THE PEARL SHIRT REENCOUNTED

From Ku-chin hsiao-shuo

TRANSLATED BY JEANNE KELLY

No honor comes with the riches of high office,
And to live past seventy is rare.
After death who remembers an empty name?
Like idle games, in the end all is vain.
Do not fritter your youth away in wanton excess,
Nor crave the quick satisfaction of women and wine.
Cast aside worries over right and wrong;
Content yourself with your lot and be satisfied.

The is'u poem, set to the tune of “The Moon over the West River,” exhorts everyone to be content with his lot, finding joy in what fate brings, and not to sap his vitality or ruin his conduct in drink, lust, riches, or anger. If happiness has to be sought, it is not true happiness; where advantage is gained, there will be loss. Of the four words, none is so dreadful as lust. The eyes are the go-between of passion; the heart is the seed of desire. In the beginning, you will be in a state of anxiety. In the end, you will lose your heart and soul. If occasionally some wayside flower should capture your fancy, no harm will come of it. If you should set your mind to scheming, going against the canons of society while seeking only a moment of pleasure for yourself with no regard for the long-cherished love between a husband and a wife—in short, if your own charming wife or favorite concubine were lured astray by the clever artifices of another, how would you feel? The old saying puts it well:

Though men's hearts may be blind,
The way of Heaven does not err.
If I do not defile the wives of other men,
They will not violate mine.

Dear audience, listen today while I tell you the tale of "The Pearl Shirt." You will see that retribution is inevitable, and this should be a good lesson for all young men.

In this story I will set forth only one person, a man by the name of Chiang Te, known also as Hsing-ko, of Tsao-yang in the prefecture of Hsiang-yang in the Hu-kuang Province. His father, Chiang Shih-tse, from youth had traveled throughout Kwangtung as a merchant. As he had lost his wife, Lo-shih, he was left with but one child, a son named Hsing-ko, who was just nine years of age. He could not bear to part with the boy, yet neither could he give up the source of his livelihood in Kwangtung. He gave much thought to the matter but in the end could find nothing for it but to take his nine-year-old son along as a companion on the journey, teaching him a few

1 Consisting of the modern provinces of Hupeh and Hunan.
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tricks of the trade. Despite his youth, the child was born with:

*Clear brows and lovely eyes,*  
*White teeth and red lips,*  
*A dignified step*  
*And clever speech,*  
*Intelligence surpassing a student’s*  
*And the ingenuity of a full grown man.*  
*Everyone called him “a little cherub,”*  
*And all admired this priceless gem.*

Fearing the envy of others, Chiang Shih-tse would never reveal that this was his own son, but wherever they went, he would say only that this was Master Lo, his wife’s nephew.  

Now it happened that the Lo family also plied their trade in the Kwangtung area. But whereas the Chiangs had been at it for only one generation, the Los had been in the trade for three. All the innkeepers and brokers of the region had known the Los for generations and treated them as part of their own families. When Chiang Shih-tse began traveling, it was in fact his father-in-law who had first started him off. Because the Los had of late been beset with a succession of unjust lawsuits against them, the family had fallen into financial straits, and for several years they had been unable to get away. Thus, at the sight of Chiang Shih-tse, there was not a one of the various innkeepers and brokers who failed to ask for news of the Los, voicing the greatest concern. When Chiang Shih-tse appeared this time with a child whom they discovered to be a relative of the Los, and who was besides so handsome and alert, they recalled their friendship extending over three and now four generations, and there was not a single one but was filled with delight.

Enough of this idle chatter. Let’s tell instead of how Chiang Hsing-ko, after making several trips with his father, proved to be so quick to learn that he soon had grasped all the various intricacies of the business. His father was of course delighted by this. Who then could have anticipated that when he was seventeen, his father would die of a sudden illness? The elder Chiang should be thankful at least that he was at home at the time and thus was spared becoming a ghost of the road. Hsing-ko wept for a spell but eventually had to dry his tears and arrange for the funeral. Besides the funeral rites, needless to say, he made offerings and had prayer services said to insure the safe passage of his father’s spirit to the next world.

During the forty-nine days of mourning, the relatives from both sides of the family all came to mourn and offer their condolences. There lived in the prefecture a Mr. Wang, who was to be the father-in-law of Hsing-ko. He also called to offer sacrifices. Naturally the Chiang family members engaged him in conversation, during which they remarked on how capable Hsing-ko had proved to be for his age. All on his own he had managed to conduct the entire funeral. One thing led to another, and finally someone suggested, “Mr. Wang, now that your daughter has also come of age, why not choose this sad occasion to complete the match? With a wife to keep him company, things will be easier for him.” Mr. Wang, however, would not consent to this, and on that same day he took his leave.

After the burial rites had been completed, a number of the relatives tried to prevail on Hsing-ko. At first, Hsing-ko, too, refused, but at their repeated urging, he began to reflect on how lonely he would be by himself, and reluctantly agreed. He asked the original matchmaker to go speak for him in the Wang household. Mr. Wang flatly refused, saying, “Our family also has to prepare a simple dowry. How can this be done at a moment’s notice? Besides, as the year of mourning is not yet completed, it would mean violating the rites. If there is to be a marriage, let’s wait until the year of mourning has passed before discussing it.” When the matchmaker brought back the reply, Hsing-ko realized he spoke quite sensibly and did not force the issue.

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Time went by like an arrow and before he knew it, the anniversary had arrived. After Hsing-ko had observed the sacrifices before his father’s memorial tablet and had taken off his coarse hemp garments of mourning, he again commissioned the matchmaker to speak to the Wangs, and finally consent was given.

After no more than a few days, the six rites were all completed and he brought his bride home. The poem [to the tune of] “The Moon over the West River” testifies to this:

White mourning curtains are exchanged for ones of red;  
Colored garments replace the hempen cloth.  
Decorated rooms are resplendent with candles blazing;  
The nuptial wine and wedding feast are all prepared.  
Why wish for an opulent dowry,  
When a wife of charm and beauty is more rare?  
Tonight the joys of the bridal bed suffice;  
Tomorrow, congratulations will be said.

The new bride was the youngest daughter of Mr. Wang, nicknamed “Third Eldest.” Since she was born on the festival date of the seventh day of the seventh month, she was also called San-ch’iao, or “Blessed Third.” The Wang’s two previously married daughters were both of unusual beauty. In Tsao-yang County, they were admired by all around and a four-line ditty was even made up about them:

Wives are easy to come by,  
But such beauties as the Wang girls you never saw.  
Better to have one as a bride  
Than to be imperial son-in-law.

As a common saying has it, “If business goes bad, it’s for a short time. If a marriage goes bad, it’s for a lifetime.” Many families of wealth and influence seek only their equal in station, or pursue an alliance with a family of great means. With never a regard for the rights and wrongs of the matter, they agree on a match. Later they find the bride they have brought home is of uncommon ugliness, and when it comes time to show her to the various relatives and family members, the parents-in-law are only in for embarrassment. Added to this, the husband himself, unhappy with his lot, will probably begin to roam about on his own. Unfortunately it is the ugly woman who knows best how to control her husband. If he is like most, he will then become querulous. If, for the sake of appearances, he gives in to her a few times, she will begin to put on airs. As none of these alternatives is particularly appealing, Chiang Shih-tse, when he heard that Mr. Wang had a knock for turning out fine daughters, had sent over lavish gifts and concluded a marriage pact between his son and the youngest daughter while the children were still very young. Today at last she was brought to her new home, and indeed she was of great charm and beauty. One could even say she was twice as beautiful as either of her older sisters. Truly:

Hsi-tzu of Wu was not so lovely.  
Nan Wei of Ch’u could not compare.  
If placed beside the Avalokiteshvara watching the moon in the water  
She would share in the bows and the homage.

