PLUM FLOWERS IN A GOLDEN VASE

(GOLDEN LOTUS)
Golden Lotus

The novel Golden Lotus (to use its most familiar title), an anonymous work written around the year 1600, is one of the masterpieces of Ming literature. The Chinese title, Jin Ping Mei, literally means “Plum Flowers in a Golden Vase,” but the title is merely a pun on the names of the novel’s three leading female characters: Golden Lotus, Vase, and Plum Flower. As with most of China’s classical novels, Golden Lotus is a long saga, running one hundred chapters (the only full translation into English, has been published in five volumes and more than 2,500 pages).

To summarize the plot as briefly as possible: Golden Lotus centers on the life of a wealthy merchant named Ximen Qing, whose main activities consist of celebrating with friends and sleeping with concubines, courtesans, and other people’s wives. The novel begins with an episode of adultery in which Ximen Qing and his paramour Golden Lotus kill Lotus’s husband and subsequently arrange to marry her into Ximen’s household as his fifth wife. Later Ximen adds to his harem by stealing yet another man’s wife, Vase, whom he favors over the jealous and insatiable Golden Lotus. Vase’s status soon rises when she bears him his first son Guange, but Vase and the son die within a year, largely due to the plotting of Golden Lotus. The inconsolable Ximen Qing then enters the final stretch of his life. Having already obtained (in chapter 49, included in our reading) a marvelous aphrodisiac from a Buddhist monk, he has been all along expanding his sphere of sexual exploits. After the death of Vase, and despite a dream in which Vase warns him of his approaching doom, Ximen gradually allows his sexual energy to drain away. In the end it is the possessive Golden Lotus who causes his death by giving him an overdose of the aphrodisiac. The last part of the novel tells of the decline of his house and the dispersal or death of the surviving wives (including Golden Lotus), leaving only his main wife, the chaste Moon Lady, and his remaining, posthumously-born son, Xiaoge, who in fact is Ximen Qing’s reincarnated self and who ends up becoming a monk.

I have chosen to translate chapters 49-51 because they are the central chapters of the novel, in the literal sense that they come at its midpoint, and also because (in keeping with the conventions of Chinese fiction) the middle chapters recapitulate the main themes of the novel. Ximen Qing, though a merchant by trade, used his wealth and connections to purchase an official position in the local constabulary, adding abuse of government office to his moral failings. When chapter 49 opens Ximen Qing has just used his influence at the capital to protect his superior, the local magistrate Xia, from an indictment drawn up by Censor Zeng. Like another of the great Ming novels, Shui Hu Zhuan (Water Margin), Golden Lotus is set in the early twelfth century, in the waning days of the Northern Song dynasty when the evil prime minister Cai Jing dominated the court and moral decadence was said to have reached its peak.
CHAPTER 49

Where Ximen Qing Receives the New Censor Song
And Encounters a Monk from the Barbarian West at a Farewell Dinner

Free and without care we pass the time:
How many years of life? Death soon awaits.
Let destiny carry you, whether good or bad!
High or low, so it goes: one only wants
What one doesn’t have. Sighing does no good;
Rich or poor, from Heaven comes all.
Your lot in life is fixed by fate,
A moment of pure leisure is a moment divine.

Xia Shou went home and told his master the news. Then Magistrate Xia came to thank Ximen Qing. “You have saved my life, my friend,” he said. “Without the benefit of your radiant influence, I would be in a very grave position.”

Ximen Qing laughed. “Do not mention it. You and I did nothing wrong, and, though Censor Zeng spoke harshly about us, His Excellency [Cai Jing, the prime minister] will take care of everything.” Ximen entertained his guest in the great hall. They laughed and talked, and it was evening before Xia returned home. The next day they both went to the yamen and attended to their duties as before.

Censor Zeng saw that, though his report reached the Court, nothing happened. He realized that some intervention had occurred in high places, and was very indignant. He knew, moreover, that the seven proposals presented by the Grand Tutor would lead to serious trouble. They would work to the detriment of the common people and the advantage of officials. So he went himself to the capital to solicit an audience with the emperor, where he submitted a memorial which sharply rebutted Cai Jing’s proposals: “The wealth of the empire must above all circulate freely. Seizing the goods of the people and hoarding them in the capital, I fear, will not usher in the age of Great Peace. The measures for collecting and distributing grain are impractical; the new large 10-cash coins will not gain acceptance; the rules concerning salt vouchers cannot be changed time and again. I have heard it said: if the livelihood of the people is exhausted, who will defend the country?”

1 Cai Jing (1046-1126) was the notorious prime minister vilified for impoverishing the empire and bringing on the downfall of the Northern Song in 1127.

2The term “yamen” refers to any government office. Ximen Qing was Magistrate Xia’s subordinate in the Constabulary of Qinghe county, an office which combined police and judicial powers.

3“Grand Tutor” was Cai Jing’s official title.

4Censor Zeng here inveighs against the panoply of measures undertaken by Cai Jing to give the
This memorial enraged Cai Jing. He told the Son of Heaven, Emperor Huizong, that Censor Zeng was insubordinate and undisciplined in concerning himself unduly in matters of state. Zeng was summoned to appear before the Board of Civil Service, which demoted him and sent him to serve as magistrate of Qingzhou in Shaanxi province.

The Censor and Intendant of Shaanxi, Song Pan, was the brother-in-law of Cai You, the older brother of the Grand Tutor. Cai You secretly ordered Song Pan to accuse Zeng about some private matter. Zeng’s servants were arrested and persuaded to bring false accusations against their master. Zeng’s name was struck from the rolls of the civil service and he was banished to the malarial regions of the remote south. Thus did Cai Jing get his revenge.

Ximen Qing told Han Daoguo and Cui Ben, the nephew of his rich neighbor Qiao, to take the grain certificates to the revenue officer at the Gaoyang customs station and register them. Lai Bao stayed at home to attend the preparations for a great banquet. He also went out to inquire whether there was any word of the arrival of Salt Commissioner Cai You’s boat.

One day Lai Bao heard that Cai and the new censor, Song, had started together from the capital and had now reached Dongchang. He brought the news to Ximen Qing, who invited Magistrate Xia to accompany him and greet the officials. The prefects and magistrates as well as the officers of each garrison busied themselves with preparations--conducted clandestinely, a secret sealed as tightly as an iron drum--to welcome the dignitaries. Lai Bao had already visited the censor on his boat and presented some gifts. Ximen Qing and Xia journeyed for fifty li to receive the notables at the new wharf at Hundred Family Village. They went on board the boat and told Commissioner Cai that they would like to invite his colleague Song. Cai agreed and said that it was their intention to visit the office of the prefecture together.

Hu, the prefect of Dongping, and all his officers, military and civil, from all the districts; their subalterns and government students; Buddhist and Daoist priests and masters of arcane arts were all gathered and presented their cards. Commandant Zhou, Sheriff Jing, and Zhang, the captain of the militia, with horses and men, attended in full dress. Word was sent in advance of the visitors’ arrival, and even the chickens and ducks were kept out of the way. Fanfare of drums and pipes welcomed Song as he entered the censorate office at Dongping. The officers presented their credentials. Song spent the night resting and, the next day, the gatekeeper came to inform him that the salt commissioner Cai had come to visit him.

Censor Song immediately came out to receive him. They greeted one another and took the places proper to host and guest.

“My dear, esteemed colleague, how long do you propose to stay here?” asked Song.

---

5 One of Cai Jing’s reforms involved a complicated scheme of rewarding wealthy persons who delivered grain to the frontier armies with salt vouchers, which entitled the bearer to receive a certain amount of salt from the government’s salt monopoly office and to sell it in the open market. Acting on insider information, Han Daoguo and Cui Ben (who ran Ximen Qing’s business affairs while he attended to his official duties) had obtained a large number of grain certificates. Here they are preparing to cash in the grain certificates for salt vouchers, expecting to reap a windfall profit when the salt is delivered into their hands.
“Your servant shall probably stay a day or two,” replied Cai. “I have a friend at Qinghe, a certain Captain Ximen of one of the great families of the area. He is a man of honest and prudent character, wealthy but modest. He also is a protegé of your venerable brother, the Grand Tutor, and that is how I happen to know him. He was good enough to come a long way to meet me and I am going to stay with him awhile.”

“What office does Captain Ximen hold?”

“He serves as the local justice of the peace. One of those who came to pay their respects to you yesterday.”

Song ordered a servant to bring him all the visiting-cards. Among them he found the names of Ximen and Xia. “Is this not the man who is a friend of Zhai Yunfeng?”

“Yes,” Cai said. “As a matter of fact, he is outside now, and asked me to invite you to take dinner with him.”

“Given that this is my first tour as censor,” said Song, “I am afraid it would be hardly becoming for me to accept.”

“Why should you be afraid?” said Cai. “Since he comes as a friend of Zhai Yunfeng, what harm is there in passing a few moments with him?”

At this they called for their sedan-chairs and made ready to start together. As soon as their order for the sedan-chairs came out, word was brought to Ximen Qing. Ximen, Lai Bao, and Cui Ben rode home in great haste to make everything ready for the banquet. Awnings had already been set up outside the gate, forming a gaily decorated reception room. Two troupes of musicians had been engaged and actors and other performers were in attendance.

Censor Song had left most of his retinue behind and brought only a few men with blue banners to clear the way. Seated in two large sedan-chairs Song and Cai, escorted by several officers and attendants carrying umbrellas, made their way to the home of Ximen Qing. Everyone in Dongping prefecture knew of this visit. As they approached Qinghe, word went from mouth to mouth that the censor was a friend of master Ximen and had come to pay him a visit. The military officers Zhou, Jing, and Zhang were greatly excited, and sent soldiers, both horse and foot, to take up positions at the crossroads along the route travelled by Their Excellencies.

Dressed in black robes, wearing his ceremonial cap and girdle, Ximen Qing went a considerable distance to greet his guests. Then the musicians began to play. At the gate the two officials alighted from their sedan-chairs and entered. Song and Cai wore scarlet gowns embroidered with unicorns, black boots of fine silk, and red girdles the color of a stork’s beak. Attendants followed bearing two large fans.

The bamboo lattices were rolled high and embroidered screens were placed in the great hall where the two guests were to be received. In the center two tables were set with delicacies and sweetmeats of the most delectable variety. The two officers bowed to one another before they entered, and, when they went in, they saluted Ximen Qing. Censor Cai summoned his servant to offer the presents he had brought for Ximen. There were two rolls of Huzhou silk, a collection of literary works, four parcels of tea and an ink slab of Duanxi stone. Song presented a red visiting-card on which was written, “The respectful compliments of your devoted servant, Song Qionian.”

“Your illustrious reputation has long been known to me,” Song said. “I have only just come to this place and I am ashamed to appear before you without some offering. My brother Cai
urged me to come, however, and, but for him, I should not have the pleasure of making your acquaintance.”

Ximen Qing fell to his knees and apologized profusely. “Your humble servant is but a plain soldier, entirely at your command. It is an honor to receive your visit which casts radiant light on my humble cottage.” He rose and bowed with the utmost politeness. Censor Song returned his greeting.

Then Cai invited his companion to be seated at the place of honor while he himself took the seat to his left. Ximen Qing respectfully seated himself at Song’s right. When the tea was served the musicians played and the drums were struck. Ximen Qing offered his guests wine, and set places before the table. Servants carried in the food. The delicacy and abundance of the feast surpassed all powers of description. Wine flowed like water amid the singing and dancing. Ximen Qing realized that his guests had brought a considerable escort, and instructed his servants to distribute fifty flagons of wine, five hundred cakes, and a hundred measures of cooked meat to them. The retainers, secretaries, and porters were entertained in other rooms. That day Ximen Qing spent a thousand taels of silver.6

Censor Song had the impulsive and volatile temperament of the people of his native Nanchang, in Jiangxi. He did not stay long, and listened to but one act of the play. Then he stood up, prompting Ximen Qing to implore him to stay. Cai, at his side, finally interjected, “My dear brother, you have no pressing business to attend to. Why not stay a little longer? Why go away so soon?”

“Brother,” said Song, “you stay. I must go to my office and see about various matters.”

Ximen Qing had bidden his servants pack two complete table services of gold and silver in food hampers, twenty altogether. For Song there was a whole set for the table, two jars of wine, two sheep, two pairs of hatpins made of gold filigree, two bolts of red satin, a set of gold dishes, two silver wine-pots, ten silver wine-cups, two small silver jars and a pair of ivory chopsticks. There was an exactly similar set for Cai, all listed on the card which Ximen proferred.

“I dare not accept such a present,” Song objected, shooting a glance at his colleague. “It isn’t possible.”

“Brother,” said Cai, “this is your sphere of jurisdiction and it is right and proper that you should accept. But, for me, the case is different.”

“They are but trifles, a humble token of the respect which I hold for you,” said Ximen Qing. “Why treat it as a matter of ceremony?”

The two officials still hesitated, but the boxes were taken away and in the end Song could do nothing but accept them.

“I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before,” he said, “yet you have entertained me nobly and given me this generous present. I do not know how I can return such kindness, but I will endeavor to do so in due time.” Turning to Cai, Song added, “Brother, I must leave, but please stay behind.”

6 The tael, or “ounce” (37.5 grams), was the standard weight of measurement for silver. In China, silver money took the form not of coin but rather lumps and ingots that had to be weighed for every transaction. To give some sense of the relative worth of a tael of silver, the average annual wage of an artisan or laborer at this time was about six taels.
At this he rose and excused himself. Ximen Qing would have accompanied him well on his way, but Song begged him not to do so. Then Song bowed and got into his palanquin. Ximen Qing went back to Cai. They removed their ceremonial robes and went to sit in the arbor. The musicians were sent away, and only the actors remained. Ximen called for food, and rare dishes and fruits were set before them. They settled down to enjoy their wine.

“You have been too good to me and Brother Song who accompanied me today,” Cai said. “I don’t know how to thank you for all the excellent entertainment and gifts.”

Ximen Qing smiled. “I only fear that everything has been too poor for you. All I could do was give but a slight indication of my feelings.” Then he said, “What is His Lordship’s honorable sobriquet?”

“He is known by Songyuan,” Cai said. “At first he firmly refused to come, but when I spoke to him of your excellent virtue, and told him that you were on familiar terms with the Grand Tutor, he consented. He also knows that you are close to Chai.”

“My relative Zhai must have spoken to him,” Ximen Qing said. “I must say that his manner seems a little strange to me.”

“That’s because he hails from Jiangxi province [in the south; Cai and Ximen are northerners],” Cai said, “but I don’t think there is anything strange about him. Perhaps the first time he meets you he thinks he must stand on his dignity.” He smiled.

“It is getting late,” Ximen said, “and you cannot return to your boat tonight.”

“The boat sails tomorrow morning,” Cai said.

“Spend the night here,” Ximen said, “and tomorrow I will see you off to your boat.”

“I am presuming on your gracious hospitality,” Cai replied. He dismissed all of his servants but two, bidding the others to come for him in the morning.

When Ximen saw that they had gone, he whispered to the servant, Dai’an: “Go quickly to the courtesans’ mansion and fetch Elegance and Bracelet. Bring them by palanquin to the back door, and don’t let anyone see you.” The boy went away. Ximen returned to the table and drank wine with Cai, while the actors sang for them.

“Elder teacher,” Ximen asked, “how long did you stay at home? And how fares your venerable mother?”

