?”

“If I called you anything,” said Kuei-chieh, “it would be ‘my child.’”

“Come over here,” said Ying Po-chüeh, “I’ve got a joke to tell you. A crab and a frog once swore brotherhood together and made a wager that whichever of them could jump over a ditch should be the elder brother. The frog made it to the other side in a hop or two. Just as the crab was about to jump, two girls came along to draw water and trussed him up with a piece of string to take home with them when they were through. They forgot about him when they were ready to leave, however, and neglected to take him. When the frog saw that his companion had not followed him he came back to see what had happened and asked, ‘What’s been keeping you?’ ‘I would have made it across,’ said the crab, ‘if I hadn’t been tied up in knots by those two little whores.’”

Thereupon, the two sisters both took out after Ying Po-chüeh while Hsi-men Ch’ing laughed himself silly. They continued to enjoy themselves:

Amid clustering blossoms and clinging brocade,

Laughing and joking at each other’s expense.

But no more of this.

To resume our story, back at home Wu Yüeh-niang had prepared a feast, partly in return for the one to which she had been treated the day before, and partly in order to celebrate the eve of Meng Yü-lou’s birthday. Her sister-in-law, the wife of Wu K’ai, Aunt Yang, and two Buddhist nuns had been invited for the occasion and were seated in the master suite. As they waited the sun eventually set, but still there was no sign of Hsi-men Ch’ing. Yüeh-niang was becoming extremely agitated.

At this point, P’an Chin-lien, tugging Li P’ing-erh by the hand, said to Yüeh-niang with a giggle, “Elder Sister, since he still hasn’t shown up, why don’t the two of us go out to the front gate and look out for him?”

“Who’s got the patience to look out for him?” said Yüeh-niang.

Chin-lien also took Meng Yü-lou by the hand, saying, “Let the three of us go out to look for him together.”

“I want to hear the joke the abess is about to tell,” said Yü-lou. “Let’s wait till she’s done before we go.”

Only then was Chin-lien induced to stay.

24 THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE

As they sat in a circle around the two nuns to hear what jokes they would tell, she said, "We only go for meaty fare. Don't give us any of that vegetarian stuff."

"Let them tell us whatever they want," said Yüeh-niang. "Don't be so demanding."

"Elder Sister," said Chin-lien, "you may not realize it but the abbess here can really tell a joke if she wants to. The last time she was here in the rear compound we refused to let her off and she came up with a whole string of good ones."

Then, turning to the abbess, she said, "If you've got any, let's have them."

At this point,

Neither hurriedly nor hastily,

Nun Wang, who was sitting on the k'ang, said, "A certain man was walking down the road when he encountered a tiger who wanted to eat him. 'Spare my life,' said the man, 'for the sake of my eighty-year-old mother who has no one else to look after her. Or else come home with me. I've got a pig there I could let you eat.' The tiger accordingly spared him and accompanied the man back to his home, where he told his mother about it. His mother, who was making bean curd at the time, couldn't bear to relinquish the pig, so she said to her son, 'Why don't you give him a few pieces of bean curd to eat?' 'You don't understand, Mother,' the son replied. 'He's not accustomed to vegetarian fare.'"

"That's no good," said Chin-lien. "We don't want to listen to any more of that vegetarian stuff. Let's have some meatier fare."

Nun Wang then told them another one. "A certain family with three daughters-in-law was celebrating the birthday of the head of the household. First it was the turn of the senior daughter-in-law to offer her father-in-law a cup of wine. 'Sir,' she said, 'you're just like a magistrate.' 'How am I like a magistrate?' the father-in-law asked. 'When you sit up there like that,' the daughter-in-law replied, 'everyone in the whole household is afraid of you. How can you say you're not like a magistrate?' Next it was the turn of the second daughter-in-law to offer a cup of wine. 'Sir,' she said, 'you're just like a yamen lictor of tigerlike ferocity.' 'How am I like a yamen lictor of tigerlike ferocity?' the father-in-law asked. 'When you shout a command,' the daughter-in-law replied, 'everyone in the whole household trembles. How can you say you're not like a yamen lictor?' 'You're really giving me a hard time,' the father-in-law said. Finally it was the turn of the third daughter-in-law to offer a cup of wine. She stepped forward and said, 'Sir, you're not really like a magistrate or like a lictor.' 'Then what am I like?' the father-in-law demanded to know. 'Sir,' said the daughter-in-law, 'you're just like a head yamen clerk.' 'How am I like a head yamen clerk?' the father-in-law asked. 'If you're not like a head yamen clerk,' the daughter-in-law replied, 'how is it that you have the run of all six chambers?'⁵²

Everyone laughed at this joke.