Chiang Hsing-ko also had his share of looks and ability; and now that he had taken such a lovely bride, together they were like a pair of jade carvings turned out by a master craftsman, more happy and loving than ever a couple could be. After the third day, Hsing-ko changed into clothes of a lighter hue and, saying that he was in mourning, had no more to do with outside affairs. He passed his time entirely in the company of his wife in the chamber upstairs, giving himself over to pleasure from dawn until dusk. In truth, whether walking or sitting, they never left each

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2 This festival originates from the romantic legend of the Heriboy and the Weaving Maid (Altair and Vega, respectively), who are permitted to meet only once a year across the Milky Way on the seventh (ch’i) day of the seventh month. This festival is known as ch’i-ch’iao, or the Blessed-Seven Festival. The third daughter of the Wang family, born on that date, was thus San-ch’iao, “Blessed Third.”

3 A beautiful girl of the Spring and Autumn period.
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on’s side, and while they dreamed, their souls were together. It has always been the case that days of hardship are difficult to endure and happy times pass by quickly. The warmth of summer passed and cold weather came. The period of mourning had already been completed, and we need say no more about their removal of the mourning gowns and the setting up of the memorial tablet.

One day Hsing-ko began thinking about the trade in Kwangtung his father had engaged in while alive. It had been neglected now for over three years, and a number of credit slips remained there uncollected. That night he talked it over with his wife, indicating his desire to make the trip. At first she agreed that he “should go.” Later when they began talking about the distance he would have to travel, loving couple that they were, how could they bear to part? Unconscious tears began rolling down both her cheeks, and Hsing-ko, too, was loath to leave her. Both of them were sunk in gloom for a while, then abandoned the idea. This happened more than once.

Little by little time slipped away. Without their realizing it, another two years passed by. This time, Hsing-ko made up his mind to go. Keeping it secret from his wife, he packed his bags on the outside, chose a propitious day, and finally informed her five days before his departure.

“It’s often said, ‘If left to sit idle, one can even consume a mountain.’ Now that there are two of us, I must set up a business to support the family. There’s no sense in tossing away this means of making a living. The weather during the second month is not too hot or cold. If I don’t get started now, what better time can I expect?”

His wife could see he was not to be dissuaded and asked only, “When will you be returning?”

“In any case the trip must be made. Whatever happens, I’ll return in a year, even if it means next time I’ll have to stay away longer.”

Pointing to a cedar tree in front of their house, his wife said, “Next year when this tree puts forth buds, I’ll be expecting your return.” With these words, her tears began flowing like rain. Hsing-ko wiped them away for her with his sleeve, unaware that his own tears were falling. Their remorse at parting and deepened affection for each other cannot be conveyed in a few words.

On the fifth day, husband and wife, amid tears and sobs, talked the whole night through, renouncing all thought of sleep. At the fifth watch, Hsing-ko got up and packed his things. He placed in his wife’s care all the jewels and valuables left by his father, taking along only the business capital, copies of the accounts, a change of clothing, bedding, and the like, as well as a few gifts he had prepared. All was arranged and packed with care.

They had in their house two male servants. He took with him the younger one, leaving the older one at home to attend to his wife’s needs and run the daily errands. Two older women tended solely to the kitchen. In addition there were two maids, one called Bright Cloud, the other Warm Snow, who were to serve only in the upper chamber, under orders not to go too far from their mistress’s side. When all the orders had been given, he said to his wife, “Now you must pass your time patiently. The neighborhood is full of idle trash, and you’re so pretty. Don’t invite trouble by standing at the front gate to gaze about.”

His wife replied, “You needn’t worry. Go quickly now and come back soon.” The two hid their tears and bade farewell. How true it is that:

Of all the sad occasions in the world,
None matches that of parting or separation through death.

As Hsing-ko set off, he was thinking only of his wife, and he remained oblivious to all else the whole day. After a number of days he arrived in Kwangtung and put up at an inn. All his old acquaintances came over to see him. Hsing-ko handed out his gifts, and one after another they gave feasts to welcome him. This went on for the better part of a month without a pause for rest. Now Hsing-ko had quite depleted his health while
at home, and had since endured the drudgery of the road. In addition, he was subjected to a period of irregular eating and drinking. Finally, he contracted a case of malaria which kept up all summer, developing into dysentery in the autumn. Every day he had the doctor check his pulse and administer medicine to him, but it lingered on through autumn, when at last he recovered his health. In the meantime, his business had been neglected, and he could foresee that it would be impossible to return home within a year. Truly:

For only a tiny fly's head of profit
He abandoned the love nest and a happy marriage.

Though Hsing-ko missed his home, as time went on, he decided he would have to give up any idea of returning.

Let's leave the subject of Hsing-ko's travels and instead turn our attention to his wife, San-ch'iao. Ever since the day her husband gave out his instructions, she had not for several months cast a glance out the window nor moved one step from the upper chamber. Time went as swiftly as an arrow, and before she knew it, the year had drawn to a close, and every house was noisily engaged in burning pine wood in braziers, setting off firecrackers, holding feasts, and playing games. The sight of all this filled San-ch'iao with grief, and she thought of her husband. What a dismal night it was! It was exactly as described by the poet in the poem:

Winter ends, but not the melancholy.
Spring has come, but not her husband;
As the day dawns, she bewails her loneliness,
Unwilling to try on her new clothes.

The next day was New Year's Day, the first day of the first month. The two maids, Bright Cloud and Warm Snow, did all they could to persuade their mistress to go to the front room to view the scene on the street.

The Chiang's residence had two interconnected wings, front and rear. The first faced out on the street and in the second were the bedrooms. San-ch'iao normally spent all her time in the second. Today, unable to resist the urgings of the maids, she finally walked across the corridor to the front wing and had them open the windows and let down the curtain. The three of them then watched from behind the curtain. How crowded and noisy the street was that day!

"All these people coming and going," San-ch'iao remarked, "yet there's not a fortune-teller among them. If there were, it'd be nice to call him in to ask news of my husband."

"Today is New Year's Day," said Bright Cloud. "Everyone wants to relax and have fun. Who'd want to be out telling fortunes?"

"Depend on us," declared Warm Snow. "We promise within five days we'll have one in here to tell your fortune."

After breakfast on the fourth day, Warm Snow had just gone downstairs to relieve herself when she suddenly heard the sound of knocking in the street. The object producing the noise, called an "announcer," was the blind fortune-teller's trademark. Without waiting to finish her business, Warm Snow hurriedly pulled up her pants and dashed outside calling the blind man to stop. Then in the same breath she turned on her heels and ran up the stairs to inform her mistress. San-chiao ordered her to call him in to take a seat in the parlor. After his asking price had been agreed upon, San-ch'iao went down to hear his pronouncements. As the blind man picked a lot, he asked what it was for. At that moment, the kitchen maids, having heard the commotion, came running in, and speaking for their mistress said, "This diagram is to ask about the traveler."