“My old mother is well. I stayed about six months, then returned to the Court. Unfortunately an accusation was brought against me by Cai He. I was among fourteen members of the Academy of History who were degraded and sent down to the provinces. That is how I came to be appointed salt commissioner. Song is a favorite of my brother, the Grand Tutor.”

“What became of Master An?” Ximen Qing inquired.

“An Fengshan has been appointed to the Ministry of Works,” Cai said. “He has gone to Jingzhou to superintend His Majesty’s forests. It’s quite a good post.”

Ximen Qing called for the actors. When they had served wine he asked them to sing “Pride of the Fishermen”:

“All the long day I think of you;
I ask myself where are you smiling, where do you take your pleasure.
Suddenly seized by painful thoughts, time and again I begrudge you.
My feelings weigh more heavily than a mountain,
The affection that binds me to you is deeper than the sea.
Separation is all the more unbearable
When our meeting leaves nothing to chance.
As the proverb says:
The lotus root snaps without breaking its filaments.”

At this moment Dai’an entered and asked Ximen to go out and speak with him. “I have brought Elegance and Bracelet by the rear door,” he told Ximen. “They are waiting in the Great Lady’s room.”

“Tell the sedan-bearers to take the palanquins away.”

“It’s already done.”
Ximen then went to his wife’s room. The two singing-girls kowtowed.

“I have brought you here this evening to wait upon His Excellency Cai, the new salt commissioner. Take good care of him; if you serve him well, I will reward you with an additional present of two taels of silver.”

“Father, you need not spell it out for us,” Bracelet laughed. “We understand perfectly well!”

“He is a southerner, and has a taste for boys. You mustn’t overdo it with your hands and feet,” said Ximen playfully.

“Mother,” Elegance said to Bracelet, “listen to this! Father is like one of those ram’s horn onions which is planted against a southern wall and grows hotter and hotter. We are to kowtow before a royal palace but we mustn’t drink the water in the well!”

Ximen Qing laughed and returned to the outer court. When he came to the inner door he met Lai Bao and Zheng Jingqi with a visiting card. They showed Ximen the card which read:

“Your relative, Master Qiao, asks that if His Excellency the Commissioner is not preoccupied at the moment, could I prevail upon you to speak to him about this matter. I fear that His Excellency will be leaving tomorrow, and no other opportunity will present itself.”

Ximen Qing told Lai Bao to follow him and wait outside the window of the arbor. While he drank with Cai he brought up the question of a “small matter” about which he hesitated to trouble his guest.

“Tell me anything on your mind,” responded Cai. “I am your servant.”

“Last year,” Ximen said, “one of my relatives by marriage received salt vouchers for having provided grain to supply troops on the frontier. The salt vouchers are to be redeemed at Yangzhou, within your jurisdiction. He would like the favor of your attention, when you take up your appointment, and asks if you would allow them to receive delivery of the salt a little earlier.” At this, Ximen proffered a card to Commissioner Cai which read: “Please remit at the earliest possible convenience 30,000 measures of salt to the merchants Lai Bao and Cui Ben.”

“This is a trifling matter,” said Cai, smiling.

Ximen summoned Lai Bao and instructed him to prostrate himself before the commissioner.

“When I reach Yangzhou,” Cai said, “come directly to my office, and I will arrange for you to obtain your salt a month in advance of the other merchants.”

“That is very kind of you,” Ximen said, “but ten days will suffice.”

Cai put the card in his sleeve as Shutong poured some wine, and the actors began to sing

“The Tiger Descends the Mountain,” ending with this final verse:
“May the azure Heavens grant me the kindness
Of sending the one I love to lie by my pillow,
And spare this student a night of solitude.”

The moment arrived for lighting the lamps.
“I have caused you much inconvenience,” announced Cai as he rose. “I must not drink any more.”

The servants were about to light the lamps, but Ximen stopped them.
“I am going to take His Excellency inside to change his clothes,” he said. He took Cai on a brief tour of the garden, and then brought him to the Kingfisher Pavilion. The bamboo lattice had been rolled down, the candles in the silver chandelier burned brilliantly, and wine and refreshments had been set out.

Ximen Qing dismissed the company of actors, and gave them two silver taels for their troubles. Shutong saw that everything was cleared away in the arbor and was closing the corner gate when the two singing-girls in all their finery came to the steps and bowed graciously, like stems of flowers in the breeze.

Their faces so charming, their robes of gold filigree,
Do not stir the fragrant dust as they ascend the steps.
Their gauze skirts still damp,
As if returning from the mists of Witches’ Peak.7

Upon seeing them Cai seemed dumbfounded. “You are too kind to me,” he said, “This is indeed too much.”

Ximen Qing smiled. “It is not very different from that entertainment which once took place on Eastern Mountain.”8

“I fear that I lack the talents of mystic An,” Cai said, “though you, sir, have the elevated sensibilities of General Wang.”9 Taking the hands of the two girls under the moonlight, he felt as excited as Liu Zhen and Ruan Zhao as they ascended Mt. Tiantai.10 They went into the

7 Witches’ Peak is a majestic mountain, typically shrouded in mist, along the famous gorges of the Yangzi River. “Witches” here should be understood in the sense of bewitching and erotic, rather than diabolical.

8 Ximen Qing refers here to the pleasure palace of Xie An (ca. 320-385), who was equally renowned as a calligrapher and a hedonist.

9 Wang Xizhi (ca. 321-379), perhaps the most renowned calligrapher in Chinese history, and a companion of Xie An (“mystic An”).

10 According to legend, Liu Zhen and Ruan Zhao encountered two ravishing fairies while climbing the sacred mountain, Tiantai, later home to one of the most important sects of Chinese Buddhism. The fairies detained them for six months; but when they returned to the world of mortals the pair discovered that six generations had passed.
Kingfisher Pavilion. Writing materials had been laid out. Taking paper and brush, Cai prepared to compose a poem for the girls. Ximen Qing told Shutong to grind some thick ink with the Duanxi inkstone, and arrange the flower-patterned paper. His Excellency was possessed of the accomplishments becoming one who finished first in the civil service examinations. Brush in hand, he wrote without hesitation, the characters springing like dragons beneath it. Under the lamp-light he finished the poem without once stopping.

Six months have passed since last we parted,
But brush and paper await me in this room.
The rain has passed: Shutong opens the pleasure garden.
A breeze summons fairies to walk among the flowers.
I drink my fill; no business presses upon me,
But when the poem is finished, the bell sounds.
Leaving you, I face new sorrows,
Knowing not when I shall return.

When Cai had finished the poem he bade Shutong fasten it to the wall as a souvenir of his visit. Then he asked the names of the two young courtesans. “My name is Bracelet,” said one. “And I am Elegance,” replied the other.

Then Cai asked them by what sobriquets they were known.
“We are but humble girls,” Elegance said, “it would not befit us to have a sobriquet.”
“You are too modest,” replied the commissioner, and pressed them so insistently that Bracelet at last said, “Mine is ‘Beloved Jade.’” Elegance said, “And I am known by ‘Fern Fairy.’” The last one particularly delighted Cai and he committed it to memory. He instructed Shutong to bring the chess set and played a game with Elegance. Ximen looked on while Bracelet served the wine and Shutong sang.

The match was won by the commissioner, but when Elegance had to drink a cup of wine she first offered one to the victor. At the same time Bracelet extended a cup to Ximen Qing. Shutong began to sing once more, and they played a second game. This time Elegance triumphed, and she quickly offered wine to the commissioner. Ximen drank again to keep him company.

After another song from Shutong, the commissioner declared, “My dear sir, it is late into the night and I can drink no more.” They went out and stood in the garden. It was the middle of May, and the moon had just risen.

“It is still early,” Ximen Qing said, “and Bracelet has not yet had a chance to offer you wine.”

“That is true. Let her bring a cup here and I will drink it among the flowers!”

The courtesan filled a large gold cup shaped like a peach and offered it with her slender fingers. Elegance brought fruits, and Shutong began a new song. The commissioner drained the cup in one swallow, refilled it and handed it to Bracelet. He apologized to Ximen Qing, “I have drunk too much. My dear sir, won’t you please ask the servants to clear away?” He took Ximen Qing’s hand, and said with great feeling, “Noble sir, your great affection and virtue make my heart quiver. You could not have been so kind unless you were a cultured person in the very marrow of your bones. I have not forgotten the loan you made me a few months ago. I
mentioned it to Zhai while I was in the capital, and if it should happen that a promotion comes my way, I will not forget your generosity!"

“Please do not mention it,” Ximen Qing said. “Think no more of it.”

Bracelet saw the commissioner holding Elegance’s hand. She knew what this meant and retired to the inner compartments. When she came to the First Lady’s room Moon Lady asked her why she hadn’t stayed.

Bracelet smiled. “He has Elegance,” she said, “I wasn’t needed any longer.”

A little later, Ximen bid good-night to the commissioner. Entering the inner compartments, he instructed Lai Xing to prepare food, wine, cakes, and delicacies, and bring them the next morning before dawn to the Temple of Eternal Felicity, where they would take leave of His Excellency. He must not forget the two young actors.

“But tomorrow is the birthday of the Second Lady,” Lai Xing said, “and there are not enough people to attend to matters at home.”

“Let Qitong buy the things,” Ximen replied. “The cooks must use the large oven.”

Shutong and Dai’an cleared everything away and took a pot of excellent tea to Cai in the garden. In the Kingfisher Pavilion the bed and furniture were arranged to perfection. Cai saw that Elegance was carrying a speckled bamboo fan decorated with an ink painting of orchids by a river. She asked him to write a poem on it for her. “I can’t think what to write,” he said, “perhaps I better improvise on your sobriquet, Fern Fairy.”

Taking up a brush, he wrote the following four lines:

In the silence of the still courtyard,
The limpid moon shines through gauze curtains.
By chance meeting while the night is still young,
The purple-fern lad and his purple-fern flower.

When Cai finished the poem Elegance bowed in gratitude, then the two turned down the bed. The valets and other servants passed the night in an antechamber nearby.

The next morning the commissioner gave Elegance a tael of silver in a red envelope. She took it to the inner courtyard and showed it to Ximen Qing, who laughed. “He is a civil officer, and of course cannot make you a very large present. Hold onto this until you receive a more auspicious omen.” Then Ximen told Moon Lady to give each of the girls five qian11 of silver and let them out by the rear gate. Shutong drew a bath for his master, dressed his hair, washed his face, and helped him with his robes. Then Ximen Qing went to the great hall and ate rice porridge with Cai.

Cai’s servants came with horses and a sedan-chair. He took his leave of Ximen Qing, thanking him profusely.

“Please don’t forget the matter of which I spoke to you yesterday,” Ximen Qing said. “I will write to you when you reach your post. And I am greatly obliged to you.”

“There is no need to write,” replied Cai. “Send a servant with a blank sheet of paper and I will do anything you ask.”

---

11 One qian was equal to one-tenth of a tael.
With these words the two mounted their horses and, followed by their attendants, went as far as the Temple of Eternal Felicity, where a farewell banquet had been prepared in the abbot’s parlor. Lai Xing and the cooks had made all kinds of preparations, and the two young actors, Li Ming and Wu Hui, sang and played their stringed instruments. After several cups of wine together Cai stood up. The horses and sedan-chair were waiting outside the gate. Ximen Qing spoke to him about the Miao Qing affair. “Miao Qing,” he said, “was a friend of mine who was falsely accused by your predecessor. The order for his arrest has been sent to Yangzhou. The case has already been settled here, so if you should see our colleague Song in Yangzhou, I would be most grateful if you could have a word with him on my behalf.”

“Do not worry,” Cai said. “When I see my brother Song I will ask him to free Miao Qing if he should be arrested.” Ximen Qing bowed and thanked him.

Dear readers, let me tell you that a short time later, while Song was traveling to Jinan, he found himself traveling on the same boat with his colleague Cai. The officers had arrested Miao Qing in Yangzhou. Commissioner Cai remarked, “This matter was Censor Zeng’s affair. Why are you bothering with it?” Subsequently Miao was released, and orders were sent to Dongping to seize the two boatmen and execute them without delay. The boy Antong also was allowed to go.

There is a poem which captures very well how sympathetic bonds among friends can visit calamity upon others:

When justice and friendship conflict
Neither one nor the other triumph.
He who deals justly loses all his friends,
He who yields to friendship abandons justice.

Ximen Qing would have gone all the way to the boat with Cai, but the commissioner asked him not to do so. “Please, my dear sir, do not come any farther,” he said. “We will part here.”

“Take great care of yourself,” Ximen Qing said. “I shall send my servant for news of you.”

Cai got into his sedan-chair and was carried off. Ximen Qing returned to the abbot’s parlor, where the abbot had prepared some tea. When the tea was poured, the abbot made reverence to Ximen and asked him what news he brought. Ximen returned the greeting. Noting that the abbot’s eyebrows were white as snow, Ximen asked, “Venerable Sir, how old are you?”

“Your humble monk is seventy-four,” replied the abbot.

“But you seem to be in robust health,” Ximen said. “What is your name in religion?”

“I am known by Daoqian, that is to say, ‘Steadfast in Vocation,’”

Ximen Qing asked how many novices the abbot had.

“Only two at present,” the abbot said, “but there are more than thirty itinerant monks in my temple.”

“Your temple and courtyard are large and spacious,” Ximen said, “though somewhat in need of repair.”

“The truth is,” the abbot said, “this temple was built by the venerable Zhou Xiu, but we have no endowment to take care of repairs, and now it is almost in utter ruin.”

“So this is the place where Commandant Zhou comes to offer incense. His estate is quite close to mine. It wouldn’t be difficult to ask Master Zhou to open a subscription registry and
collect donations from others. I would be glad to contribute something, for my part.”

The abbot folded his hands and bowed in thanks to Ximen Qing, who told Dai’an to fetch a tael of silver from his purse and offer it to the abbot.

“I have given you much trouble today,” Ximen said.

“Not knowing that Your Excellency was coming,” the abbot apologized, “I hope you will excuse my inadequate preparations.”

“I would like to ‘change my clothes,’” Ximen said.

The abbot quickly called a young novice to show Ximen the way to the commode. As he returned Ximen Qing noticed a large meditation hall five spans wide in which a large number of itinerant monks were striking “wooden fish” drums while chanting their sutras. Ximen stepped in and looked around the hall. There was one strange-looking monk with a raw-boned face and deep-set eyes, the temples of a leopard, and a dark, liver-colored complexion. He wore on his head a cock’s-comb turban, and was dressed in a flesh-colored robe. His shaggy beard was all matted together, but his shaved head shone with a brilliant light like that of a veritable arhat, and his eyes blazed like a fiery dragon. The strange monk lay still on his meditation mat, his head bowed, his chin buried in his chest, with mucus, like two jade chopsticks, running from his nose.

Ximen Qing thought that this must be a monk of extraordinary powers, so unusual was his appearance. “I will rouse him,” he said to himself, “and make some inquiries.” Then, in a loud voice, he said to the holy man, “Where do you come from? How is it that Your Reverence has come to this place?”

There was no answer. Ximen repeated his question, but again drew no response. He asked a third time, and now the monk rose from his meditation mat, stretched his limbs, opened one eye, and, inclining his head towards Ximen Qing, replied in a hoarse voice, “Why do you ask me these questions? I am only a poor monk. My name changes not whether I am traveling or meditating. I come from the Monastery of Cold Chambers amid the deep forests and high peaks of India, the holy land far off in the west. I roam the world, dispensing medicines to relieve the sufferings of mortals. What do you want of me?”