"You bald-pated rascal!" said Chin-lien. "You've managed to get us all into it. What sort of a yamen clerk would have the nerve to venture into every chamber? The bald-pated dog would be lucky to escape with his nether regions in one piece."

After this exchange, Chin-lien, Yü-lou, and Li P'ing-erh went off to the front gate together to look for Hsi-men Ch'ing, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"What's Father doing away from home on such a snowy day?" asked Yü-lou. "I wonder where he's gone."

"If you ask me," said Chin-lien, "he's sure to be at that whore Li Kuei-chieh's house in the quarter."

"But he smashed the place up he was so upset with her," said Yü-lou. "He swore an oath never to set foot in it again. Why should he go back there? Let's make a bet on it. I'm sure he's not at her place."

"Sister Li can be our witness," said Chin-lien. "Are you willing to shake on it? I say he's gone to her house today. It was day before yesterday that he trashed the whore's place. Yesterday that cuckold Li Ming came here to size up the situation. Today Ying the Second and that Hsieh fellow showed up at the crack of dawn, like ghost-snatching demons, and dragged him off with them. My guess is that the old procuress and that whore have:

Laid plans and hatched a scheme,⁵³

in order to get him back there again. If they're able to work their wiles on him, somehow or other, and succeed in propitiating him, they'll have a chance to:

Relight the furnace and restore the account.

Who knows how long he'll be tied up, or what the probabilities are as to whether he'll come home or not; but our elder sister just keeps waiting for him."

"Even if he doesn't come home," said Yü-lou, "he ought to send a page boy back to let us know about it."

As they were talking, who should come by but a vendor of melon seeds, so the two of them, standing in the gateway, bought some melon seeds and stood there cracking them in their teeth. All of a sudden, they caught sight of Hsi-men Ch'ing coming toward them from the east, and the three ladies beat a hasty retreat.

Hsi-men Ch'ing, who was on horseback, sent Tai-an ahead of him on foot, saying, "See who it is standing there in the gateway."

Tai-an ran forward a step or two and reported, "It's the Third Lady, the Fifth Lady, and the Sixth Lady, buying melon seeds at the gate."

In due course, Hsi-men Ch'ing arrived home, dismounted, and walked back through the inner gate that led to the rear compound. Meng Yü-lou and Li P'ing-erh had gone ahead to the master suite to tell Yüeh-niang of his

arrival, but Chin-lien lay in wait for him, concealing herself in the black shadow behind the whitewashed spirit screen.

When he encountered her, Hsi-men Ch'ing was startled and said, "You crazy little whore! Coming upon you so suddenly gave me quite a start. What were you all doing out at the front gate?"

"You have a nerve to ask," said Chin-lien. "Where have you been all this time, that you should only be coming home now, leaving your mothers with nothing to do but wait for you at the door?"

After some time, Hsi-men Ch'ing arrived in the master suite. Yüeh-niang had prepared a feast for the occasion which was laid out on the table with everything:

Straight and proper.⁵⁴

She told Yü-hsiao to hold the flagon and Hsi-men Ta-chieh to serve the wine. Hsi-men Ch'ing was served first, after which, when all of the sisters had been served in turn, they sat down at their places. Ch'un-mei and Ying-ch'un played and sang for them in the lower part of the room.

After they had eaten for a while, the first course was cleared away and the sweetmeats in honor of Meng Yü-lou's birthday were served, consisting of forty saucersful of delicacies of every kind.

The finest vintage poured from the flagon,⁵⁵

Iridescent liquid overflowed the cups.