"The wife is asking about her husband, then?" asked the blind man.

"That's right," replied the old woman.

"When the green dragon rules the world," declared the fortune-teller, "the sign of wealth is set in motion. If the wife is asking about her husband, the traveler is halfway home. With him he
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has gold and silks filling a thousand chests, and there is no sign of a storm in his path. The green dragon belongs to the wood element, and wood thrives in the spring. Around the time of the beginning of spring he started off. By the end of this month or the beginning of the next, he is sure to return home, laden with riches besides."

San-ch'iao instructed the male servant to give him three pennies and send him off. Beside herself with joy, she went up to her room. It was a true case of "thirst allayed by the sight of plums" and "hunger satisfied with a picture of cakes."

Most people, as long as they don't cherish high hopes, will remain untroubled. Once they get their hopes stirred, then all sorts of foolish wishes and silly ideas start coming to them, making the time drag by. Merely because she put stock in the words of the fortune-teller, San-ch'iao now thought of nothing but her husband's return, and from this time on often went to the front of the house, where she sat gazing up and down the street from behind the curtain.

This went on right up until the beginning of the second month, when the cedar trees began to put forth their buds, and still there was no sign of her husband. Remembering his promise at departure, she grew more and more anxious. Several times a day she would peer outside. And then it happened that she met her handsome young man. Truly:

*If there is a bond between them, the two will meet across a thousand li. Without a bond, they will not meet though face to face.*

And who was this handsome young man? As it turned out, he was not a native of the area, but came from Hsin-an in Hui-chou, a man by the name of Ch'en Shang, also called "Big Happy Brother," which was later changed to Ta-lang, "Big Boy." He had just turned twenty-four and was a fine-looking fellow. Though he would not have surpassed Sung Yu or Pan An in looks, neither would he have ranked beneath them.

This young man, who had lost both parents, got together a sum of two or three thousand taels in cash and began making trips to Hsiang-yang to buy rice, beans, and such, usually going once a year. His quarters were outside the city, but on this particular day, he had happened to enter the city to check at Pawnbroker Wang's shop on the Great Market Street for letters from home. The pawnshop was right across from the Chiang's, and so he came to pass by. You ask how he was dressed? On his head was a Soochow-style palm-leaf hat, and he wore a robe of Hu-chou silk, white as a fish's belly, which happened to be just like the one Hsing-ko usually wore. Catching sight of him from a distance, San-ch'iao thought that he was her husband returning, and she lifted the curtain and fixed her gaze on him. When Ch'en Ta-lang raised his head to find a beautiful young woman in an upper story staring at him unblinkingly, he assumed that she had taken a fancy to him, and he, too, threw a glance in her direction. Who could have known there would be this misunderstanding on both sides? When San-ch'iao realized that it was not her husband, both cheeks turned bright red with shame, and hastily pulling the window shut, she ran into the back room where she sat down on the edge of the bed. However, her heart would not stop pounding wildly.

Meanwhile, Ch'en Ta-lang's soul had already been snatched away by the woman's gaze. When he reached his quarters, he still could not get her off his mind. He said to himself, "Though my wife at home is rather pretty in her own way, how could she ever compare with this woman? I must get a message to her somehow, but I've no way to get in. If I could just spend a night with her, even though it cost me my entire capital, this life would not have been lived in vain." He began to sigh, then suddenly remembered that in the East Alley of the Great Market Street, there was a pearl seller named Granny Hsüeh with whom he had
done business before. This old woman had a clever tongue, and besides she was out day after day traveling through the streets and alleys. Was there a family she did not know? He would have to talk over the matter with her. Surely she would have some suggestion to make.

Tossing and turning, he finally got through a restless night. The next day he was up bright and early, and saying that he had business to attend to, called for some cold water so he could wash and comb his hair. Taking along one hundred taels' worth of silver and two ingots of gold, he hurried into the city. As the saying goes:

*If you're after enjoyment in life, You have to put in an all-out effort.*

When Ch'en Ta-lang entered the city, he made straight for the East Alley and there knocked on the gate of Granny Hsüeh's. She was in her yard selecting her pearls, her hair in disarray. When she heard the knocking, she gathered up the bundle of pearls, asking at the same time, "Who is it?" When she heard the three words, "Ch'en of Hui-chou," she hurried to open the gate and invite him in, saying, "I haven't washed yet, so I won't try to stand on ceremony with you. What honorable business brings you here at such an early hour?"

"I made a special point of coming early, for I was afraid I'd miss you if I came later," replied Ch'en Ta-lang.

"You want to buy some pearls or trinkets from me?"

"I do want some pearls, but there's a bigger business that you'd be interested in."

"Anything out of my line, I'm not used to handling."

"Is it safe to talk here?"

Granny Hsüeh shut the gate and invited him in to take a seat in her small room; then she asked him, "Now what's on your mind?"

Seeing that no one was around, Ta-lang fished in his sleeve for the silver and opened his cloth bundle, spreading its contents out on the table, as he said, "Only after you've accepted these one hundred taels will I resume to speak."

Not knowing what was afoot, the old woman could not be induced to take them. Ta-lang said, "Is it too little for you?" Hurriedly he took out two ingots of shining gold which he also placed on the table, saying, "Please take these ten taels of gold. If you refuse again, I'll take that to mean you're intentionally turning down my request. Today I'm the one who has come seeking your help and not the other way around. This is a matter I can't do without your help; that's why I've come to you especially. If you should try but fail, the gold and silver will still be yours to keep. I certainly won't come back to ask for it, nor will I hold any grudges against you. I'm not such a petty sort!"

Tell me, dear audience, has there ever been a procurress without greed for money? How could the sight of those gold and white pieces fail to stir her desire? At this moment, her face was all smiles, and she said, "Now you mustn't get me wrong, sir. Never in my life have I asked for a cent of any money which I don't deserve. Today I'll accept whatever your assignment is and put this aside for the time being. If it turns out I can't be of service, I'll return the money to you." As she finished speaking, she put the gold ingots in with the bundle of silver pieces and wrapped them up together, saying, "I'm being much too bold." She went to stash it away in her bedroom, then hurried back and said, "I'll not presume, sir, to express my thanks yet. You must tell me what do you want me to do."

"I'm searching desperately for a certain life-saving jewel," said Ch'en. "It's to be found only in the house of a certain family in the Great Market Street. Go and borrow it for me please."

The old woman broke into laughter and exclaimed, "You're just up to mischief! I've been living in this alley for more than twenty years now, yet I've never heard of any life-saving jewel in the
Great Market Street. Please tell me, sir, who owns this jewel?"

"Who lives in that big house across from the pawnshop of Wang from my country?"

The old woman thought for a moment, then replied, "That's the house of Chiang Hsing-ko of this region. Chiang has been away traveling for over a year, now. Only his wife is at home."

"His wife is the very one I must borrow this life-giving jewel from," he said, and with this he pulled his chair up closer to the old woman and told her just what was on his mind. When the old woman had heard him through, she hurriedly shook her head and exclaimed, "Now, that's quite a difficult matter! The girl has been married to Chiang Hsing-ko for less than four years, and the couple are like fish and water. They're never so much as an inch apart. Now that he's had to go away, the young mistress has never left the upper story, so chaste is she. Hsing-ko has some peculiar ways and is quickly angered over trifles, so I've never once gone near their door. I've no idea what the young lady even looks like, so how could I possibly agree to take on such a task? Your gift has proved too high a blessing for me to enjoy."