“If you distribute medicines to relieve suffering,” Ximen Qing said, “then perhaps you have something which will renew my powers?”

“I have.”

“I should like to invite you to my house,” Ximen Qing said. “Will you come?”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” the monk said.

“In that case,” said Ximen, “let us start at once.”

The foreign monk rose, picking up the iron staff lying at the side of the mat. Throwing over his shoulder a leather bag containing two gourds of medicine, he left the meditation hall with Ximen Qing. Ximen ordered Dai’an to bring two donkeys and bade him ride together with the monk to his house.

“It’s not necessary,” protested the foreign monk. “You go first on your horse. This poor
monk does not ride any animal, but I shall be there before you.”

“Surely this is no ordinary monk,” marveled Ximen, “or else he would not make such rash
promises.” He was afraid that the monk might go off somewhere else, and told Dai’an to follow
him. Then, taking leave of the abbot, Ximen mounted his horse and headed straight for the
village, accompanied by his escort of servants.

It was the seventeenth day of the fourth month, the birthday of Wang Liu’r. It also
happened to be, in Ximen Qing’s household, Charm’s birthday. The invited guests had
gathered in the main ceremonial hall to tender their felicitations. Wang Liu’r, having no one else
to send, told her brother Wang Jing to invite Ximen Qing to visit her. She instructed him to go
to the gate and speak to Dai’an, or if he wasn’t there to wait for him to return. Wang Jing had
been waiting for two solid hours when Moon Lady and Charm emerged to see off Mama Li,
from the courtesan’s house, in a palanquin. Seeing a young boy about fifteen years old, Moon
Lady asked him what he wanted.

Wang Jing prostrated himself before Moon Lady and said, “I have come from the Han
family to see my brother An.”

“Which brother An?” Moon Lady asked.

Fearing that Moon Lady would discover that the boy had been sent by Wang Liu’r, Ping’an,
who was standing nearby, interrupted: “He has been sent by the steward, Han Daoguo. He wants
to see Dai’an to find out when Han is supposed to come by.”

Moon Lady was taken in by this ruse and returned to her chambers.

Shortly after, Dai’an arrived at the gate with the foreign monk. Dai’an was bathed in sweat
from head to foot, his legs aching from the strain, but the monk was perfectly at ease and not
even breathing hard. Ping’an told Dai’an about the visit from Wang Jing: “The great lady saw
him, but fortunately I was here, and explained that he had come from Clerk Han, and the matter
passed over. Otherwise the cat would have been out of the bag. If she happens to ask you any
questions, give her the same story I did.”

Dai’an opened his eyes wide as he fanned himself. “My luck is certainly rotten today!
Father told me to bring this bald-headed rascal home. It’s no mean distance, and we came
straight from the temple without stopping for an instant. I can hardly breathe. Father would
have me hire two donkeys, but the monk would not hear of it. It is all very well for him to walk,
but as for me, the soles of my shoes are worn away, and my feet are ragged, too. A hell of a way
to make a living!”

“What does Father want with him?” Ping’an asked.

---

14 Wang Liu’r, the wife of Ximen Qing’s shop manager, Han Daoguo, was having a secret affair
with Ximen Qing.

15 Another of Ximen Qing’s wives. The six wives, in rank order, are: (1) Moon Lady;
(2) Charm; (3) Jade Tower; (4) Snow Beauty; (5) Golden Lotus; (6) Vase.

16 Here the servant Ping’an fools Moon Lady into thinking that it was Han rather than his wife who
had sent the boy.
“Who knows?” Dai’an said. “He said something about getting some medicine out of him!”

As they were talking, they heard the sound of attendants clearing the way. Soon Ximen Qing appeared. Seeing the foreign monk at the gate, he said, “Master, indeed you are a god among men! You really did get here before me!” Then he asked the monk to sit in the great reception hall. Ximen Qing gave his hat to Shutong and told him to bring a fresh suit of clothes. As he sat down, the monk opened his eyes wide and gazed around the spacious and lofty room, with its still and deep courtyard, the entrance arch hung with a curtain woven with green pearls, tortoise-shell, and shrimp antennae. The floor was covered with a woolen tapestry embroidered with lions rolling balls. In the middle of the hall was a black table embellished with carved dragon-flies on its legs and praying mantises along the edges. A flecked marble screen stood on the table. All around it were several heavy cedar chairs, their backs decorated with eels’ heads. The scrolls of paintings on the wall were hung from rods of dwarf bamboo and secured at the bottom with agate weights. When the foreign monk had looked around him Ximen Qing said to him, “Master, do you drink wine?”

“Wine and meat, I partake of both!” he replied.

Ximen sent a servant to the kitchen to tell them not to bother preparing a vegetarian meal but to bring wine and food. Since it was Charm’s birthday, nothing was lacking. A table was set and food brought: to begin with, four plates of fruits, four dishes of hors-d’oeuvres, and four other dishes to accompany the wine—fish heads, duck confit, blackened chicken, and perch. These were followed with another four dishes to be eaten with rice: meat roasted with nuts and ram’s-horn onions, periwinkle-shaped pastries with minced meat, plump lamb sausages, and slippery eels. Next came the soup: each bowl contained two meatballs and a garnished sausage, a soup known as “Dragon Playing With Two Pearls.” And lastly, a large platter piled high with meat dumplings.

Ximen Qing beckoned the monk to eat, and bade Qintong bring a jar of wine with a round handle and a mouth shaped like a chicken’s head. The boy opened the ruddy ceramic jar and poured out a thin stream of wine white as snow into high-stemmed cups in the shape of lotuses. He passed a cup to the monk who emptied it in one gulp. More dishes were brought: one of inch-long horse meat sausages, another of preserved goose neck. There were raisins and prunes for the monk to eat with his wine, and a great bowl of noodles with eels and vegetables to finish.

The monk gobbled up everything until his eyes bulged. “I feel tipsy and stuffed,” he said. “I’ve had my fill.”

Ximen Qing told the servants to clear the table. Then he asked about medicines to enhance his skill in the arts of love.

“I have one medicine which was refined by the Immortal Laozi according to the recipe transmitted to him by the Queen Mother of the West. None may obtain this medicine but those who are chosen by fate. Since you have treated me with such generosity, I will give you several pills.” Out of his bag the monk pulled a gourd from which he emptied about a hundred pills. “Take one on each occasion, but no more,” he said. “Swallow it with a little wine.” He opened the other gourd and took from it about two qian of red powder. “Each time you use it,” said the monk, “take two grains. Be sure not to take too much. Should you feel a burning sensation,
massage your sex with your hand and strike it against your thigh a hundred times or so, and it will pass. But use these remedies sparingly, and be sure to give none to anyone else!”

Ximen Qing accepted the medicines with both hands. “May I ask you, what is the secret of this medicine?”

The monk replied:

Shaped like an egg
Yellow like a duck.
Three times the Immortal Laozi forged it
From the recipe of the Queen Mother.
At a casual glance
It seems like a clod of earth or dung.
But one who looks closely sees a treasure
More precious than any jewel.
No gold can buy it,
No jade can replace it.
Girt with gold and robed in purple,
Dressed in sable you may be;
Though you ride upon the plumpest chargers,
And dwell in opulent mansions,
Take but a speck of this, then
Rush like a whirlwind into the bedchamber.
There you will find eternal spring,
Forever alive and fragrant.
The jade mountains will never crumble,
And moonbeams always shine on cinnabar fields.18
The first engagement will leave you full of vigor,
The second, even stronger than before.
Though twelve exquisite beauties await your onset
You may enjoy each one, according to your fancy,
And all night through erect your lance will stand.
Soon, new strength will be given to limbs and belly.
It will refresh the testicles, invigorate the penis.
In a hundred days hair and beard will be black once more,
In a thousand mornings your youth will be restored.
Your teeth will be strong, your eyes more bright,
Your seed will bear fruit at first planting.
I fear this may seem beyond belief;
Try mixing the medicine in the cat’s food.
After three days the cat will burn with fire,

18“Cinnabar fields,” in Chinese medical lore, refers to a region in the lower abdomen where sexual energy is stored.
On the fourth it will be beyond control.  
If a white cat, it will soon be black,  
Then cease to piss and shit, and so will die.

Though in the summer you may sleep in the open,  
And in the winter plunge yourself in water,  
If you cannot keep your bowels free,  
Your hair you’ll surely lose.

Each time take but a grain or two,  
Your virile power will grow mighty.  
Ten women in a single night  
Will cause no slackening in your vital power.  
Your old lady will knit her brows  
The dissolute courtesan cannot take your measure.  

When you are sated and wish to retire from the field,  
Swallow a mouthful of water and sheath your weapon.  
Your virility will not suffer.  
In pleasure and enjoyment you will spend your nights,  
The joys of spring will fill the orchid chamber.  
Thus I bestow it on a connoisseur,  
May your manly vigor flourish evermore.

After having listened to this long discourse, Ximen Qing asked for the recipe: “When I send for a doctor, I insist upon having a good one, and when I take medicine, I like to know what it contains. When I have used it up, how will I know where to find you? Whatever you ask, you shall have it.” Then Ximen Qing ordered Dai’an to fetch twenty taels of silver from the back room for the foreign monk.

The monk laughed. “This poor monk has left his family behind and roams about the four corners of the world. What would I want with this pile of silver? Please take it back.”

The monk made ready to leave. Ximen Qing saw that he would not consent to reveal the recipe. “Master, since you will not accept silver, allow me to give you a roll of cloth to make a habit for yourself.”

Ximen bade a servant bring ten yards of cloth and presented it to the foreign monk with both hands. The monk bowed and thanked him. As they approached the gate the monk cautioned him again: “Don’t take too much! Be careful, be careful!”

With these words, his leather sack on his back and iron staff in his hand, he went out the gate and mysteriously disappeared.

It is said:

The pilgrim’s staff holds up both sun and moon,  
Nine worlds slide under his sandals of straw.
A poem bears witness to this:

Maitreya\textsuperscript{19} appears as a monk in the world below
With his beggar’s pouch, and his staff in hand.
Should he grant you a thousand lives,
Each lifetime will give you cause for regret.

Dear reader, if you don’t know what happened next, listen to the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{19} Maitreya is the Buddha who will preside over the future paradise.
CHAPTER 50

Qintong Secretly Listens to the Lovemaking of Swallow and Oriole
And Dai’an Takes a Pleasant Stroll in Butterfly Lane

Heaven gives her these crimson lips,
The east wind fills her smiling face.
Devoted to love’s bliss, the beauty’s heart,
Intoxicated with rapture, opens to every new joy!
The femme fatale inclines toward sorrowful love,
With a wordless smile she snares mortal men.
Ye who bear sorrow in this world of dust,
Enter the garden of ephemeral flowers.

As was mentioned, it was Charm’s birthday. Nun Wang came from the Guanyin Convent, bringing Nun Xue from the Convent of Lotus Blossoms. With them came two novices, Miaofeng and Miaochu.

Upon hearing that Nun Xue, who was known to be deeply versed in the practice of the Holy Way, had arrived, Moon Lady hastened to greet her. The nun was wearing an elegant bonnet, and a long, tea-colored robe. Her tonsure revealed a smooth, bluish head. She was a stout woman, with ample jowls under her chin. As she entered she exchanged bows with Moon Lady and the other wives.

“I present to you the mistress of the household, and the other ladies,” said Nun Wang to Nun Xue.

The ladies quickly prostrated themselves. The nun raised her eyebrows, closed her eyes, put on all sorts of airs before this company, and spoke in an extremely affected voice. The ladies addressed her as “Elder Xue,” and she in turn called Moon Lady “Bodhisattva” or else “Milady,” which could not fail to confirm Moon Lady’s high esteem for the nun.

Aunt Wu and Aunt Yang had also come to call. Moon Lady offered them tea and a table overflowing with vegetarian dishes, marinated legumes, and cakes, far more sumptuous than usual. The two novices, who were barely fourteen or fifteen years of age, displayed a natural shyness. After eating, and having finished with their tea, everybody ascended to the upper parlor where they listened to a sermon from the nun.

Moon Lady saw Shutong carrying trays in from the outer court and said to him, “Has the monk who drinks wine and eats meat left yet?”

“Yes,” Shutong said. “He has just gone. Father saw him to the door.”

“Where did he meet that monk?” Aunt Wu asked.

“My husband went to see Commissioner Cai on his way,” Moon Lady answered, “and he brought the monk back from the temple where they held the farewell banquet. The monk eats everything, even wine and meat! My husband asked him for some sort of medicine, and tried to

20 A Buddhist saint; especially used to refer to the goddess of mercy, Guanyin.
give him some silver, but he wouldn’t accept. I wonder what sort of business he’s in! Then he
left after the noon meal.”

“Observing the rules of abstinence is not easy,” Nun Xue said when she heard these words.
“We nuns take great care to hold to our vows, but they don’t mean anything to monks of his
type. But as the Scriptures say: ‘if we take but a mouthful of meat, we shall suffer for it in our
next life.’”

“People like us eat meat every day,” interjected Aunt Wu, “so we will have a great many
crimes to pay for in our next reincarnation.”

“No,” Nun Xue reassured her. “It is just the same as with bodhisattvas: the good fortune
and wealth you enjoy now are your reward for the merits you earned in past lives. It is right and
proper that you should enjoy both wealth and comfort. It’s just as they say: ‘You reap in the
autumn only what you sow in the spring.’”

Meanwhile, Ximen Qing had parted from the foreign monk and was about to return to the
house when Dai’an came up and whispered to him, “Aunt Han [i.e., Wang Liu’r] has sent her
brother to ask you to come visit her, as it’s her birthday. She hopes very much that you can
come and sit with her for awhile.”

With the monk’s aphrodisiac now in hand, Ximen Qing desired nothing more than to test it.
The invitation came at just the right moment. He told Dai’an to prepare his horse and sent
Qintong on ahead with a jar of wine. Then he went to Golden Lotus’s room to fetch his case of
sex toys. Putting on a small hat and ordinary clothes, he headed off to Wang Liu’r’s house,
followed by Dai’an. As he dismounted he told Qintong to remain outside and keep watch, and
sent Dai’an back with the horse, instructing him to say, should anyone inquire, that his master
was going through the accounts at the house in Lion Street.

Wang Liu’r came out to welcome Ximen. She was wearing her hair in a chignon fixed with
silver thread and a hairpin of gold filigree, jade jewelry, and pearl earrings. Her head was
uncovered. She had put on a gauze bolero the color of jade, a cotton summer tunic, and a long,
unlined skirt, white at the waist. After kowtowing to Ximen, she sat down beside him.

“If you are free, stay here a moment and relax,” she said. “It was good of you to send the
wine.”

“I had forgotten your birthday,” Ximen Qing replied. “I was obliged to say farewell to
someone outside the city and have only returned this moment.” He took a pair of hairpins from
his sleeve and presented them to her, saying, “In honor of your birthday.”

The young woman took the gift and examined it. The hairpins were made of gold and bore
the character “longevity.”

“They are very pretty,” she said, and bowed in thanks.

Ximen Qing gave her a half-tael of silver and asked her to send a boy for a jar of southern
spirits. “Are you tired of ordinary wine,” Wang Liu’r laughed, “that you need southern spirits?”
But she sent Shutong off to buy a flask.