Yüeh-niang's sister-in-law, the wife of Wu K'ai, was induced to occupy the seat of honor but retired to her room during the first watch because she did not like to drink too much wine. Wu Yüeh-niang and the sorority of concubines, however, continued to keep Hsi-men Ch'ing company, throwing dice:

Playing at guess-fingers or gaming at forfeits.

When it was Yüeh-niang's turn to call the game, she said, "If you want me to set the rules for this round, the scoring will be based on domino combinations. Each player in turn must come up with the name of a song tune, the names of two domino combinations, and a line from the *Hsi-hsiang chi* (The romance of the western chamber),⁵⁶ strung together so as to make some semblance of sense. He or she must then throw the dice and drink a cup of wine as a forfeit if any of the numbers thrown correspond to those in the domino combinations he or she has named."

Yüeh-niang went first, saying, " 'The Sixth Lady,' like a 'Drunken Yang Kuei-fei,'⁵⁷ drops her 'Eight-pearled Bracelet.'⁵⁸ 'Gossamer strands catch on the rose-leaved raspberry trellis.' "⁵⁹

When she threw the dice, none of the numbers corresponded to those in either of the domino combinations she had named.

Next it was Hsi-men Ch'ing's turn. He said, " 'The Beautiful Lady Yü,' observing 'Ch'u and Han Contend for Supremacy,'⁶⁰ feels threatened by 'The Regular Cavalry.'⁶¹ 'Beside my ears gongs and drums resound to the skies.' "⁶²

Sure enough, when he threw the dice he got the combination called "The Regular Cavalry" and had to drink a cup of wine as a penalty.

Li Chiao-erh came next. She said, "The Water Nymphs,' because 'Two Gentlemen Intrude upon Peach Blossom Spring,'⁶³ are startled out of their idyll in which 'Flowers Blossom and Butterflies Fill the Branches.'⁶⁴ As a result, 'Fallen red petals cover the ground, their rouge now cold.'⁶⁵

When she threw the dice, she escaped unscathed.

Then came Chin-lien, who said, "The Old Crone' 'Ventures among the Flowers in Her Dotage,'⁶⁶ thereby flouting "The Three Bonds and Five Constants.'⁶⁷ 'If not arrested for seduction, it will be for robbery.'⁶⁸

Sure enough, when she threw the dice she got the combination called "The Three Bonds and Five Constants" and had to drink a cup of wine as a penalty.

Next it was Li P'ing-erh's turn. She said, "Decorous and Pretty,' she 'Mounts a Ladder to Gaze at the Moon,'⁶⁹ waiting until "The Spring Equinox, when Day and Night are Equal in Length.'⁷⁰ At that time, 'Separated from him by the intervening wall, she might have turned to stone awaiting her husband.'⁷¹

When she threw the dice, she escaped unscathed.

Then came Sun Hsüeh-o, who said, "The Pockmarked Young Man,' on seeing "The Flock of Crows Attack the Phoenix,'⁷² only succeeds in tripping up "The Wild Goose with the Broken Leg.'⁷³ 'I'll be damned if I do and damned if I don't.'⁷⁴

When she threw the dice, she escaped unscathed.

Finally, it was the turn of Yü-lou to finish the round. She said, "Nien-nu Is Charming.' Propping up the drunken 'Red Doublet Four,'⁷⁵ she trails "The Hem of Her Brocaded Skirt.'⁷⁶ How often will she enjoy 'Spring breezes and moonlit nights amid gold lamé bed curtains.'⁷⁷

Sure enough, when she threw the dice she got the combination called "Red Doublet Four."

Yüeh-niang completed her round as mistress of ceremonies by saying to Hsiao-yü, "Pour some wine for the Third Lady."

Turning to the latter, she continued, "You'd better drink three large cups. This evening it's your turn to spend the night with the bridegroom."

Addressing herself then to Chin-lien, Li Chiao-erh, and the rest, she said, "As soon as she's finished her wine, we must all see the two of them to their bridal chamber."

"If that is Elder Sister's decree," said Chin-lien, "how could we dare not to comply?"

This badinage reduced Yü-lou to a state of utter confusion.

Not long thereafter, the wine was finished and Yüeh-niang and the others escorted Hsi-men Ch'ing as far as the door of Yü-lou's chamber before going their separate ways. Yü-lou invited them to come in and visit for a while, but none of them would stay.