At these words Ch'en Ta-lang fell to his knees. When the old woman tried to pull him up, his hands gripping her sleeves held her down firmly in her chair so she could not budge. "My very life is in your hands," he implored. "You just have to come up with some clever plan, so that I can take her and save this wretched life of mine. If this is successful, there'll be another hundred taels for you. If you refuse, then I may as well end my life this very moment."

The old woman was too startled to know what to do, and she said, "All right, all right! You're overwhelming me with all this. Now, please get up. There is something I have to say."

Ch'en at last rose and, holding his hands together in a respectful salute, said, "Whatever clever plan you have, please tell me at once."

"This will take time," Granny Hsiüeh replied.

"If you want it to work out, you can't figure in terms of months or years. If a time limit is set, then I won't be able to accept the assignment."

"If indeed it can work out, then what difference will a few days make? Only, how do you plan to go about it?"

"After breakfast tomorrow, be sure to meet me at Wang's pawnshop. Don't be late. Bring a little extra cash along with you, saying only that you're doing business with me. Now, there's a reason for all this. If I can get these feet of mine past the Chiang's threshold, you're in luck. You must then hurry back to your lodgings. Don't loiter around the front door. Should you be recognized, everything will be ruined. If I make any headway, I'll come myself to report to you."

"I'll do everything you say," Ch'en said. And with a deep bow, he happily opened the door and departed. Truly:

**Before the defeat of Hsiang Yü and before the crowning of Liu Pang.**

**Altars have already been set in honor of the generals.**

Nothing else worth mentioning happened that day. The next day Ch'en put on a fine suit of clothes, took out a few hundred taels in cash, which he placed in a large leather box, and ordered a young servant to carry the box along behind him to the Wang's pawnshop in the Great Market Street. Noticing that the windows of the house opposite were tightly closed, he guessed that the mistress was not in. Then, greeting the pawnshop keeper, he asked for a wooden stool and sat down in front of the door, gazing off toward the east. Presently Granny Hsiüeh came in sight, clutching a wicker case in her arms. Ch'en stopped her and asked, "What's in the case?"

"Pearls and jewelry," she answered. "Would you be interested, sir?"

"Just what I'm after."

The old woman entered the pawnshop and, seeing the shopkeeper, apologized for her intrusion and then opened the case. Inside were ten or
more bundles of pearls as well as some smaller boxes, all filled with novel varieties of flower clusters speckled with blue, ingeniously designed to give delight, bright and dazzling. Ch'en selected a few strings of thick white pearls along with various hairpins and earrings, and placing them all in one pile, said, "I'll take all of these."

The old woman gave him a look and said, "Please take what you want; but I'm afraid the price may be more than you're willing to pay."

Ch'en had already gotten the message, and opening the leather box, he began stacking up the glittering white pieces of silver, shouting, "With all this silver, you think I can't afford those things of yours?!

By this time, quite a few neighborhood loafers had strolled over and stood watching in front of the pawnshop.

"I was merely joking," the old woman said. "How could I presume to take you lightly, sir? You must be careful with your silver. Please put it away. I'm asking only to be paid a fair price."

The two of them bickered back and forth, the one demanding a high price, the other countering with a smaller sum, as far apart from each other as heaven and earth. The one setting the price would not waver from her original demand. In the meantime, Ch'én Ta-lang, holding on to the things and refusing either to put them down or raise his offer, deliberately stepped out of the shop. He turned the pieces over one by one to get a good look at them, remarking on which was genuine and which was fake, appraising their value as they sparkled in the sunlight. This eventually drew the entire market crowd over to watch, and there were continuous shouts of appreciation.

"Buy them if you're going to," the old woman burst out. "If not, then leave them. What's the point in just wasting someone's time like this?"

"Who's not buying?" retorted Ch'en, and the two went off on another round of haggling over the price. Truly:

A mere dispute over the price,
And the lady upstairs was aroused.

Hearing all the commotion going on opposite her door, San-ch'iao was drawn in spite of herself to the front room, where she pushed open the window and peeked out. All that caught her eye was the sparkling of pearls and the brilliance of gleaming gems—a lovely sight. When she noticed the old woman and the stranger wrangling interminably over the price she instructed her maid to go summon the old woman over so she could have a look at her things. Bright Cloud crossed the street as instructed and gave Granny Hsüeh's sleeve a tug, saying, "My mistress would like to see you."

"Which family is that?" the old woman asked deliberately.

"The Chiangs across the street," replied Bright Cloud. At this the old woman swept up the pearls and other items in one deft motion and hurriedly wrapped them up, saying, "I've no time to carry on this nonsense with you!"

"All right then, I'll raise my offer a little," Ch'en said.

"I'm not selling. For that kind of price, I could have sold them long ago." As she spoke, she placed them into the case and locked it up again. Taking it in her arms, she started off.

"I'll carry it for you, old lady," Bright Cloud offered.

"No need," replied Granny Hsüeh, and without a backward glance, she strode straight across to the house opposite. Secretly rejoicing, Ch'en gathered up his silver pieces and, saying good-bye to the pawnshop keeper, returned to his lodgings. Indeed:

His eyes gazed after the victory flag;
His ears listened to the glad tidings.

Bright Cloud led Granny Hsüeh up the stairs, where she met San-ch'iao. When the old woman caught sight of the young wife, she thought to herself, "Truly a heavenly creature! No wonder
Ch’en has lost his head over her. If I were a man, I’d be in a tizzy myself.” She then said, “I’ve often heard of your virtue and intelligence and have only regretted never getting a chance to make your acquaintance.”

“What is your honorable name, old lady?” asked San-ch’iao.

“My name is Hsüeh. I live over in the East Alley, so I’m a neighbor of yours.”

“Why wouldn’t you sell those things of yours just now?”

Laughing, the old lady said, “If they weren’t for sale, I wouldn’t have taken them out. But what a fool that stranger turned out to be, despite his fine appearance! He can’t recognize a thing of worth!” At this she proceeded to open her case and take out a few hairpins and earrings which she handed to the woman for inspection, exclaiming, “Mam, can you imagine what it cost just to make such pieces? Why, the prices he offered are ridiculous! How could I ever account for the loss to my employer?” And she held up some pearl pendants, saying, “Top-notch goods like these. He must be dreaming!”

San-ch’iao inquired what the asking price and the price offered had been, and then said, “That was really putting you out some.”

“Well, after all, you’re from a good family,” said the old woman, “and have a wide experience with such things. Your eye is ten times sharper than a man’s.”

San-ch’iao instructed the maid to serve tea, but the old woman put in, “Don’t bother with tea. I’ve an important matter to attend to over in the West Street. Too much of my time was wasted dealing with that man. The saying is certainly true that ‘When a deal falls through, it holds up the work.’ Would you mind if I left this case along with the key in your care? I’m going off for the time being but will return shortly.” So saying, she left. San-ch’iao ordered her maid to see her down the stairs. She left the house and struck off toward the west.