She took Ximen Qing’s clothes and invited him to sit in her chamber while she washed his
hands and trimmed his nails. She shelled some almonds for the tea which the maid brought.
They played dominos for a while at the small table in the bedchamber, and then cleared it off to
prepare the wine.
In the meantime Dai’an, after a vexing day and weary from racing to keep up with the foreign monk, had returned home with the horse. He went to bed immediately and slept until the lamps were being lit in the evening. Rubbing his eyes, he realized that night had fallen. He went to the inner courtyard to get a lantern and make ready to go for Ximen Qing. Moon Lady accosted him: “After Father saw off the monk, instead of coming in to change his clothes he suddenly took off again. Now, where is he off drinking?”

Dai’an was silent for a moment, then said, “He didn’t go anywhere. He is at the Lion Street house going over the accounts with Brother Bao.”

“He can’t spend the whole day inspecting accounts,” snorted Moon Lady.

“No,” said Dai’an. “When he finished with the books he had something to drink by himself.”

“All by himself, indeed!” exclaimed Moon Lady. “Since when does he drink all alone? I can tell you’re lying. What did that boy from Han Daoguo want?”

“He wanted to know when Uncle Han should come.”

“You conniving rascal!” Moon Lady fumed. “Up to another one of your tricks!”

Dai’an dared say no more. Moon Lady told Little Jade to give him a lantern. “Tell Father,” she said, “that the Second Lady is waiting for him to come and celebrate her birthday.”

Dai’an went to the shop. He found Shutong and Clerk Fu sitting behind the counter. On it were a bottle of wine, several cups, two pairs of chopsticks, bowls, plates, and a platter of beef tripe. Ping’an came in with two jars of pickled fish. “Excellent!” said Dai’an, putting down his lantern. “I have come just in time!” Then he turned toward Shutong and said jokingly, “You little whore! What are you up to? I’ve been looking for you everywhere, and here you are hiding away and having a nip of wine!”

“What is it you want with me?” asked Shutong. “Perhaps you would like me to play your ‘grandson’ for awhile?”

“You little snipe! You dare talk back to me! I was looking for you so I could bugger you!”

With this Dai’an leaped up, pushed Shutong down in the chair, and kissed him on the lips. Shutong pushed him away with his hands.

“You queer!” cried Shutong. “You’re lucky I don’t tell you what I think of you! Now you’ve hurt my teeth and knocked my hat off!”

Clerk Fu saw the hat on the ground. “Why, that’s a new hat,” he said, and turned towards Ping’an. “Better pick it up before anyone steps on it.” Shutong snatched back the hat and tossed it on the *kang*,21 his face reddening.

“Well, you little whore!” said Dai’an, “I was only playing with you. Why do you get so angry?” He dragged Shutong onto the *kang* and, with all his might, spat in his mouth. They overturned the wine jar and wine spilled all over the counter. Clerk Fu was afraid it would stain the books, and hastily mopped it up with a handkerchief.

“Enough!” he said, “you’ll just make each other angry!”

“The whore!” repeated Dai’an. “I don’t know where he was brought up to make him as insolent as this!”

---

21 A *kang* is a raised platform lined with bricks which can be heated with charcoal or coal in the winter. It takes up a large part of the main room in houses in North China.
“A game is a game,” groaned Shutong, his hair completely disheveled. “You’ve filled my mouth with your filthy semen.”

“Little faggot,” retorted Dai’an, “To think that this is the first time! You have swallowed semen before, who knows how many times!”

Ping’an warmed up some wine and passed it to Dai’an. “Drink this quickly and go find Father. You can settle with him when you come back.”

“Yes, wait for me to come back with Father,” said Dai’an, “and I’ll have a word with you. You little faggot, if I don’t knock you around until you see ghosts and spirits, you don’t show me any respect. I shall spit on you again. I am the son of no human parents, so I can do whatever I please.” He drank his wine, summoned two small boys to accompany him with the lantern, and rode off on horseback to the house of Wang Liu’r. He called for someone to let him in and asked Qintong, “Where is Father?”

“He is asleep,” Qintong replied as he closed the gate.

The two of them entered the kitchen. The old lady Feng said to him, “Your Aunt Han waited a long time for you, but you didn’t come. She’s left some supper for you.” She took from a cupboard a plate of donkey flesh, a dish of cold roast chicken, two bowls of long-life noodes and a pot of wine.

Dai’an drank some wine and said to Qintong, “Come here, I can’t drink all this wine. Let’s finish the pot together!”

“It’s for you,” said Qintong. “Drink it yourself.”

“I’ve just had a pot.”

The two youths finished it off together. Then Dai’an said to the old lady, “Mother Feng, I’d like to have a word with you, but please don’t hold it against me. You are supposed to be in the service of the Sixth Lady [Vase], and ought to be attending her. Yet I always find you here working for Aunt Han. When I get home I think I’ll have to say something to the Sixth Lady.”

The old woman cut him short. “You funny little monkey!” she said, giving him a poke, “You keep quiet! If you say a word to her she will never forgive me, and I won’t dare go back to her.”

While Dai’an and the old woman were speaking, Qintong slipped away to the bedchamber. Crouching below the window, he surreptitiously peered in to see what was going on.

Ximen Qing took one of the foreign monk’s pills with his wine, undressed himself, and sat on the bed where the young woman awaited him. He opened the case in which he kept his instruments. First he slipped the silver support down to the base of his penis, and placed the sulphur ring on the tip. Then he took a pinch of the red powder the monk had given him from a small silver box, kneaded it into a ball, and placed it in the “horse’s eye.” The aphrodisiac had an instant effect. Suddenly his member drew to its full height, exposing an enormous, vibrant head, its eye opened wide. Ligaments bulging, it took on a purplish liver-color as it grew to a length of eight inches, far larger than normal.

Ximen Qing was highly pleased. So this medicine of the foreign monk indeed is very interesting, he thought to himself. The young woman, completely naked, sat herself down on his chest. Taking his member in her hand, she squeezed it, exclaiming, “No wonder you wanted those spirits! So this is what you’re up to!” She asked him where he procured his secret medicine, and he told her the whole story about the foreign monk.

First he made Wang Liu’r lie down on the bed, her back leaning against two pillows. His
member in hand, he directed it towards her sex, but the head was so large that even after patient effort he could insert it only half-way. The fluids of her sex were flowing abundantly, though, lubricating his enormous member, and eventually he was able to enter her all the way. Excited by the wine, Ximen withdrew slowly and then plunged deeply inside her. He experienced an indescribable pleasure. The young woman, intoxicated by sensual pleasure, lay paralyzed upon the pillows, moaning uncontrollably. “Dada, your cock is so big!” she repeated. “Your little strumpet is going to die of pleasure!” Then she added, “I beg of you, save some of your energy to take me from behind!”

At this Ximen Qing turned the young woman over on her knees, with her back arched, and pressed the tip of his member against her vagina. Grasping her thighs, he thrust himself inside her with all his force, making a loud slapping noise.

“Dada, give it to your little strumpet! Don’t stop! Why don’t you move the lamp closer? I want to see!”

Ximen Qing brought the lamp next to them. He spread the woman’s legs and mounted her, folding his thighs around her as he crouched above her. With one hand he caressed “the heart of her flower,” with the other he played with her thighs, and then reached toward her trembling sex.

“When your husband returns,” suggested Ximen, “I will send him with Lai Bao and Cui Ben to buy salt in Yangzhou. When the salt is all sold off I can dispatch him to Huzhou to negotiate an order for silk fabric. What do you think?”

“Good Dada, send him wherever you want, as long as you send him away! There’s no need to keep at home that old cuckold who doesn’t do anything! But,” she added, “who will take care of the store?”

“I will put Ben the Fourth in charge.”

“Yes,” she said, “He can look after it.”

The two returned to the labors of love, unaware that Qintong, underneath the window, had the pleasure of hearing everything. Dai’an came along from the kitchen and saw him spying at the window. He tapped Qintong on the back and said, “What are you doing listening there? Come away before they get up.” Qintong followed Dai’an outside.

“You might not know,” Dai’an said, “that in the alley behind here two pretty ladies have just arrived. I saw them when I was riding by. They’re at Long-legged Lu’s place. One is called “Little Gold,” and the other “Peerless”; they can’t be more than sixteen years old. We’ll leave some of the boys here to keep watch, and go and have some fun with the girls!”

Dai’an gave instructions to the others: “Stay here by the gate. We’re going to go outside and wash our hands. If someone asks for us, come out in the street and call us!”

The two boys walked through the moonlit alley, which was known as “Butterfly Lane,” because it contained no fewer than ten public houses for eating and drinking. Dai’an already had had his fill of wine. The door opened for them only after many repeated shouts.

Inside, the old cuckold Long-legged Lu and the house madam were occupied with weighing silver by the light of the lamp. The two boys barged into the room like a pair of ferocious demons, grabbed the lamp and blew it out. But the brothel-keeper had time to recognize Dai’an as the servant of His Excellency Ximen, the county judge. He invited them to sit down.

“Call the two girls to sing something for us, right away!” demanded Dai’an.

“You’ve arrived a little too late, young master,” the proprietor said. “They are both entertaining visitors.”
Without wasting words Dai’an leapt into the inner rooms in two bounds. He found himself shrouded in gloom. The lamps were not lit, but he could make out the forms of two drunkards, wearing white felt hats, on the kang. One was fast asleep, while the other was removing his boots.

“Who is it?” cried the latter.

“I’m the one who fucks your mother!” retorted Dai’an, letting his fist fly.

“Ouch!” cried the drunkard, who flew out of the room without bothering to pull on his socks. The other man slithered to the end of the kang and hobbled away. Dai’an demanded that lamps be brought.

“The thieves! Rogues!” he shouted, “how dare they ask who I am! I ought to have skinned them alive rather than let them get away. It would have been better to drag them to the police court to try out our new thumbscrews!”

Long-legged Lu came with a lamp in his hand, bowing and apologizing profusely.

“Please don’t get angry, my two sirs! They are strangers and did not know you. Don’t treat it too seriously.” Then he turned to the two girls and said, “Come, sing something for our two friends!”

The two ladies both had their hair done up in a chignon like a skein of silk. They wore white tunics, and green and red gauze skirts.

“We did not expect you today,” they said. “It is late and we have made no preparations.” They brought four cold dishes, followed by duck eggs, rice sautéed with prawns, reheated salted fish, a pig’s head, and sausages. Dai’an took one girl by the arm, and Qintong the other.

Noticing the perfume sachet of red silk and silver which Peerless was carrying, Dai’an took it from her hand and replaced it with a handkerchief he pulled from his sleeve. Soon the wine was ready. Peerless poured a cup and handed it to Dai’an. Little Gold took up her mandolin, and, after passing a cup of wine to Qintong, began to sing:

In the fortress of the flowers in the mist,
Life truly is hard.
I may not choose to sit, or yet to stand,
Day after day I must be ready to welcome strangers.
On my body the fortunes of this house depends.
When evening comes, the procuress
Makes me give up my earnings.
What does she care whether I live or die?
I stand beside the gate till midnight,
When I come in, none asks if I am hungry.
How much longer must I live
Among the flowers in the mist?
Three years? Five?
Our destiny brings death, not life,
None notice my tear-stained cheek.
When the tree puts forth its prettiest blossoms
My final hour will arrive.
When Little Gold finished, Peerless held out another cup for Dai’an, picked up her mandolin, and sang:

I enter the chamber and glance all around;
On the whitewashed wall
I see a mandolin hanging,
All covered with dust.
From my sleeve I pull a cloth to wipe it clean.
Taking the mandolin in my arms,
I tune its strings, and strum a sad tune.
Tears fall in a violent stream
My beloved enemy, what pleasures we had!
He has abandoned me, like this mandolin,
Which played so much and sang so much for him.
Now I remain alone with my tears and pain.
He has kept everything for himself,
And knows not where I am.

They began to heat some more wine when a servant boy suddenly came for Dai’an and Qintong. The two boys quickly rose to their feet.
“We will come and see you another day,” Dai’an said to Peerless as he left to return to Wang Liu’r’s house.
Ximen Qing had gotten up and was drinking with his lover. The two valets went into the kitchen.
“Has Father called for us?” Dai’an asked the old woman Feng.
“No,” she said, “He just asked if his horse had come, and I said it had. That’s all.”
The two boys sat in the kitchen and asked the old woman to make some tea. Each of them gulped down a bowl. They sent the other boys to light the lamps and bring out the horse. Ximen Qing was about to depart when the young woman said to him: “Father, the wine is good and hot. Won’t you have another cup? Or are you going to have more when you reach home?”
“No, I’m not going to drink any more at home,” said Ximen. He took the cup she offered him and drank.
“When will you come again?”
“I will come after I have sent your husband off on this business trip,” replied Ximen.
A maid came with tea so that Ximen Qing might rinse his mouth. Wang Liu’r escorted him to the door, where he mounted his horse and rode home.

Golden Lotus was with the other ladies in Moon Lady’s chambers listening to Nun Xue and the two novices chant hymns. She didn’t return to her room until night had fallen. Suddenly she remembered that Moon Lady had scolded Dai’an about “some tricks he was up to.” Lotus wondered what intrigue he was mixed up in. Then, searching her bed, she discovered that the case of sex toys was missing. She called to her maid Plum Flower and asked about them.
“I didn’t take them,” Plum Flower said. “Father was here while you were gone and rummaged around in the cabinet behind the bed, then went out again. But I don’t know what he
did with the case.”

“When did he come back?” Lotus asked. “How is it that I didn’t know about it?”

“You were in the inner courtyard with Nun Xue. Father came in wearing a small hat, but didn’t answer when I asked him what he was looking for.”

“If he’s taken the goods, then he’s gone to see the whores,” Lotus said. “When he comes back I’ll have a few questions for him!”

But Ximen Qing returned very late and didn’t come to the inner courtyard. Qintong accompanied him with a lantern and they went through the garden gate directly to Vase’s chamber. The valet then brought the lantern back to Little Jade. The two nuns and all the ladies—Charm, Jade Tower, Golden Lotus, Vase, and Snow Beauty—were still sitting with Moon Lady. Seeing Qintong, Moon Lady asked him whether his master had returned.

“Yes,” the boy replied, “he has gone to the chamber of the Sixth Lady.”

“Well, look at this!” Moon Lady exclaimed. “Not an ounce of decency in this man. Here we have been waiting for him all this time and he doesn’t come.”

Vase hastened to her room to see Ximen Qing.

“The Second Lady awaits you in the inner courtyard,” she said. “It’s her birthday. Why have you come here?”

“I’ve drunk too much already,” laughed Ximen Qing. “I will see her tomorrow.”

“Drunk or not,” said Vase, “you must come with me and take a cup of wine in the inner courtyard. Otherwise you will offend the Second Lady.” She pushed and pulled him with all her strength to the rear of the house. Charm offered him a cup of wine.

“It seems that you were all alone in the house over there,” said Moon Lady. “What were you doing that you have come back so late?”

“I have been drinking with Brother Ying,” Ximen replied.

“Of course!” Moon Lady snapped. “I knew you wouldn’t be drinking by yourself.” She said no more.

Ximen Qing did not stay long. He staggered back to Vase’s chamber. Even though he had exerted himself for a long time with Wang Liu’r, the effects of the aphrodisiac he had received from the foreign monk had not yet worn off. His member was hard as ever, stiff as an iron rod. Entering the chamber he asked the maid Jasmine to help him disrobe and climbed into the bed to sleep with Vase, who was already in bed with the infant Guange.