"My child," teased Chin-lien, "see that the two of you get a good night's rest. Your mother will come back to see you in the morning. Don't be naughty now."

Then, turning to Yüeh-niang, she continued in the same vein, "Kinswoman, my child is still a youngster. For my sake, if anything comes up, give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Slavey Six," said Yü-lou:

"The best vinegar takes time to ferment.

I'll have something to say to you tomorrow."

"As for me," said Chin-lien, "I'm like:

The go-between who has to climb the stairs:

Quite inured to such alarms."

"My child," said Yü-lou. "Won't you stay a little longer?"

"We're only outsiders, after all," said Chin-lien, "from the other side of the wall."

Thereupon, along with Li P'ing-erh and Hsi-men Ta-chieh she set out to return to the front compound. Just as they reached the inner gate, Li P'ing-erh lost her footing on a slippery patch of ground and fell down.

Chin-lien made a big to-do about it, calling out, "Sister Li, you might as well be blind. With every move you make you come a cropper. When I tried to catch you, one of my own feet slipped into the snow and now my shoe is all muddy."

Yüeh-niang overheard this, and said, "It must be that pile of snow by the inner gate. I've told the page boys to take care of it more than once, but the lousy slaves simply won't cart it away. It's no wonder someone has taken a spill."

Then, turning to Hsiao-yü, she said, "Take a lantern and escort the Fifth Lady and the Sixth Lady back to the front compound."

Hsi-men Ch'ing, in Yü-lou's room, said to her, "Just take a gander at that lousy little whore. She steps in the mud, trips someone up, and then has the nerve to suggest that the other party has gotten mud on her shoe. She invariably picks on someone who's unlikely to give her any lip in return. It's just like her, little whore that she is. I'm sure it was she, yesterday, that put the maidservants up to singing:

It was the night of their assignation."

"What was the point of that particular song suite?" asked Yü-lou.

"What she meant to suggest," said Hsi-men Ch'ing, "is that my wife's encounter with me was not really just a coincidence, but something done by design; as though she was burning incense at night in the expectation that I would discover her in the act."

"Sister Six seems to know every song in the repertory," said Yü-lou. "The rest of us don't understand such things."

“You don’t know what that whore is capable of,” said Hsi-men Ch’ing. “All she ever does is engage in backbiting at other people’s expense.”

We will say no more, for the moment, about how Hsi-men Ch’ing spent the night in Yü-lou’s room, but turn instead to P’an Chin-lien and Li P’ing-erh.

The two of them chatted as they walked along, Chin-lien addressing her companion sometimes as Sister Li and sometimes as Sister Hua. They accompanied Hsi-men Ta-chieh as far as the inner gate that led into the front courtyard, where she returned to her quarters. Hsiao-yü, holding a lantern, then escorted the two of them into the garden.

Chin-lien was already half drunk. Taking Li P’ing-erh by the hand, she said, “Sister Hua, I’m a little tipsy today. Be good enough, whatever happens, to accompany me into my room.”

“You’re not drunk, Sister,” said Li P’ing-erh.

Before long, they arrived at Chin-lien’s quarters, and Hsiao-yü was sent back to the rear compound. Chin-lien invited Li P’ing-erh to sit down and have some tea.

“You were talking just now,” said Chin-lien, “about that time when you were unable to enter the household. Who do you suppose you have to thank for the present situation? Who would ever have thought that today we’d be sisters:

Walking along the same gangplank?⁷⁸

I don’t know how much unpleasantness I had to put up with on your account, or all the things that were said about me behind my back. As for my good intentions, they are known only to Heaven. That’s all there is to it.”

“I know how much trouble you went to,” said Li P’ing-erh.

“Your kindness will be amply rewarded,

I will never dare to forget it.”

“As long as you’re aware of it,” said Chin-lien, “we can be on talking terms with each other.”

In a little while, Ch’un-mei served the tea and, after finishing it, Li P’ing-erh took her leave and went back to her own quarters, while Chin-lien went to sleep by herself. But no more of this. Truly:

Just as it seems that, first to last,

there is nothing to regret;

No sooner are the branches formed than

they begin to proliferate.⁷⁹

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