San-ch’iao had fallen in love with the pieces and waited eagerly for the old woman’s return so she could bargain with her. The woman did not appear for the next five days. On the afternoon of the sixth day, there was a sudden heavy downpour. Before the sound of the rain had died out, there was a knocking at the door. San-ch’iao ordered the maid to open it to see who was there, and in came Granny Hsüeh, her clothes half soaked and with a tattered umbrella in her hand. She recited, “Don’t leave under clear skies, but wait instead for the rain to start.” She set the umbrella at the bottom of the stairs and went up. Offering her blessings, she said, “Madam, the other day I broke my promise to you.”

San-ch’iao hastened to return her greeting and asked her, “Where have you been these past few days?”

“My daughter has just been blessed with a son, so I went to look and stayed a few days. I just returned this morning. On my way back the rain started, so I stopped at the house of an acquaintance to borrow an umbrella, a tattered one at that. What luck!”

“How many sons and daughters do you have, old lady?”

“Only one son, who’s already married. But I’ve four daughters. This is my fourth. She was made the concubine of Mr. Chu of Hui-chou. He runs a salt shop just outside the North Gate here.”

“You have many daughters, so you don’t consider them worth bothering about. But this place has no lack of suitable husbands; how could you bear to marry her off to an outsider as a concubine?”

“You don’t understand. This man, though he comes from other regions, is a very kind person. Though my daughter is a concubine, the first wife remains at home and it’s my daughter who stays at the shop, where she has servants and maids to serve her. Every time I go there, he treats me with the respect due an elder, and is never in the least neglectful. Now that she’s given him a son, it’s even better.”
"Then it's a real blessing for you that you found her such a good match," said San-ch'iao. As she finished speaking, Warm Cloud brought in some tea.

"On a rainy day like this I've nothing to attend to," said the old woman. "May I be so bold as to ask to look at your jewelry? I might come across some interesting designs which would be good to keep in mind for the future."

"They're all just ordinary ones. You must promise not to laugh." So saying, San-ch'iao took out a key, opened up a chest, and one after another removed a large number of hairpins, filigree, tassels, and the like.

At sight of them, Granny Hsüeh could not find words enough to praise their beauty. "When you have such rare treasures as these, you must surely find those few things of mine unworthy of your notice."

"That's very kind of you to say. How much do you really want for those things of yours?"

"You're a good judge of value, madam. What need is there for me to waste my breath?"

San-ch'iao picked up her own pieces, then brought out Granny Hsüeh's wicker case, set it on the table, and handed the old woman the key, saying, "Please open it, old lady, and check your own things."

"There's really no need to."

Granny Hsüeh then opened the case and removed the items one by one for San-ch'iao's inspection and assessment. The prices San-ch'iao offered proved to be quite near the mark. The old woman made no effort to argue with her, but cried joyfully, "This way, no one will lose out. Even if I make a few strings less, it'll be a pleasure."

"There's just one thing. At present I've no way to get all the cash needed. The best I can do is offer you half now, then settle with you in full when my husband returns. He'll be back any day now."

"A few days will make no difference," the old woman replied. "But as I've given in considerably on the price, the silver must be of the finest grade."

"That'll be no problem," San-ch'iao said. She picked up the few ornaments and pearls she liked best, then ordered Bright Cloud to bring out some wine and drank with the old woman.

"How can I let you go to so much trouble?" said the old woman.

"I've plenty of time on my hands," said San-ch'iao, "and it's so seldom that I have a chance to enjoy your company. If you don't mind the little I have to offer, I hope you will often come to visit."

"Thank you, madam, for your kindness to one so undeserving. My house is so unbearably noisy, while here it is quiet."

"What business is your son in?" San-ch'iao asked.

"Oh, he handles the gem dealers. They're in every day clamoring for wine and soup. The racket they make is more than one can stand. Luckily for me, I'm out making the rounds of all the houses, so I need spend little of my time at home. Otherwise, if I had to stay cooped up in six feet of space, I'm afraid I'd go out of my mind."

"Our house is quite close to yours. Whenever it gets too much for you, then just come on over for a chat."

"I'm just afraid that I might outstay my welcome."

"Not at all," San-ch'iao assured her.

In the meantime the two maids in turn had been busily moving back and forth, and had laid out two sets of bowls and chopsticks, two plates each of smoked chicken, smoked pork, and fresh fish, along with bowls of fruit and plates of vegetables, sixteen dishes altogether.

"What a feast!" exclaimed the old woman.

"These are the only things we have on hand. Please don't blame me for my lack of hospitality."

So saying, San-ch'iao poured some wine and passed it to Hsüeh, who took the cup and toasted her health. Then they sat down across the table.
and began drinking. Now it happened that San-ch'iao's capacity for wine was considerable, while the old woman was something of a wine jug herself, and as they began to drink, they became more and more congenial, regretting only that they had not met earlier. That day they continued eating until evening came and the rain finally let up. The old woman expressed her thanks and prepared to return home. San-ch'iao brought out a large silver goblet and urged Hsüeh to have another few rounds. She then had supper with her and said, "Stay a while longer, old lady. I'll get the first half of the money for you."

"It's getting late," the old woman said, "Please relax and don't worry about it tonight. I'll come and get it tomorrow. I won't take along this wicker case, either. That'll save me from having to lug it over the muddy roads."

"Then tomorrow I'll be expecting you," San-ch'iao said.

The old woman said good-bye and went downstairs, picked up her tattered umbrella, and left the house. Truly:

Nothing like the tongues of these cunning old hags
To cause much upset in other peoples' lives.

During all this time Ch'en Ta-lang waited listlessly in his lodgings, not having heard a word from the old woman. At the sight of the rain that day, he guessed that she would be at home and made his way through the wet and mud into the city to see if there was any news, only to find she was not at home. At a tavern he had three cups of wine with something to eat, and then went to Granny Hsüeh's place to inquire again; but still she had not returned. Noticing how late it was getting, he was on the point of turning back when he caught sight of the old woman, her face beaming, staggering and reeling into the alley.

Ch'en approached her, and bowing, he asked, "How are things coming along?"

The old lady said with a wave of her hand, "It's still too early. The seeds are just now being sown. No sprouts are up yet. It'll be another five or six years before the blossoms open and the fruit is ready for you to taste. So you needn't come nosing about here. I'm not the type to gossip."

Seeing how drunk she was, Ch'en Ta-lang had no choice but to turn around and go back.

The following day the old woman brought some fresh fruit, as well as chicken, fish, pork, and the like, which she ordered the cook to prepare and pack into two boxes. She then bought a jug of fine wine and, asking her neighbor boy, Hsiao-erh, to carry it for her, arrived at the front gate of the Chiangs'.

Seeing no sign of Granny Hsüeh yet that day, San-ch'iao had just ordered Bright Cloud to go out and look up and down the street for her; so she chanced to see the old woman as she approached. The old woman bade Hsiao-erh set down the boxes downstairs and then sent him off. Bright Cloud meanwhile had already announced her arrival to her mistress, who received her as an honored guest, going out to the top of the stairs to meet her. The old woman was full of thanks and greeted her by saying, "I happened to have some wine, so I brought it along for your enjoyment."

"You really shouldn't have spent so much money," San-ch'iao said. "Why should I deserve all this?"

The old woman asked the two maids to carry the things upstairs and lay them on the table.

"Old lady, you're much too extravagant, making such a display as this!" San-ch'iao said.