Vase turned to him and said, “Sleep somewhere else. Why have you come back here? The baby has just gone to sleep, and he’s sleeping so nicely. Besides, I don’t feel well, and I don’t want you climbing all over me. Go to somebody else. Why do you come here to trouble me?”

Ximen Qing held her by the neck and kissed her on the mouth. “My little hussy, it’s you I want to sleep with,” he said. Then he uncovered his member and showed it to Vase.

“Ah! How did you make it so big?” she said with a start.

Ximen Qing laughed and retold the story about his encounter with the foreign monk. “If you don’t let me sleep here, I’ll die!” he finished.

“But, it’s not possible!” Vase protested. “I have been unwell for two days, and it’s not over yet. If anything, it’s worse. Wait a little bit and I will certainly sleep with you. Spend tonight with the Fifth Lady [Lotus]. It’s all the same to you.”

“I don’t know why,” Ximen said, “but it’s you who I want to sleep with tonight. I feel like a chicken about to have its throat cut. I beg of you! Indulge me! Tell the maid to bring some
water, wash yourself, and we’ll sleep together.”

“You make me laugh,” Vase said. “You spend the day carousing somewhere, come home drunk as a skunk, and behave so scandalously! Even if I wash myself, I won’t be clean. It’s improper and disgusting for a man to let himself be soiled by a woman’s menses. It brings bad luck. If I die tomorrow, you’ll still come looking for me!”

Finally, seeing she could not get rid of him, Vase told the maid to bring some water, and washed her sex. Then she returned to the bed and let Ximen Qing approach. Strangely enough, the baby Guange, who Vase had rocked gently until he had gone to sleep, woke up the second she climbed into bed. This he did three times. Vase told the maid to calm the baby with a rattle and bring him to the wet-nurse. Afterwards they were able to enjoy themselves more freely.

Ximen Qing sat down inside the bedcurtain while Vase mounted him. By the light of the lamp he could see his penis enter her, and admired her snow-white bottom. He held her by her thighs and watched the in-and-out movement of his member. No sooner had he entered her halfway than he felt an indescribable pleasure. Fearing that her blood might get on him, Vase repeatedly wiped herself with a napkin. After two hours of pushing-and-pulling, he grasped her thighs firmly, massaged his member, and entered her so deeply so that his pubic hair pricked her thighs. What sheer delight!

“Gently, Dada,” cried Vase, “You’re hurting me.”

“Since it’s painful, I will let you go,” said Ximen, who reached out towards the table for some tea. He swallowed a mouthful of cold tea just as his sperm spurted out, gushing like water.

It’s just as they say:

The four limbs relax with delight,
The whole body feels as fresh as the spring.

Ximen Qing was beginning to appreciate the extraordinary power of the foreign monk’s medicine. He fell asleep just as the third watch sounded.

Golden Lotus, knowing that Ximen had gone to sleep in Vase’s chamber, was quite sure that he had taken the case of sex toys there to disport himself with her. It never occurred to her that he might have had another liaison outside. She closed her door and went to sleep, grinding her teeth.

The nuns passed the night with Moon Lady. Nun Wang secretly gave Moon Lady the placenta of a baby boy and some medicine from Nun Xue. Nun Wang told her to ingest it with a little wine on the forty-ninth day of the sixty-day cycle, and then to sleep with her husband the same night. She would conceive a child, but she must not let anyone else know about it. Moon Lady accepted the gift and thanked the two nuns.

“I had expected you at New Year’s, but you never came,” Moon Lady said, reproaching Nun Wang.

“It’s easy for you to say, my good lady,” said Nun Wang. “When I came to see you I made no secret of the fact that you would have to wait until the fourth month, the Second Lady’s birthday, for an opportunity to see Nun Xue. Luckily she had a chance to obtain this, in exchange for three qian of silver, from a midwife who had just delivered a first-born son. Before bringing it to you we had to wash it with alum water, scrub it clean, and bake it between two
bricks, just as it’s supposed to be done. Then we sifted it through a double-fold of gauze and mixed it with medicines and charms. And now here it is.”

“I have caused you a great deal of trouble, Mistress Xue and Master Wang,” said Moon Lady. She gave two taels of silver each to the two nuns, and thanked them again.

“When I become pregnant,” Moon Lady added, “I will give Mistress Xue a bolt of yellow satin to make a monastic habit.”

Nun Xue joined her hands and bowed. “You have the compassion of a bodhisattva, Your Ladyship. We thank you.”

Just as the proverb says: it is easier to sell three loads of lies in one hour than a pinch of truth in ten days.

If we knew the art of becoming a Buddha,
Monks and nuns would flood the whole world.

If you don’t know what happened next, please listen to the next chapter.
CHAPTER 51

Where Moon Lady Hears an Exposition of the Diamond Sutra
And Cinnamon Takes Refuge in Ximen Qing’s House

Unable to bear gazing upon the sad, pale face in the mirror,
She places her hands on fragrant cheeks, too listless to sleep.
The halcyon-green belt hangs loosely about the thin, famished waist,
Tears stain the rouged face, etching trails of gold filigree.
The heartless thief of love leaves behind only pangs of grief,
My yearning heart beats wildly in fury.
When will the east wind favor me and carry my lover
To my pillow’s side when I awake?

So upset was Golden Lotus when she thought that Ximen Qing had taken his case of sex toys to spend the night with Vase that she tossed and turned the whole night, her heart filled with spite. The next day, after Ximen Qing left for the yamen and while Vase was still washing and dressing, Lotus went to see Moon Lady.

“Vase has been saying nasty things about you behind your back,” Lotus began. “She says that you are overbearing, and take advantage of your position as First Lady to lord it over the rest of the wives and meddle with other people’s birthday celebrations. Last night, she says, our husband came in drunk and went to her room. She was in the inner courtyard, but you shamed her before everyone without the slightest cause. Angry because of losing face, she went to her room and forced him to come to your room. And then he only stayed a little while before going back to her room. They spent the night murmuring their little secrets to each other. He has given himself to her, heart, entrails, and all, she says.”

Her lie had its intended effect: How could Moon Lady not become furious? She said to Aunt Wu and Jade Tower: “You two were both present yesterday. I did nothing anyone could take exception to. When the valet came with the lantern I simply asked him why his master had not come, and he said that he was in the Sixth Lady’s chamber. That’s when I mentioned that the Second Lady was waiting for him and that he hadn’t a single ounce of decency. I don’t see why she should feel hurt. What reason does she have to insult me and accuse me in this fashion? Me, who has always taken her to be a good person! Evidently I was judging her by appearances, and did not realize what she really is like. You can never tell. Now I see that she is a needle hidden in a bolt of cloth, a thorn in the flesh. How do I know what stories she may have been telling my husband? No wonder he was so anxious to go and see her yesterday. But never mind, my pretty lady. Even if he stays with you night and day, it’s all the same to me. You can have him, those of you who cannot bear the strain of widowhood. Think of it! Even when we were first married that rogue didn’t treat me with respect, either inside or outside the house, yet I’ve managed to survive!”

“Lady,” Aunt Wu said, “say no more. It’s only because of the child, you see. It’s always this way for those who serve as prime minister: you must know how to navigate troubled waters with calm and equanimity. You are still the mistress of the house, and the mistress is like a jar which has to hold all sorts of water, both clean and foul.”
“One of these days,” Moon Lady said, “I will have a few words with her, and find out what she meant in saying that I’m overbearing and lording it over everyone.”

“Dear sister,” said Lotus, sensing trouble, “forgive her. The proverb says, ‘The truly noble do not take offense at the failings of the unworthy.’ Are there any of that baser sort who are without fault? Who among us has not suffered from the provocations which she makes in front of him in the intimacy of her chamber? Remember that I am the one closest to her, and what would happen if I should become angry! It’s only because of the baby that she can treat others like this. And she also has this to say: when the baby grows up, those who have been good to her will be repaid with kindness, and she will revenge herself against the rest. Our number will be up, and we’ll all starve to death! But, of course, you knew nothing of this!”

“Lady,” Aunt Wu cried, “How can she say such things?”

Moon Lady didn’t make a sound. As the proverb says, “When the road ahead is dark, some will grab torches, and some will bring candles.”

Ximen’s daughter, Orchid, also was present. No one realized that Orchid was on friendly terms with Vase. Whenever she lacked for needles, thread, or cloth for making soles, Vase had given her satin, taffetas, or other silks of superior quality without hesitation, often adding two or three handkerchiefs and even—discreetly, of course—some silver. When Orchid heard this conversation, how could she hesitate to report it to Vase?

Vase was in her chamber, preoccupied with making an amulet of wool thread for the baby to wear for the Festival of Dragon Boat Races, multi-colored silk imitation rice dumplings, and a “tiger” made from moxa to ward off illness. When Orchid came in she asked her to sit down while she worked. Jasmine brought some tea.

“When we asked you to come and take tea with us, why didn’t you come?” Orchid began.

“After your father left I wanted to take advantage of the coolness of the morning to make these knicknacks for the baby,” Vase replied.

“I have something to tell you,” Orchid said. “Please don’t think that I’m fond of gossip, but have you done anything to displease the Fifth Lady? She has been telling my mother that you called her an interfering nuisance who lords it over the others. Mother intends to ask you what you meant by this. But when she asks you, don’t tell her that I spoke to you about it, or she will be angry with me. But you had better think of what you are going to say to her.”

No sooner had she heard these words than Vase dropped her needle. Her arms fell limp by her sides, and for a long time she could not speak. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“I never said a single word,” she replied at last. “Last night, I was in the inner courtyard when the valet came to tell me that Father had gone to my room. I rushed to urge him to come to the inner courtyard. Did I do anything to cause reproach? Your mother has been very kind to me. Don’t you think I have a conscience? The one who claims to have heard me say such things must have some part in it.”

“She certainly seemed to be disturbed when she heard Mother say that she would come immediately to ask you about it,” Orchid said. “If I were you, I would have it out with her, face to face.”

“No,” said Vase, “Challenge that sharp tongue? Heaven help me! She is scheming night and day to cause my ruin. She won’t stop until she has gotten rid of me and my baby. If she only spared the child...” Vase began to sob.

Orchid stayed for awhile and tried to comfort her. Tiny Jade came in to ask them both to
come to dinner, and then return to the inner courtyard. Vase put down her sewing and went with Orchid, but she did not touch her food and went back to her chamber to lie down.

When Ximen Qing returned from the yamen and saw Vase lying on the bed, he asked Jasmine what was amiss.

“She has eaten nothing all day,” the maid replied.

Startled, Ximen Qing knelt down by Vase and said, “Why haven’t you eaten? Tell me!”

Then, seeing that her eyes were red from crying, he added “What is troubling you? Tell me.”

Vase quickly rose, rubbing her eyes. “My eyes have been bothering me for some reason. I’ve been feeling too fatigued to eat.” She said nothing more.

It’s just as they say: What fills the heart is never spoken. There’s a poem that bears witness:

Never presume that a beautiful woman is stupid,
She never has a chance to reveal her intelligence.
When it’s a matter of dealings with others,
She must choke back the grief swelling inside.

Orchid returned to the inner courtyard and spoke to Moon Lady: “I have spoken to the Sixth Lady. She swears on her life that she never said anything. And besides, to whom would she say such things? Then she turned to me, crying, and asked whether she would speak in such a way about someone who had shown her such kindness.”

“I don’t believe a word the Fifth Lady says,” Aunt Wu said. “The Sixth Lady is much too good a lady to say things like that.”

“I suspect that there is some kind of trouble between the two of them,” Moon Lady said. “The Fifth Lady couldn’t get our husband to pay attention to her, and that is why she bit her tongue and tried to use me as a screen for her.”

“You must make sure that you are not too hasty in passing judgment, Lady,” said Aunt Wu. “I won’t speak behind Vase’s back: she is worth more than a hundred Golden Lotuses. She has a good heart. She has been here for two or three years and never has she done the slightest thing to merit reproach.”

As they were talking Qintong appeared carrying on his back a large bundle wrapped in blue cloth.

“What is that?” Moon Lady asked.

“These are the thirty thousand salt vouchers which Clerk Han and Cui Ben have brought after registering them at the customs office. Father asks that the two of them be given something to eat. Then we’re to weigh the silver and wrap it up. The day after tomorrow is the twentieth, a lucky day to start on a journey, so Han, Cui, and Lai Bao will be off to Yangzhou.”

“My brother-in-law will be coming back shortly, I’m sure,” Aunt Wu said. “I should retire to the Second Lady’s chamber with the two nuns.”

Barely had she spoken these words when Ximen Qing parted the curtains and entered. The three women hurried off towards Charm’s room, but not without Ximen Qing having noticed them.

“What’s that thievish, bald-headed whore Xue doing here?” he demanded.

“Is there any need for such filthy language?” said Moon Lady. “She asks nothing of you; why do you insult her like that? What has she done to you? And how do you know that her
name is Xue?"

“Don’t you know about the scandal she has caused?” said Ximen Qing. “She arranged an illicit rendezvous at her convent between the daughter of Counselor Chen and some young man named Ruan the Third on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The dalliance with that woman cost Ruan his life. Xue was paid three taels of silver for her part in the assignation. When the affair was discovered, the yamen conducted a judicial inquiry. I had old Xue arrested, stripped, and given twenty blows with the cane. Then she was told to marry and return to lay life. I should like to know why she hasn’t obeyed this order! Perhaps we shall have to drag her back to the yamen and put the thumbscrews on her once more!”

“Here you are again speaking such slander about religion and the Buddha,” Moon Lady said. “She is a disciple of the Buddha, no doubt because of the good works she performed in a previous life. Why should she return to a lay existence? You know nothing of her piety and holy works.”

“Holy works!” Ximen Qing exclaimed. “Ask her how many men she works in a night!”

“Don’t be so vulgar,” Moon Lady said, “or you’ll oblige me to say things which I’d rather not utter.” Changing the subject, she said, “When are the three of them leaving for Yangzhou?”

“I have sent Lai Bao to see our relative Qiao. We will each contribute five hundred taels. The twentieth is a lucky day, so I’ve decided to send them then.”

“Who will take care of the haberdashery shop?”

“I’m leaving Ben the Fourth in charge.”

Moon Lady opened a chest and took out the silver, weighed it, and handed it to the three men. Ximen Qing supervised as they bundled up the silver in the courtyard. He gave each man five taels for their expenses and told them to prepare their baggage.

As the men busied themselves with wrapping the silver, the Count arrived and proceeded into the courtyard. Seeing Ximen Qing he asked, “What are you up to, Elder Brother?”

Ximen explained to him that he was sending Lai Bao to Yangzhou on the twentieth to conduct some business in dealing salt.

“Congratulations, Elder Brother,” the Count said, raising his hands in felicitation, “I’m sure you’ll make a handsome profit out of this expedition.”

Ximen Qing invited him to sit down and asked for tea. Then he asked, “When will Li the Third and Huang the Fourth get their money?”

“Within a month, I expect,” the Count replied. “They told me yesterday that the officials in Dongping prefecture are offering another contract for twenty thousand units of incense. Huang and Li are very eager to get your backing to the extent of five hundred taels, as they are short of cash at the moment. As soon as they get their money they’ll deliver it to you without touching a penny.”