The old woman replied with a laugh, "I'm afraid our poor house cannot prepare anything good. Please take it merely as an offer of a cup of tea."

Bright Cloud then went to fetch bowls and chopsticks and Warm Snow got the brazier going. In a moment the wine was warmed and the old woman said, "Today is my little treat. Now you must take the guest's seat."

"Though you've gone to much trouble on my
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account, how can you expect me to accept the seat of guest in my own house?” protested San-ch’iao. Each continued to yield the seat politely to the other for some time until finally Granny Hsüeh was obliged to sit in the guest’s position.

As this was their third meeting, they felt on even closer terms than before. In the midst of drinking, the old woman said, “Your husband has been away for a long time now and still hasn’t returned. How could he abandon you like that?”

“Indeed, you’re right. He said he’d be back in a year. I can’t imagine what could be keeping him.”

“If you ask me,” said the old woman, “when one has put aside a rare gem like you, even if he found himself piles of gold and heaps of jade, they would not be anywhere near as precious.”

She went on, “For most of those accustomed to being constantly on the road, the inn is their home and their home an inn. Take my fourth daughter’s husband, Mr. Chu, for example. Now that he’s got himself a concubine, he’s stayed happy morning and night. How’s he ever going to miss home? Perhaps in a span of three or four years, he’ll return once, and then before one or two months are up, he’s off again. His wife at home is left in charge of his neglected children and lives like a widow. How would she know what he’s up to on the outside?”

“Oh, but my husband’s not like that.”

“This is all just idle chatter, of course. How could one possibly compare heaven and earth?”

The two spent the day guessing riddles, rolling dice, and getting themselves pleasantly intoxicated before they said their good-byes.

On the third day Granny Hsüeh came with Hsiao-erh to get the dishes and at the same time picked up the first half of the promised sum. San-ch’iao had her stay once more for a snack.

From then on, using the half-unpaid sum as a pretext for asking news of Hsing-ko, she often came to visit. The old woman had a gift for chatter, and besides was given to cracking jokes and carrying on like a crazy fool with the maids, so that she had endeared herself to servants and mistress alike. If a day went by without her appearing, San-ch’iao would feel lonely, and so had her old servant find out where she lived. Then she would invite her over at all hours, so that they became more and more intimate.

There are in the world four kinds of people whom one should never get involved with. Once they become familiar with you, there’s no stopping them. Who are they? Wandering priests, beggars, vagrants, and procuresses. The first three are bad enough, but the procuress is even more dreadful, if only because she will worm her way into one’s home. When the women of the household grow weary of the monotony, they will go round her up. Granny Hsüeh was a bad sort to begin with, full of honeyed words and gentle phrases, and now she had become the bosom friend of San-ch’iao, who could not do without her for a minute. How true that:

Painting a tiger’s skin is easy, but not so the bones. A man’s face one can know, but not his heart.

To Ch’en Ta-lang’s repeated inquiries, Granny Hsüeh replied only that it was still too early. It was now the middle of the fifth month, and the weather was steadily becoming hotter. The old woman chanced to mention to San-ch’iao how cramped she was in her snail-sized quarters, which a western exposure made particularly unsuitable for summer weather. They could not be compared with the spacious airiness of the upper story of San-ch’iao’s house.

“Why not spend your nights here if you can leave your family in the evening?” said San-ch’iao.

“That would be very nice indeed. I’m only afraid that your husband might come back.”

“When he does return, it probably won’t be in the middle of the night!”

“Well, if you don’t mind the trouble—I’m really being very forward now—how about my moving my bedding over and keeping you company tonight?”
“Oh, we have plenty of bedding,” said San-ch’iao. “You needn’t bring your own. Why not go back and let your family know, then spend the rest of the summer over here?”

The old woman did, indeed, tell her son and daughter-in-law of her intentions, and then came back carrying only a box of toilet articles. San-ch’iao remonstrated with her. “You’ve gone to unnecessary trouble. Surely you don’t think we’ve no combs here? Why have you brought this?”

“One thing I’ve always hated is sharing a washbasin and comb. I’m sure you have a set of the finest combs, but how could I ever dare use such things? And the same goes for those belonging to the maids. It’s better I bring my own. But now you must tell me which room I should sleep in.”

San-ch’iao indicated a tiny wicker couch in front of her own bed and said, “I’ve already arranged a place for you to sleep. We’ll be close together so that we can chat during the night if we have trouble sleeping.” She pulled out a green gauze curtain, which she asked the old woman herself to hang up. They then had a drink of wine together before finally settling down to sleep.

Normally the two maids laid out their bedding in front of the bed to keep the mistress company, but now that the old woman was there, they were sent off to sleep in the next room.

From this time on, the old woman would go about the streets doing her trading by day and after nightfall return to the Chiang’s to sleep. Often she brought a jug of wine along to provide a little merriment.

The couch and the bed were arranged in the shape of the letter T; and though the women were separated by a curtain, it was as though they were sleeping in the same bed. During the night they would chatter endlessly, leaving out none of the lewd talk that was heard on the streets. The old woman, at times feigning intoxication or madness, would go into the details of her own youthful affairs in order to stir up the young wife’s longings, getting her roused to such a point that her tender cheeks alternately flushed and paled, paled and flushed. The old lady was well aware that the young woman’s feelings were aroused but that she could not bring herself to voice her thoughts.

Time sped by, and soon it was the seventh day of the seventh month, San-ch’iao’s birthday. Early in the morning the old woman prepared two boxes of birthday gifts for her. San-ch’iao thanked her and tried to make her stay for a bowl of noodles, but the old woman said, “I have some pressing business to attend to today, but in the evening I’ll come keep you company and we can watch the Herdboy pay his visit to the Weaving Maid.” She then departed.

She had gone no more than a few steps from the door when she ran into Ch’en Ta-lang. Not wanting to hold a conversation there in the street, they retreated to a quiet, secluded alley. Contracting his brows, Ch’en complained to the old woman, “What a dawdler you are! Spring went and summer came and now here it is the beginning of autumn. Today you say it’s too early and tomorrow you’ll be saying it’s too early again. You don’t seem to understand that a day is like a year for me. If we put this off any longer, her husband will be back, and the whole thing will be thrown to the winds. That will be nothing less than murdering me! When I get down to the court of hell, you can be sure I’ll see that you pay for it with your life!”

“Don’t get so excited and so impatient,” the old woman said. “You’re here just at the right time, for I was about to go looking for you. Now the success or failure of our plan all depends on what happens tonight, but you must do everything just as I say.” And she told him that thus and so was to be done, in such and such a manner. “Everything must be kept very quiet. Don’t give me trouble.”

Ch’en nodded and exclaimed, “A marvelous plan! When it has succeeded, I’ll certainly reward

5 For Herdboy and Weaving Maid, see footnote 2.
you handsomely.” With this he went off in high spirits. Truly:

_He marshals his forces to seize the jade,
Exhausting his energies on the fulfillment of his desires._

Granny Hsieh had set that evening to bring the matter to a successful conclusion. In the afternoon a fine rain had fallen and the sky had become overcast. By evening neither moon nor stars were visible. The old woman led Ch'en through the darkness and concealed him off to the left while she went to knock on the door. Bright Cloud opened the door and came out with a lighted paper lantern. Intentionally, the old woman grooped in her sleeve, saying “I've dropped a Lin-ch'ing handkerchief. Could you please help me find it?” Taken in by this, Bright Cloud shone the lantern down on the pavement. The old woman seized this opportunity to motion Ch'en over and whisked him through the door, leading him to an empty space underneath the stairs where he could hide. She then cried out, “I've got it. You needn't look anymore.”

“Just in time, too,” Bright Cloud said, “for the fire's gone out. I'll go light another one to show you in.”

“Oh, I can find my way by now. No need for a light.” In the darkness they closed the door and groped their way up the stairs.

“What did you drop?” San-ch'iao asked.

Granny Hsieh pulled a small handkerchief from her sleeve and said, “This is the culprit. It's not worth anything, but it was given to me by a customer from Peking. Don't they say, 'a meager gift but a generous wish'?”

“I'll bet it's a keepsake from a lover,” San-ch'iao said teasingly.

“That's about right,” the old woman said with a chuckle.

That night they drank and made merry.

“There's more than enough wine and food,” the old woman remarked. “Why not offer some to the maids and servants in the kitchen and tell them to really enjoy themselves as on a festival night?”

San-ch'iao went ahead and put aside four dishes of food and two jugs of wine, which she told the maids to take downstairs. The two serving women and the male servant ate and drank for a while and then went off to bed. But of this we need speak no more.

To continue, the old woman in the course of her drinking asked, “Why hasn't your husband returned yet?”

“It's been a year and a half now all together,” said San-ch'iao.

“Even the Herdboy and the Weaving Maid meet once a year. But you've been apart now for half a year longer than they. As the saying goes, 'Once the man is on the road, you don't have any more control.' A traveler never lacks opportunities for romance. The only one who has it hard is the wife at home.”

San-ch'iao sighed and lowered her head, making no response.

“But I'm just full of prattle,” the old woman said. “Tonight is a celebration for the Herdboy and the Maid. One should drink and be merry instead of making unpleasant remarks.” With that she poured out some wine and urged the lady to drink.

Well in her cups at this point, the old woman pressed more wine on the two maids, saying, “This is the nuptial wine of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maid. You must drink some more, and one day you will marry loving husbands who'll never leave your side.” Unable to resist her urgings, the two maids forced it down, and as neither were good drinkers, they began to stagger and reel about. San-ch'iao ordered them to shut the staircase door and go on to bed while the two of them continued drinking by themselves.

As the old woman drank she babbled on, “Madam, how old were you when you got married?”

“Seventeen,” replied San-ch'iao.
"My, you were late in having your first experience. You weren't taken advantage of. I was thirteen when I first experienced it."

"You were married that early?"

"Well, now, as for getting married, that was at the age of eighteen. You see, I was learning needlework at the house next door, and the young master began flirting with me. Smitten by his good looks, I gave in to him. At first it was quite painful, but then after two or three times I came to enjoy it. Was it that way with you, too?"

San-ch'iao only giggled in reply. "It's better never to have had a taste of what it's like," the old woman went on. "Once you've experienced it, you can't give it up. Sometimes you get such an itch deep down inside. It's not too bad during the day, but oh, is it ever hard to bear at night!"

"You must have known quite a few men while you were still at home. How did you ever pass as a virgin when you got married?"

"My mother had a notion of what was going on and was afraid it would lead to disgrace, so she gave me a prescription for restoring virginity, an infusion of guava peel and alum. Washing with this will tighten things up. I just made a big fuss about how painful it was and that way it was kept secret."

"As a girl, you must have had to sleep alone at night."

"I still remember when I was at home and my older brother was away, I used to sleep with my sister-in-law in the same bed. We took turns playing the man's part."

"What's the good of two girls sleeping together?"

The old woman walked over and sat down close beside San-ch'iao. "You may not realize it," she said, "but as long as the two of you have a good understanding, it can be enjoyable for both and give you some release, too."

San-ch'iao gave the old woman's shoulder a shove. "Oh, I don't believe it. You're telling lies."

The old woman could see her desires had been stirred and purposely tried to rouse her. She continued, "I'm fifty-two this year, and often during the night the old itch comes over me, and I can't bear it. Lucky for you you're able to manage so well despite your youth!"

"If you can't bear it, why not get yourself a man?"

"This withered old flower? Who'd want me now? I may as well tell you, I've my own means of getting satisfaction, an emergency measure."

"Oh, you're lying. What sort of way could that be?"

"Just wait until we're in bed," the old woman said, "and I'll tell you all the details." She had just finished saying this when a moth began hovering over the lamp. She raised her fan and struck at it, deliberately smashing the lamp with her fan. "Oh, dear!" she cried. "I'll go light another one." Then she went over and opened the staircase door. Ch'en Ta-lang had already made his way up the stairs, and had been lying in wait behind the door for some time. All this was in accord with the old woman's prearranged scheme. She then declared, "Oh, I forgot to bring a light for the lamp," and turning around, led Ch'en Ta-lang to her own couch, where she concealed him. The old woman went downstairs for awhile, then came back up and announced, "It's quite dark outside, and all the lights in the kitchen have gone out. What should we do?"

"I'm used to sleeping with a light on," said San-ch'iao. "I get really terrified in pitch darkness."

"How about if I sleep with you to keep you company?"

San-ch'iao, who had wanted to ask her about her "emergency measure," replied, "Splendid."

"Madam, you go on and get in bed. I'll be there as soon as I shut the door."

San-ch'iao undressed first, then got into bed and called, "Hurry to bed, granny."

"I'm coming," replied the old woman. But instead she dragged Ch'en up from her couch and pushed him stark naked into San-ch'iao's bed. San-ch'iao touched his body and remarked, "My,
your skin is smooth for your age." The other made no reply but wriggled down under the covers, then putting his arms around her, he kissed her. Still thinking it was the old woman, she embraced him. All at once he rose up on top of her and began. Now, for one thing, the young woman had had a little too much to drink, which had left her in a haze, and for another, her longings had been stirred up by the old woman. At this point she had no time to demand explanations, but let him have his way with her.

One, a young woman languishing lovesick in her chamber, The other, a handsome young man, away from home and craving romance.

One had endured for so long— Like Wen-ch'un at her first glimpse of Hsiang-ju. The other, waiting long in anticipation— Like Pi-cheng finally meeting with the Ch'en girl.°

Clearly a long drought brought to an end by a sweet rain, A joy to exceed meeting an old friend away from home.

Ch'en Ta-lang was a man familiar with the world of sensual pleasures, and he explored all its mysteries and savored its every delight, setting the girl's soul adrift from her body. It was not until the rain had stopped and the clouds dispersed that San-ch'iao at long last asked, "Who are you?"

Ch'en Ta-lang then recounted to her in detail how he had yearned for her, and how he had implored Granny Hsieh to devise a plan. Now here at last he had fulfilled his lifelong wish and could die without regret.

The old woman came up to the edge of the bed and said, "It's not that I was overbold, but that first of all, I pitied the young lady spending her nights alone in the springtime of her youth, and second, I wanted to save the life of Mr. Ch'en. You two were destined for union. It had nothing to do with me."

"Now that things have come to this," said San-ch'iao, "if by chance my husband should find out, what should I do?"

° Another well-known pair of lovers: Pan Pi-cheng and Ch'en Chi-ao-lien.