“But as you see I’m already sending people to Yangzhou, and have no silver at hand,” said Ximen. “I’ve even had to borrow five hundred taels from my relative Qiao. Where do you expect me to find the money?”

“Well,” said the Count, “they have repeatedly entreated me to speak to you on their behalf. But, ‘The same client cannot trouble two patrons.’ If you can’t help them through this pinch, who else could I turn to?”

“Xu Si, in East Street outside the city, owes me money. I can raise five hundred taels from him.”
“Splendid,” the Count said.

At this juncture Ping’an brought a visiting-card. He explained that His Excellency Xia had sent Xia Shou to invite Ximen Qing to visit him the next day. Ximen Qing unfolded the card. “Good,” he said.

“I have some news for you,” the Count said after Ping’an left. “Do you know about Cinnamon, from the brothel? Has she been here lately?”

“She has not been here since New Year’s. I haven’t heard anything about her.”

“Well, the third son of the imperial commissioner, Wang, is the nephew by marriage of Marshal Huang of the Eastern Capital. When he visited the Capital to pay his respects at New Year’s, that old eunuch Huang gave young Wang and his wife a thousand taels of silver as a New Year’s gift. Oh, you have no idea how beautiful she is, this niece of Marshal Huang. No painter could capture half of her charm. Since you have been content to stay at home with your own ladies, Old Sun, Pock-Marked Zhu, and Little Zhang, and three or four others have been spending their time at the brothel with this young man. He was offered the virginity of the young girl, Fragrance, at Qi’s place in Second Bridge Lane, and now he’s taken up with her. He’s often found at Cinnamon’s house as well. This Wang fellow wound up by pawning all of his wife’s jewelry, which upset her so greatly that she tried to hang herself. The other day, just this month, Wang’s wife went to visit her uncle in the Eastern Capital on his birthday, and she told him everything. The old eunuch was furious. He sent a list of names of all of his nephew’s companions to his colleague, Marshal Zhu, who passed it on to Dongping prefecture with orders to have them arrested. Yesterday, the three of them—Old Sun, Pock-marked Zhu, and Little Zhang—were arrested at Cinnamon’s house. Cinnamon herself managed to hide at her neighbor’s house, where she spent the night. They’ve asked me to come today and beg you to intercede.”

“It was just around New Year’s that I was saying that they have been busy trying to cadge some silver out of somebody or another,” Ximen Qing said. “And that Pock-marked Zhu has even played a dirty trick or two on me!”

“Well, I will be going,” the Count, “but I’m afraid that Cinnamon will be coming to see you, and whether or not you listen to her she will blame me for having stuck my finger in the pie.”

“Wait a moment,” Ximen said. “I have something else to ask you. Don’t promise anything to Huang and Li until I notify you that I’ve gotten the money from Xu.”

“I understand.”

No sooner had the Count reached the main gate than the sedan-chair of Cinnamon arrived. She hurriedly got out and entered the house.

Ximen Qing was telling his son-in-law Chen to fetch a mule and go to Xu Si’s place and press him for the money. Qintong came into the garden and spoke to Ximen Qing.

“The First Lady would like to see you in the inner courtyard. Aunt Cinnamon is here.”

Ximen went to the inner courtyard and saw Cinnamon, dressed in a tea-colored robe, her face unpowdered, and her head wrapped in a white kerchief. Her hair was disheveled and the color had drained out of her cheeks. Seeing Ximen Qing, she prostrated herself in front of him.

“Father,” she cried, “Whatever shall I do? Fate has abandoned me. We were sitting quietly at home behind locked doors when suddenly disaster dropped from the heavens! It’s all because of this Wang the Third fellow whom I don’t even know! I asked myself why Old Sun and Pock-marked Zhu would come to our house to take some tea, given that my sister was not at home.
They are going to cause us trouble, I said, but our mother, the older she gets, the more foolish she is! So they came in. It was our aunt’s birthday. I wanted to get into my sedan-chair and be done with them, but Pock-marked Zhu got down on his knees and begged me not to leave until I had at least given them some tea. I don’t like to give offense to anyone. Then they came in with the young gentleman. They made me bar the door and wouldn’t let me leave. Suddenly a group of men arrived and pounded on the gate. They took away the three fellows without the slightest explanation. Wang the Third managed to sneak away, and I hid in a neighbor’s house. I was finally able to pass a message to have someone bring me here. Our mother is half out of her wits, and thinks only of killing herself.

“Today the lictors from the sub-prefecture came with a warrant and spent the whole morning making a horrible fuss and searching for me. It seems that my name is on some list and they want to send me to the Eastern Capital to answer some questions. Father, have pity on me! What will I do if you don’t help me! Mother,” she cried, addressing Moon Lady, “Please say something to him!”

Ximen Qing laughed. “Get up,” he said. “Who else’s names are on the list?”

“Fragrance, from Qi’s place,” Cinnamon said. “That’s to be expected, because he had taken her virginity, and spent a lot of money there. But if I’ve ever seen one penny of his money, you can pluck my eyes out! And if I’ve ever touched him, may a beastly sore grow in every one of my pores!”

“You must do something for her,” Moon Lady shuddered, “and stop her from making these terrible oaths.”

“Has Fragrance been arrested?” Ximen Qing asked.

“She’s been hiding at the home of the emperor’s kinsman, Wang,” Cinnamon replied.

“In that case,” Ximen Qing said, “stay here for a couple days. If they come looking you, I will send someone to the county seat to speak in your favor.”

Ximen summoned Shutong. “Draw up a letter saying that Cinnamon is here at my house as a guest, and take it to His Excellency Li at the county yamen. Let’s see how he reacts.”

Shutong bowed and left, dressed in a black tunic. In a short time he returned with a response from magistrate Li.

“His Excellency proffers his greeting to Your Excellency,” Shutong reported. “He says that he is entirely at your disposal in all other matters, but in this case it is a matter of an order issued by the authorities in the Eastern Capital which obliges him to apprehend and detain these persons. Out of regard for Your Excellency he can allow you two days’ grace, but in order to vacate her arrest you must send someone to speak to the authorities in the capital.”

When Ximen Qing hear this he sighed. “Lai Bao is leaving in a day or two. I have no one else to send!”

“Why not sent the other two by themselves,” suggested Moon Lady, “and have Lai Bao go to the Eastern Capital to do something for Cinnamon? He will still have time to catch up to the others in Yangzhou. Can’t you see how terrified the girl is?”

Cinnamon kowtowed to Moon Lady and Ximen Qing. Ximen sent for Lai Bao.

“You’re no longer going on the twentieth. I will send the others on ahead to Yangzhou, and you will leave for the capital tomorrow to dispose of this matter concerning Cinnamon. Visit our relative Zhai, and convince him to send someone to settle this business at the yamen.”

Cinnamon bowed deeply to Lai Bao, who stepped back and saluted her in return.
“I will leave immediately, cousin Cinnamon,” Lai Bao said.

Ximen Qing dictated another letter to Shutong thanking Majordomo Zhai for his troubles in handling the matter of Censor Zeng. Then he sealed up a packet of twenty taels of silver to go along with the letter and gave it to Lai Bao.

Recovering her good humor, Cinnamon presented Lai Bao with five taels of silver to take care of his expenses, and added, “Mother will reward you more suitably when you return.”

Ximen Qing would not let him accept, however, and returned the money to the young woman, while asking Moon Lady to provide Lai Bao with five taels for the journey.

“But that’s not fair,” protested Cinnamon. “It is I who has asked you for this favor, and yet you are the one paying the expenses.”

“You make me laugh,” Ximen Qing said, “Do you think that I do not have five taels and need your money?”

Cinnamon finally desisted and put away her money. “I am very much in your debt,” she said to Lai Bao. “But please leave early tomorrow. I am so afraid that you may be too late.”

“I will leave before dawn, at the fifth watch,” Lai Bao promised. He took the letter and went off to Clerk Han’s shop in Lion Lane.

Wang Liu’r was in her room, sewing underclothes for Ximen Qing. Opening the window, she caught sight of Lai Bao.

“What news do you have?” she asked sharply. “Please come in. My husband isn’t home. He’s gone to the tailor’s for some clothes, but will be back shortly.” Then she called her maid Brocade: “Hurry to the shop of tailor Xu, and tell Father that Master Lai Bao is waiting here for him.”

“I have just come to say that I won’t be going with him tomorrow,” Lai Bao said. “An urgent matter has suddenly come up. The boss is sending me to the Eastern Capital instead, to speak on behalf of Cinnamon, from the courtesans’ house. She has just been pleading with Father, kowtowing over and over again, and he has entrusted the task to me. He wants your husband and Cui to go ahead, and I will join them later at Yangzhou. I leave early tomorrow; I already have the letter.” Then he added, “What is it that you’re making, Sister-in-law?”

“Underclothes for my husband.”

“Tell him not to bring many clothes. They’ll be going to the land of silks and satins, so why should he bother bringing his own?”

As they were talking, Han Daoguo arrived. The two men greeted one another, and Lai Bao explained to him what had happened. Then he asked, “When I reach Yangzhou, where can I find you?”

“Father has told us to take lodgings at the inn of Wang Boru, above the wharf. It seems that Father was on intimate terms with Wang’s father. His inn is large and spacious, with a considerable clientele of traveling merchants. Our money and goods will be safe there. That’s where you’ll find us.”

“Sister-in-law,” Lai Bao said, “As I’ll be leaving for the Eastern Capital tomorrow, is there anything you would like me to deliver to your daughter at Zhai’s house?”

“Only some trifles,” Wang Liu’r replied. “There are two pairs of hairpins her father had made for her, and also two pairs of shoes. If it’s not too much trouble, it would be very kind of you to bring them along.”

She wrapped the shoes and hairpins in a kerchief and gave them to Lai Bao. Then Wang
Liu’r told the maid to prepare some food and heat up the wine while she set the table.

“Sister-in-law,” Lai Bao protested, “please don’t go to any trouble on my account. I cannot stay. I have to return home to pack my luggage so as to be ready to start first thing in the morning.”

“Come now!” Wang Liu’r laughed heartily, “Don’t stand on ceremony with us! We must share a pot of wine between us clerks to bid you bon voyage!” Then she turned to her husband and shouted, “Get a move on, you old teetotaler! The table is crooked; why don’t you set it properly and have Uncle Bao sit down. You really are good for nothing!” Then she brought out the food and poured a cup of wine for Lai Bao. Wang Liu’r sat down in the company of the two men. After they had finished several draughts, Lai Bao declared, “I must return. It’s getting late. I don’t want to go back and find the gate shut early.”

“Have you hired some mules?” Han Daoguo asked him.

“I will take care of it early tomorrow,” Lai Bao replied.

“You should hand over the keys and the account books to Cui Ben,” said Han, “then you won’t have to go to spend the night there. Get a sound sleep at home before you set out.”

“You have a point there. I will give them to him tomorrow.”

The young woman handed him another cup of wine and said, “Uncle Bao, drink one more cup, and I won’t keep you any longer.”

“If you insist, I’d like it a little warmer.”

Wang Liu’r quickly poured the wine back into the wine pot and told Brocade to reheat it. When it was ready she filled the cup again and offered it to Lai Bao with both hands. “I’m sorry that I have nothing better to offer you to eat,” she apologized.

“You are too kind, Sister-in-law,” said Lai Bao. “We are all one family; please don’t stand on ceremony.” He raised his cup and toasted Wang Liu’r. The two of them finished off their wine in one draught. Then Lai Bao rose to leave. Wang Liu’r gave him the package to take to her daughter.

“Please visit my daughter at the majordomo’s residence and bring back news of her,” she asked Lai Bao, apologizing for the inconvenience. “I will feel much relieved to hear that she is well.”

With this they exchanged bows, and Han Daoguo and his wife accompanied their guest to the gate. Lai Bao went home to prepare for his journey, and left for the Eastern Capital the next day.

Moon Lady was in her chamber entertaining Cinnamon. Aunt Wu and Aunt Yang both were sitting with them. Suddenly Aunt Wu’s older brother arrived and went to talk to Ximen Qing.

“An order has come from Dongping prefecture appointing me Keeper of the Seals and putting me in charge of building and operating the community granary. The imperial decree stipulates that if the construction is finished within six months I will be promoted one degree in rank. But if the work is delayed, the censorate will conduct an investigation. Brother-in-law, if you can spare the money, I would be most grateful if you could lend me some so that the work can begin immediately. Please be assured that when I am reimbursed for the construction costs, I will pay you back in full.”

“How much do you need?” Ximen Qing asked. “You shall have it.”
“You are very kind. Twenty taels will suffice.”

The two went to the inner courtyard to speak to Moon Lady. Ximen Qing asked her to give twenty taels to Wu. After giving him the money, she asked the two men to join them for tea. Since the ladies had female guests, the men hesitated to sit down. Moon Lady then suggested that Ximen Qing take Wu to the main reception room for some wine. While they were drinking, Chen Jingji entered, bringing the response from Xu Si. “Hsu asks to be allowed two days to make good on his debt,” Chen reported.

“You are getting soft in your old age!” Ximen Qing retorted. “I need the money right away! Give him another two days? He wants to pay me when it suits him! We’ll have to put that son-of-a-bitch in his place!”

Chen Jingji bowed in acknowledgement. Wu asked him to sit down. Chen bowed again, and sat at the side of the table. Qintong quickly came forward bringing a wine cup and chopsticks.

In the inner courtyard Aunt Wu and Aunt Yang, Charm, Jade Tower, Golden Lotus, and Vase were all keeping Cinnamon company in Moon Lady’s chamber. Miss Yu, the blind chanteuse, sang for them several arias from “Student Zhang Voyages to the Treasure Pagoda.” When she put down her mandolin Jade Tower passed her some wine and fed her hors-d’oeuvres while guffawing: “This millstone of a blind beggar made a mess of it. I couldn’t wait for that horrible song to end. Don’t say that I don’t spoil you!”

Golden Lotus took a piece of meat with a pair of large chopsticks and dangled it under Miss Yu’s nose to tease her.

“Sister,” Cinnamon said to Jade Flute, “pass me Miss Yu’s mandolin and I will sing a tune for the ladies.”

“But you are so distressed, Cinnamon,” Moon Lady said. “Surely you don’t feel like singing.”

“It’s nothing. Now that you and Father will speak for me I have nothing to worry about.”

“Sister Cinnamon,” laughed Jade Tower, “You are a true doll among courtesans! How quickly you change your expression! A moment ago you were scowling and seemed so tormented that you weren’t even able to drink a drop of tea. And here you are talking and laughing!”

Cinnamon stretched her fingers of jade and sharply plucked the stiff strings. While she was singing Qintong came in, having cleared the table in the outer courtyard.

“Has my brother-in-law left?” Moon Lady asked.

“Yes,” Qintong replied.

“Brother-in-law will be coming here soon, no doubt,” Aunt Wu said. “We’d best move to another place.”

“Father will not be coming to the inner courtyard,” Qintong assured her. “He has gone to the room of the Fifth Lady.”

Hearing that Ximen Qing had gone to her room Golden Lotus began to shift in her seat. She lifted one foot and then the other, itching to get away, but felt that it would be impolite to leave all of a sudden.

“Go,” said, Moon Lady, losing patience with Golden Lotus’s squirming. “Don’t sit there like a famished guest who can’t get anything to eat!”

Golden Lotus tried to pretend to be in no great hurry, but her feet carried her quickly away.
When she arrived in her chamber, in the front part of the house, Ximen Qing had already taken
the foreign monk’s aphrodisiac. He had summoned Plum Blossom to help him out of his clothes
and was sitting on the bed, under the bedcurtains.

Seeing him, Golden Lotus laughed. “My little boy, aren’t you good today! You got into
bed without even waiting for mama to come! We were in the inner courtyard keeping Aunt Wu
and Aunt Yang company. Cinnamon sang for us, and we drank plenty of wine. I don’t know
how I managed to find my way here alone, stumbling in the dark!” Then she called to Plum
Blossom: “If there’s some tea, bring me a pot.”

Plum Blossom poured some water to infuse the tea. When she had drunk the tea Lotus
twisted her mouth as a sign to Plum Blossom. The maid understood, and went to a corner to heat
some water for her. Lotus handed her some sandalwood perfume and white alum to wash her
sex. Then she drew close to the lamp to remove her headdress so that her hair was held by a
single gold hairpin. Picking up a mirror, she freshened her lipstick. Then she rinsed her mouth
with perfumed tea. Finished with her preparations, she came and sat at the head of the bed while
Plum Blossom took her shoes and replaced them with her sleeping slippers. The maid then left
the room, shutting the door tightly behind her.

Lotus pulled the lamp to the edge of the bed. With one hand she parted the bedcurtains
while she slipped off her crimson culottes with the other, uncovering her jade body. Ximen Qing
was sitting on a pillow, his member swollen to enormous size, with a double silver clasp fastened
on it. Seeing it in the lamplight, Lotus gave a start. She could not encircle it with her hand.
Heavy and full-blooded, a dark violet hue, it seemed too big for even a tiger’s mouth.

Lotus shot a harsh glance at Ximen Qing. “I figured that you wouldn’t say anything to me.
You’ve been taking some of that monk’s medicine to make it so big, just so you can amaze your
old lady. Fresh meat and good wine are for others; who is it that you’ve been playing your new
sport with? You come to me only with the defeated troops and vanquished generals, and your
little hen is supposed to be content to be fucked by this thing. Don’t tell me that you don’t play
favorites!” In a sharper voice she continued, “Just the other day you took advantage of my
absence to steal away with your bag of toys and carry on your games with the Sixth Lady,
without me knowing a thing! And to think that she pretends to be one of those pure, pious types!
You wretched creature, you can be twisted around anybody’s finger! When I think about it! I
won’t have anything to do with you for a hundred years!”

Ximen Qing laughed. “You little slut,” he cried, “come here! Let’s see if you know how to
do it! I’ll bet a tael of silver that you can’t suck me properly!”

“You’re a pain in the neck, you rat! Whatever you swallow, I’m the one who suffers for it,”
groused Lotus. With this she leaned over on the mat and seized his member with both hands,
raised it to her crimson lips, and began to suck.

“What an enormous thing!” she gasped, “The way you cram it in my mouth hurts.” Then
Lotus stopped talking and began to suck Ximen’s member with an in-and-out motion, sometimes
using her tongue to play with the tip, or licking the ligaments along the shaft, sometimes
thrusting it deep into her mouth, or alternately chewing and jerking it, or withdrawing it from her
mouth and rubbing it against her powdered face. Lotus manipulated him in a hundred ways,
making his member grow larger and harder than ever before. The head seemed on the verge of
bursting like a ripe melon; its eye opened wide; its shaft was straight and stiff.

Lowering his head Ximen Qing could observe the glistening, soft skin of the young woman
through the gauze curtains which enveloped her, and the delicate fingers holding his member as
she swallowed it all the way down to the hair around its base. He was so absorbed by the
spectacle of her head bobbing under the lamp that he barely noticed a white angora cat crouching
by his side. Attracted by the motions of Lotus without knowing what she was doing, the cat
poised itself to spring and strike at the object in her hand with its claws. Ximen Qing playfully
teased the cat with a black fan flecked with gold he had been holding in his hand. Lotus
snatched the fan from Ximen and struck a hard blow at the cat, which scurried away from the
bed.

Lotus glared at Ximen Qing and said, “Aren’t you a droll fellow, my sweet! How you mock
me! The creature is about to claw me and you amuse yourself by goading it on! What if it leaps
on your head and scratches your face? Will you be happy then? I’m not going to play this game
any longer!”

“You silly little whore,” Ximen replied, “you will end up talking me to death.”

“Go and ask Vase to suck you! I’m tired of playing with your thing and not knowing what it
is you’ve taken. I’ve been sucking you for an eternity and nothing has come of it, nothing!”

Ximen Qing then took from his sleeve a small gold box. With a tooth-pick he took a bit of
the reddish ointment from the box and placed it on the tip of his member and rubbed it into the
“horse’s eye.” Lying down on his back, he motioned for Lotus to mount him.

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” Lotus said. “With such a big head it takes a little time to
lubricate this tortoise you’re sticking in me.”

The young woman began to push and rub from side to side as if afflicted by some
unbearable itch. Soon she began to moan: “Dear Dada, I’m too tight! I’m totally blocked up!
It’s hurting me!”

While squeezing his member with her hand she saw, in the light of the lamp, the “handle of
the fly-swatter”: her vagina had swallowed half of his member, but it filled her so completely
that any movement was impossible. They young woman moistened the two sides of her vulva
with saliva to allow it to slide in more easily. Then she began again her back-and-forth motion,
rising and falling, so that little by little his whole member disappeared inside her.

“The aphrodisiacs you usually use give me a burning sensation and a terrible itch inside,”
Lotus murmured. “How is it that with this medicine from the monk I feel an intense cold which
rises up from my vagina straight to my heart? This time my whole body feels numb. I’m putting
my life in your hands today, I think. That’s scarcely tolerable!”

Ximen Qing laughed. “My dear fifth wife,” he said, “let me tell you a funny story I heard
from my friend the Count. Once there was a man who died. The king of hell covered his body
with an ass’s skin because in his next life he was destined to be reborn as a donkey. But some
time later a magistrate of the infernal regions checked the registers and announced that the
fellow still had thirteen years yet to live as a man. They sent him back to his wife, who noticed
that his body was human in every respect except his male member, which was that of a donkey.
‘I will return to the world of the dead and have it changed back,’ he declared. His wife, alarmed,
quickly replied: ‘I am afraid that they will not let you return. Leave it be, and I will endure it
somehow.’”

Lotus struck Ximen with the fan and laughed. “It’s no surprise that that beggar the Count’s
wife could be trained to put up with a donkey’s tool! You foul-mouthed thing! I should give
you a sound thrashing, but what would others think!”
The lovers entwined themselves around each other for another two hours, but Ximen Qing’s vitality never slackened. He closed his eyes and let the young woman sit atop him. She pulled up and slammed down on him, making a loud noise as the head of his tortoise slapped between her thighs. After a long time she slumped down against Ximen Qing. Ximen used his feet to raise her thighs and she began to move again in a faster rhythm, rising and falling on his swollen gland. Ximen’s eyes followed the movements of her body. After a while Lotus felt herself overwhelmed by intense pleasure. She turned over, seized Ximen’s neck with both hands, and pulled his body to the top of her while plunging her tongue into his mouth. His member drove into her up to the hilt, reaching into the innermost part of her vagina. Exhausted by their ceaseless lovemaking, Lotus barely had enough breath to whisper, “Darling Dada, please stop! I’m dying!” A second later she fell into a swoon. The tip of her tongue was as cold as ice. A final discharge trickled from her. Ximen Qing felt a burning heat from her vagina radiating throughout his whole abdomen. An inexpressible sensation of exquisite rapture filled his heart. Then an abundant flood of fluid poured from the young woman, who wiped it up with a handkerchief. The two of them lay with their necks and legs intertwined, gripping each other tightly, sucking on each other’s tongues. Yet for all that Ximen Qing had not produced an ejaculation. They slept for barely an hour when the young woman, her desire not yet stilled, clambered on top of Ximen again and the two renewed their lovemaking.

After experiencing two orgasms the young woman felt overcome by fatigue. Still in peak form and not in the least tired, Ximen Qing marveled at the divine efficacy of the monk’s aphrodisiac. The cock had just crowed, and, through the window, light was spreading in the eastern sky.

“My darling,” Lotus said to him, “You haven’t climaxed: return this evening and let me really suck you.”

“You can suck me all you like,” Ximen Qing replied, “but you won’t manage to make me come. There’s only one way to do that!”

“Tell me, what is it?”

“It’s a secret which mustn’t be heard by other ears,” said Ximen Qing. “I will tell you when I return this evening.”

Rising early, Ximen attended to his toilet. Plum Flower helped him to dress. Han Daoguo and Cui Ben also had come early and were waiting outside.

Ximen Qing went out, burned some spirit money so that they might have an auspicious journey, and gave them two letters. “This one is to be presented to the inn-keeper Wang Boru, on the embankment at Yangzhou,” said Ximen. “Take the other to Miao Qing in the city and ask him whether things have been settled properly. Return as soon as you can and report to me. If you need more money, I will send some with Lai Bao when he comes.”

“Don’t you also have a letter for His Excellency Commissioner Cai?” Cui Ben asked.

“I haven’t written the letter to Commissioner Cai yet,” said Ximen. “I will send it with Lai Bao.”

The two men kowtowed, mounted their horses, and rode away.

Ximen put on his hat and ceremonial belt before departing for the yamen, where he met with Magistrate Xia and thanked him for the invitation Xia had sent the day before.

“We could have no greater honor than your distinguished company today,” Magistrate Xia
said. “There won’t be any other guests.”

After attending to their business, they parted and each returned to his own home.

Also rising at an early hour, Moon Lady had set the table and invited Ximen Qing to have his breakfast porridge with her. While they were eating a man on horseback wearing a black uniform appeared at the gate. He carried a leather satchel, and his whole face was covered with sweat. The man asked Ping’an if this was the home of His Excellency Judge Ximen.

“From whom have you come?” Ping’an inquired.

The man leaped down from his horse, bowed, and said: “I am in the service of His Excellency An, superintendent of His Majesty’s forests. He has sent me in advance to bring some gifts. My master is attending a banquet at the residence of His Excellency Hu, prefect of Dongping, with His Excellency Huang, director of the tile works. They wish to come and pay their respects to His Excellency, and I have come to see if he is at home.”

“Do you have a card?” Ping’an asked.

The man took a card from his satchel and handed it to Ping’an along with several gifts. Ping’an took them and showed them to Ximen Qing. Ximen glanced at the list of presents, which read: “Two rolls of Zhejiang silk, four catties of Huzhou brocade, one belt, one antique mirror.”

“Wrap up five qian of silver and deliver them with a reply to the messenger,” Ximen instructed Ping’an. “Tell him that I am at home awaiting the visit of Their Excellencies.”

The messenger rode off in a hurry. Ximen Qing occupied himself with necessary preparations for receiving his visitors.

Towards mid-day the cry rang out that the two gentlemen were about to arrive. They came in two large sedan-chairs covered by magnificent canopies. First they sent in their servants to present their visiting-cards: “Your disciple An Zhen salutes you” said one; “Your disciple Huang Baoguang salutes you” said the other. The two visitors were dressed in boots of black silk and each wore on his robe a medallion decorated with a white pheasant among blue clouds. They dismounted from their sedan-chairs and each politely invited the other to enter first. Ximen Qing emerged to greet them. Then they went into the great reception hall and exchanged salutations. Each took their places, Secretary Huang on the left, Secretary An on the right, while Ximen Qing occupied the seat of the host between them.

“Your great virtue and refined reputation has long been known to me,” began Huang as he raised his hands in benediction. “Your disciple must apologize for having waited so long to pay my respects.”

“The honor is mine,” Ximen Qing replied. “I am entirely unworthy of your visit. It is I who ought to come and pay my respects to you. May I venture to ask what is Your Reverence’s sobriquet?”

“The sobriquet of my colleague Huang is ‘Taiyu,’ which signifies the supreme calm, tai, that radiates from Heaven throughout the universe, yu,” explained Secretary An.

“Will you permit me to ask your honorable sobriquet?” Huang asked.

“My humble appellation is ‘Siquan,’ or ‘Four Springs,’ which comes from a well with four openings here on my humble estate,” Ximen said.

22This motif designated the fifth of the nine protocol ranks in the civil service.
“We met with Brother Cai the other day,” An said. “He told us how he and the censor, Song Songyuan, had imposed themselves on you.”

“Since I am under the orders of my friend Cai Yunfeng, and besides Censor Song is my superior, it was the least of my duties,” Ximen Qing said. Then he continued: “Through my service at the capital I had learned of your illustrious appointment, but I had no opportunity before now to congratulate you. When did you take leave of your family?”

“Last year, after you left the capital, I went home to marry again,” said An. “After a year’s time I returned to the capital around New Year’s, when I was appointed to the Ministry of Public Works, with the title of secretary, and charged with supervising the transport of lumber for construction of the imperial palaces. The route to the imperial forests in Jingzhou passes by here, so how could I not come and pay my respects?”

“I am infinitely grateful for the immense honor you pay me with your visit,” replied Ximen as he invited his guests to put themselves at ease and unloosen their ceremonial dress. When Ximen ordered the servants to prepare the table, Huang rose from his seat.

“Speaking frankly,” Secretary An explained, “my colleague Huang and I must return to Dongping and attend the banquet at the residence of Prefect Hu. We were only passing by; you must excuse us for not staying longer. We will come and trouble you some other day.”

“But if you are going to His Lordship Hu’s place, the road is very long,” Ximen protested. “Even if you are not hungry yourselves, what about your escorts? Your servant will not offer you anything special, just a plain meal to refresh your servants.”

After sending plates of food out to the sedan bearers Ximen had a table prepared in the reception hall: the rarest delicacies of the season were brought, soup, rice, appetizers, fresh seafood, and other delightful dishes. Ximen Qing poured just three cups of wine into golden goblets, then ordered the servants to take the wine outside and regale his visitors’ entourage. Shortly afterwards the two officials stood up and took their leave.

“We have arranged a small reception tomorrow,” An said to Ximen Qing, “and should be very honored if you would come. It will be held at the residence of Chamberlain Liu. We hope you will give us the pleasure of your company.”

“Since you are so good to bestow this favor on me,” replied Ximen, “how could I refuse?”

With these words Ximen Qing escorted them to the gate. Just as the visitors left a messenger arrived reminding him to call upon Magistrate Xia. Ximen Qing gave orders to ready his horse and went to the inner chambers to change his clothes. When he emerged, he mounted his horse and set off. Dai’an and Qintong accompanied him while the soldiers cried out to clear the road. Waving a black fan he made his way to Magistrate Xia’s.

After exchanging greetings in the reception hall, Ximen Qing explained why he was delayed: “I received a visit from Secretary An of the Ministry of Public Works and Secretary Huang of the tile works. They stayed a long time, or else I would have been here sooner.”

Dai’an took his master’s robe and gave it to a valet to fold, and then put the robe along with the belt in his leather satchel. Two tables had been set in the hall. Ximen took his place at the left. Next to him sat the preceptor Licentiate Ni. When Ximen Qing asked him his name, the latter replied:

“Your humble servant is called Ni Peng, Peng as in the fabulous bird known as the roc. My style name is Shiyuan, ‘The One Who Will Go Far,’ and my sobriquet is Guiyan, ‘Cassia Cliff.’ I am one of the regular stipendiary students at the prefectural school, and am tutoring His
Lordship’s son in preparation for the civil service examinations. I’m ashamed to say that I am entirely lacking in the arts of courtesy and companionship.”

While Ni was speaking two young actors came forward and kowtowed. Then, while they were enjoying their repast, the cook came out to prepare their meal. Ximen Qing summoned Dai’an and told him to give the cook a gratuity, and then said: “Bring me my bonnet and take my ceremonial robes back home. Don’t come back for me until evening.”

The young servant bowed in acknowledgement, mounted his horse, and rode away.

After Ximen Qing left her Golden Lotus returned to her bed. It was already noon before she could rouse herself from her slumber, but she was too lethargic to dress her hair and cringed at the thought of the remarks that would be made in the inner courtyard. Moon Lady had invited Lotus to join her for the noon meal, but Lotus sent word that she was not well. Not until afternoon did she leave her chamber and go to the inner courtyard. Taking advantage of her husband’s absence, Moon Lady wished to listen to Nun Xue expound upon the teachings of the Buddha and recite the commentaries to the *Diamond Sutra*. A pulpit had been placed in an antechamber, and the incense sticks had been lit. The two nuns, Wang and Xue, sat facing each other, with the two novices standing beside them. The services began by chanting the name of the Buddha. All the ladies were present: Aunt Wu and Aunt Yang, Moon Lady, Charm, Jade Tower, Golden Lotus, Vase, Snow Beauty, and Cinnamon. They gathered round in a circle and listened first to Nun Xue as she preached:

“It is said that a flash of lightning lasts only an instant, but the fire and brimstone of hell are eternal. The withered blossom cannot return to the tree, and the waters of a stream cannot return to their source. Gilded pavilions and halls hung with tapestries are meaningless when one’s life comes to an end; exalted office and sumptuous fortune are but passing dreams. Gold and jade are nothing but the wages of sin. Rouge, powder, and delicate silks prove to be nothing more than the scourges of the evanescent world. The joys which wives and children bring endure no more than a century; the suffering awaiting you in the realm of darkness lasts a thousand times longer. No sooner does your head lie down on the pillow than destiny brings you to your grave. Your meaningless reputation will be inscribed on an empty board; your crumbling bones will lie buried in the yellow earth. Sons and daughters will fight over your immense domain of fields and gardens; not a thread of your thousands of trunks of silks and brocades will cover you after your dead. Before the spring of your youth has run half its course you will be overrun by white hairs. Barely will you have received congratulations upon your marriage when condolences mourning your death will arrive. Bitter, bitter sorrow! Vital breath transforms into the clear breeze, and dust returns to the earth! The wheel keeps on turning without returning; no matter how many times the head or face changes, our numberless reincarnations continue.

“Hail the Three Treasures of the Buddha, his Law, and the Community of Clerics, who hold sway over the past and future of this illusory world and the limitless void!”

“O profound and sublime doctrine,

---

23 One of the most important Buddhist scriptures, one especially popular among devout lay believers.
Unattainable even in a thousand eons!
Finally I am allowed to hear it,
If only I may comprehend its true meaning!”

Nun Wang took up the sermon in her turn:
“Sakyamuni Buddha²⁴ is the patriarch of all the Buddhas, the master of Buddhist doctrines. How did it come to pass that he abandoned his family? Listen to me, and I will explain it to you.”

Nun Xue began to sing the psalm “The Five Offerings”:

“Sakyamuni was a brahman prince,
He left his mountains, his snows, his rivers.
He fed his flesh to the birds of prey on Vulture Peak,
With this sacrifice he obtained a body of gold from the spray of the nine-headed dragon
And became the holy Sakya, the Awakened One of the Great Vehicle!”

Then Nun Wang said:
“You have heard how Sakyamuni became a Buddha. Now listen while it is explained to you how the Bodhisattva Guanyin sought to practice his teachings, and after a thousand incarnations obtained the fullest powers of the divine Way.”

Nun Xue spoke:
“Radiant and adorned, mistress of subtle goodness, she forsook her palace amid the majestic mountains. The gods offered her the throne of the Buddha, and after fifty-three transformations she became the savior, the compassionate Guanyin, the ‘One Who Listens For Those In Suffering.’”

“You have heard of the Law of the Bodhisattva Guanyin,” said Nun Wang. “Now I will tell you about the Sixth Patriarch, the master of meditation, the Buddha-Who-Transmitted-the-Lamp, who converted the Western Regions and returned to the East without leaving any writings. Listen to the story of his hard labors.”

Again it was Nun Xue’s turn to speak:
“Bodhidharma was the Sixth Patriarch.²⁵ For nine years he faced a wall and endured every hardship. Weeds and grasses bent down as he approached; tigers and dragons knelt before him. Passing hither and yon on his sandals woven from weeds, he became the great Buddha, the

---

²⁴ The historical Buddha, who lived in India in the sixth century B.C.

²⁵ Actually, Bodhidharma (an elusive historical figure traditionally said to have arrived in China around 520), founder of the Chan or Meditation Sect of Buddhism (best known by its Japanese name, Zen), was the First Patriarch of Chan. The Sixth Patriarch, Huineng (638-713), became the most important teacher in the Chan (and especially Zen) tradition, and was closely associated with the Diamond Sutra, the scripture the nuns expound here. But the following anecdotes refer to Bodhidharma rather than Huineng.
compassionate Vairocana.”

“Since you have heard in detail about the Sixth Patriarch, the Transmitter-of-the-Lamp,” said Nun Wang, “may I ask if you know the story of the hermit Pang, who long ago left his family and set out to sea on an empty boat to seek the fruits of Truth?”

Nun Xue spoke:

“The hermit Pang understood well: he relinquished the merit he had earned for future lives and devoted himself to helping the poor and distressed. He spent his nights sleeping among the mules and horses. He gave up his wife and children to embark on the boat of the Law and became the protector of the Community of the Most Subtle Vehicle of the Law.”

Moon Lady was listening intently, absorbed in the sermon, when Ping’an rushed in, looking very excited. “His Excellency Song has sent a messenger and two guards bearing a number of presents,” he announced.

“Your master has gone to a banquet at Magistrate Xia’s,” Moon Lady said, flustered. “Who will take care of them?”

The company was in an uproar when Dai’an arrived carrying a parcel.

“Don’t worry, madam,” he said. “I will take their card and bring it to Father. Meanwhile I will ask Master Chen to invite the messengers in and provide them with refreshments.”

No sooner had Dai’an finished speaking than he mounted his horse and galloped away to Magistrate Xia’s residence.

“His Excellency Censor Song has sent some gifts,” Dai’an told Ximen Qing. Ximen took the card, which read: “One fresh whole pig; two jars of Jinhua wine; four reams of official stationery; one folio book.” At the bottom of the card was written, “With the compliments of your disciple, Sung Qiaonian.”

Ximen Qing quickly issued instructions: “Return home right away and tell Shutong to take one of my double-folded cards and write a response. Give it to the messenger with three taels of silver, two handkerchiefs, and a box to carry them. And remember to give five qian of silver to each of Song’s men!”

Dai’an hurried home, but could not find Shutong anywhere. In his excitement he ran in circles like an ox turning a grindstone. Nor could he find Chen Jingji. Clerk Fu had taken charge of entertaining the messengers. Dai’an went to the upper storey of the inner courtyard to fetch the silver and handkerchiefs. Since there was no one around to wrap them, he had to wrap and seal them himself on the counter, and asked Clerk Fu to write the necessary card. Turning to Ping’an, he asked where Shutong had gone.

“He was here when Master Chen was here,” Ping’an replied, “but when Master Chen left to get some money Shutong disappeared, too.”

“No need to say more,” Dai’an grimaced. “I’m sure that little rascal is roaming the streets

Vairocana, originally an alternate name for Sakyamuni, acquired a separate identity as a celestial Buddha and figured as the most important Buddha in the esoteric Tantric Sect, the tradition from which Tibetan Lamaism springs, and in other esoteric sects such as Zhenyan (Shingon in Japanese).

Pang Wen, a famous Chan monk of the ninth century.
chasing after some woman.”

Just as Dai’an launched into a tirade Chen Jingji and Shutong returned astride a pair of mules. Dai’an scolded the boy and gave him a card to compose a reply. Then they sent off the messengers who had brought the gifts from Censor Song.

“You little guttersnipe!” Dai’an snapped at Shutong. “What the hell have you been up to? Whenever Father is not around to keep an eye on you run off with someone or other to chase after girls. Father didn’t give you permission to go with Master Chen. What do you mean by going off on your own? Don’t think I won’t tell Father!”

“Tell him whatever you like,” retorted Shutong. “You don’t scare me. If you don’t dare to tell him, then I shall consider you my poppet.”

“You bastard of a guttersnipe!” Dai’an shouted. “You dare challenge me?” Dai’an raced forward and gave Shutong a sharp kick which sent him sprawling on the ground. The pair rolled about struggling with each other until Dai’an gained the upper hand. Dai’an held Shutong long enough to spit in his face. “I’m going to get Father,” he said, “but when I get back I’ll settle my score with you, you slut!”

Moon Lady had returned to the inner courtyard where she gave the two nuns some tea and refreshments before they started to chant hymns and recite the scriptures once again. Golden Lotus grew impatient. She tugged Jade Tower’s sleeve, but Jade Tower ignored her. Then she tried Vase, but not without fear of Moon Lady’s reproaches.

“I see that she wants you to go with her,” Moon Lady said to Vase. “You had better go. Since she is so impatient, what good will it do to force her to stay here any longer?”

Vase left with Golden Lotus. Casting a glance toward them, Moon Lady said, “As soon as the turnip is pulled from the ground, the earth breathes more freely! Better to let her go than to watch her hopping about like a rabbit in a cage. In any case she is not the kind of person who listens to the Law of the Buddha!”

As they passed the inner door Lotus took Vase by the hand. “The Great Lady is very fond of that kind of thing,” Lotus said. “But nobody in the household has died, and I don’t see any reason why we should have the nuns in the house reciting all their scriptures. What good does it do to sit there with them? Let’s go out and see what the Young Lady28 is doing.”

As the two women walked through the main reception hall they noticed a light in one of the side rooms. Orchid was there, arguing with her husband Chen Jingji over the disappearance of a sum of money. Lotus rapped on the window frame to get their attention.

“So, instead of listening to the nuns’ hymns, here you are quarreling,” Lotus called out. Chen Jingji came out and saw the two women standing there. “So it’s the Fifth Lady and the Sixth Lady,” he cried. “It’s a lucky thing I held my tongue. Come in and sit down.”

“What impudence!” Lotus said. “So you would curse us?” As she entered she saw Ximen’s daughter busy sewing shoes and exclaimed: “At this late hour, and with the weather so hot and sticky, too, here you are sewing shoes! What were you two fighting about?”

“Ask her,” replied Chen. “Father sent me out to obtain some silver from a client, and my wife gave me three qian to buy her a brocaded handkerchief. Once I got there I groped around in

28 Ximen Qing’s (and Moon Lady’s) daughter, Orchid.
my bag, but the money was missing, so I wasn’t able to buy it for her. When I got back she accused me of spending the money on some woman. She’s spent the whole day bickering, and went so far as to make me take an oath on my soul. Then one of the maids found the three qian while cleaning the house. My wife took the money and won’t give it to me, but she wants me to go tomorrow and buy her the handkerchief just the same. You two ladies judge which of us is in the wrong.”

“You thievish rascal!” growled Orchid. “Let’s have no more of your stories! If you weren’t chasing a woman, why did you take Shutong along? You heard Dai’an telling him off! I’m sure the two of you were out sharing a woman. And you’ve only just now returned? Where is the money you were sent to get?”

“Then you found it, the other money?” Lotus asked Orchid.
“Yes, the maid picked it up when she was sweeping. I have it here.”
“Don’t worry,” Lotus said to Chen. “I will give you some money and you can buy two handkerchiefs for me.”
“If there are some handkerchiefs to be bought outside the city gate, please buy some for me,” Vase added.
“In the Linens Lane outside the city gate,” said Chen, “there is a shop run by a Mr. Wang which sells all kinds of kerchiefs and napkins in all colors. You may have as many as you like. Just let me know what your favorite colors and patterns are, and tomorrow morning I will get them for you.”
“I would like one embroidered in gold, with kingfisher-blue stitching on an antique gold background, and a motif of a phoenix among flowers,” said Vase.
“But gold on an antique gold background doesn’t go well,” objected Chen.
“Don’t you concern yourself with my affairs,” retorted Vase. “I want another made of pink and silver muslin embroidered with the eight treasures29 on a background of ocean blue, and also one in sparkling colors with sesame flowers against a gilt background.”
“And my dear Fifth Mother, what design would you like?” Chen asked.
“I only have a little money,” Lotus replied. “I will be happy with two, one of jade-colored muslin with gold fringe and . . .”
“But you aren’t an old woman,” interrupted Chen. “Why would you choose such a pale color?”
“What business is it of yours?” Lotus said sharply. “If I can’t wear it now, it will serve when I have to wear mourning.”30
“Well, then, what shade would you like for the other?”
“I would like a Sichuan muslin, of the most delicate weave, a grape violet tint, with gold and jade at the top, and all sorts of brocade motifs, with a pattern of crossed squares, and in every

29 The “eight treasures” are auspicious symbols associated with the Buddha: the Wheel of the Law, the conch shell, the royal canopy, the banner of state, the lotus, the endless knot, the vase, and the twin fish.

30 In Chinese custom, white is the color of death, and white clothing is worn by those in mourning.
square a pair of love symbols,” said Lotus. “And a lace border fringed with pearls and stones representing the eight treasures.”

“Aiya!” cried Chen. “You are like the melon-seed peddler who sneezed when he opened his box, and scattered his seeds all over the place.”

“You wicked fellow!” Lotus said. “If I have money to buy something I like, I’ll buy whatever pleases me. It is a question of taste, and has nothing to do with you.”

Vase produced a lump of silver from her purse and held it out to Chen. “This will do for both of us,” she said.

Lotus shook her head. “I will pay for my own.”

“But Brother-in-law is going to buy them all together,” Vase said. “There’s no need to trouble yourself.”

“This piece of silver will be more than enough for all of them, the Fifth Lady’s included,” Chen said. He brought out a balance and weighed the silver: it weighed one tael and nine qian.

“With the rest,” Vase said, “please buy a pair of handkerchiefs for your wife.”

Orchid stood up and bowed to Vase.

“Since the Sixth Lady is paying,” Lotus proposed, “bring out your three qian. You and your husband can play a hand of cards: the loser must offer us a banquet. If the money doesn’t suffice, we can ask Vase for more. Father won’t be home tomorrow; we’ll take advantage of his absence to eat roast duck and drink white wine.”

“Since the Fifth Lady asks for it,” said Chen, “give it to her.”

Orchid gave the silver to Lotus, who handed it to Vase to keep. Then the cards were brought out, and Orchid and her husband played by the light of the lamp. With the help of Lotus, standing by her side, Orchid won three straight games.

All of a sudden they heard a knocking at the gate. Ximen Qing had returned.

Lotus and Vase rushed back to their chambers. Chen Jingji went to inform Ximen Qing about the debt owed by Xu Si: “He will send two-hundred-fifty taels tomorrow, and the other two-hundred-fifty by the end of the month.”

Ximen Qing muttered several curses. Half-drunk with wine, he did not go to the inner courtyard where the women were sitting, but went directly to the chamber of Golden Lotus.