"Only you and I know of this," said Granny Hsieh. "We have only to buy the silence of the two maids, Bright Cloud and Warm Snow, and then who else could let it out? Leave it to me to see that your nights are merry, and there will be no problem. But later on you mustn't forget all I've done for you."

At this point, San-ch'iao ceased to consider the matter any further, and the two continued their wild delights until the fifth watch had died away and the sky had begun to brighten, and even then they were loath to part. The old woman urged Ch'en up and sent him off.

From then on, not a night passed that they did not spend together. Sometimes the old woman came with him; sometimes the young man came alone. As for the two maids, the old woman cajoled them with sweet words, frightened them with threats, and had their mistress reward them with gifts of clothing. When Ch'en came he would often give them some money to buy things. Thus kept in a state of contentment, they became a party to the undertaking. Upon his arrival at night and departure at dawn, at each coming and going, the two maids were always there to usher him in or send him off with never a hindrance. Ch'en and San-ch'iao were truly a loving couple, joined as though by glue, and close as husband and wife. Wishing to secure their relationship, Ch'en often gave her gifts of fine clothes and jewelry, and paid off the rest of the money she owed the old woman. With another hundred taels in cash he showed his gratitude to the old woman. After more than half a year's time, he had paid out approximately one thousand taels in cash, and San-ch'iao also had given the old woman things worth over thirty taels in cash. It was only because of the old woman's relish for such ill-gotten gains that she was willing to mastermind their affair. As the ancients have said, "All parties must come to an end":

The evening of the first moon after the New Year had no sooner passed
The Pearl Shirt Reencountered

*Than already the Ch’ing-ming season of the third month had come.*

Ch’en Ta-lang began to reflect that he had let his business slip for a long time now, and that he should be returning home. That night, when he spoke of this to the young woman, so deep was their attachment that neither could bear the thought of separation. On the other hand, she would gladly have packed a few of her valuables and run off with him, to be his wife forever. But Ch’en said, “It cannot be done! Every detail of our affair from start to finish is known to the old woman. Even my landlord, Mr. Lü, who has seen me come into the city every night, can’t but have his suspicions. What’s more, there are always crowds of passengers aboard the ships. We can deceive no one. And the two maids cannot be taken along either. When your husband comes back and finds out the true facts, he certainly won’t let the matter drop. Please be patient for the time being. Next year at this time, I’ll find some quiet, secluded lodgings and get a message to you in secret. Then the two of us can secretly leave without anybody’s knowledge. Won’t that be a better solution?”

“But if you don’t come back next year, what then?”

At this Ch’en made her a vow, and she said, “As your heart is sincere, I, too, will remain true to you. Once you are back home, if there is someone available, have him take a message to Granny Hsüeh’s home, so that my mind can be at rest.”

“I know what to do. Don’t worry,” Ch’en assured her.

After another few days, Ch’en hired a boat, loaded it with provisions, and came back to say good-bye to the young woman. That night their affection was redoubled. They talked for a while, then wept for a while, then gave themselves up to pleasure, not sleeping a wink the whole night. At the fifth watch they rose, and the young woman went and opened a chest from which she took out something precious called a “pearl shirt,” which she handed to Ch’en, saying, “This shirt is an heirloom of the Chiang family. If you wear it in the summertime, you will feel a coolness through to your bones. You are setting off at a time when the heat is increasing, so it is just what you’ll need. I’m giving it to you to remember me by. When you wear this shirt, it will be as though I were pressed close to your body.”

Ch’en felt himself go limp and he could not speak through his sobs. She then put the shirt on him, and ordering the maid to open the gate, went herself to see him out. After repeated entreaties for him to take good care of himself, she bade him farewell. As the poem goes:

*Years ago amid tears she bade her husband farewell. Today, she cries with grief as she sees off her new love. Deplorable indeed is the fickle nature of women. She calls a wild bird to supplant the gentle dove.*

Our story now divides in two. We shall tell how Ch’en Ta-lang wore this pearl shirt every day close to his skin. Even at night when he took it off, he laid it beside him in his bed, never letting it out of his sight.

All along the way he met with favorable winds, and so in less than two months he reached Feng-ch’iao in the Soochow Prefecture. Feng-ch’iao was a gathering place for brokers in fuel and rice, so he was certain to find a dealer to whom he could dispose of his cargo. But we will speak no more of this.

One day he attended a banquet given by a man from his own county, and there met a merchant from Hsiang-yang, elegant and handsome in appearance. It was none other than Chiang Hsing-ko himself. Hsing-ko had done some trading in jewels, tortoise-shell, sappanwood, aloeswood, and the like in Kwangtung, and then set off with some companions. After some discussion among themselves, the group of them all decided they wanted to go to Soochow to do some selling. Hsing-ko had often heard the saying that “Up above there
is Paradise, down here there are Soochow and Hangchow," and he thought he would visit this large bustling city, do his trading, and then finally wend his way home.

Chiang Hsing-ko had arrived in Soochow in the tenth month of the preceding year. As he was known to everyone in his business circle as Master Lo, Ch'en Ta-lang did not have the least reason to suspect anything. These two men, meeting as they did quite by chance and being of nearly the same age and of similar appearance, in the course of their conversation developed a mutual respect and admiration. During the banquet each asked where the other was staying and they exchanged visits, subsequently becoming good friends and getting together quite often.

When Hsing-ko had finished settling the accounts with all of his customers and was about to depart, he stopped in at Ch'en's lodgings to bid him farewell. Ch'en brought out some wine to entertain him, and so soon they found themselves carrying on a pleasant conversation. It was toward the end of the fifth month, and the weather was stifling. Both of them loosened their clothing as they drank and Ch'en exposed the pearl shirt to view. Hsing-ko was astounded. Still, he could not very well let on that he recognized it, and so he merely remarked on its beauty. Presuming on their close friendship, Ch'en then asked, "On the Great Market Street of your county lives a man named Chiang Hsing-ko. Perhaps you know him?"

Cleverly choosing his words, Hsing-ko answered, "I've been away for a long time. Though I know there is such a person in our town, I'm not acquainted with him. Why do you ask?"

"To tell you the truth," Ch'en replied, "I became rather involved with his family." He then told of his love for San-ch'iao, and pulling the shirt out to look at it, said with tears in his eyes, "This shirt was a gift from her. When you go back, I have a letter I'd like you to deliver for me. Tomorrow morning I'll take it over to your inn as early as possible."

"Of course," replied Hsing-ko. But in his heart he was saying, "Could such a thing be? But the pearl shirt here is proof. This couldn't be just idle chatter." At that moment, it was as though needles were jabbing into his stomach. Finding some pretext to stop his drinking, he hurriedly rose and took his leave.

Back in his lodgings, he was overtaken by the alternate moods of pensiveness and fretfulness, wishing he could learn some means of shrinking distance that would bring him home in an instant. He packed his bags that very night, and the following morning boarded the boat, ready to set off. Suddenly on the bank someone came rushing up all out of breath. It was Ch'en Ta-lang. He handed a large packet to Hsing-ko, exhorting him repeatedly to be sure to deliver it. Hsing-ko was so angry that his face turned ash gray and he was unable to speak a word. He waited till Ch'en Ta-lang had left and then looked at the letter. On the outside was written, "Please deliver to the house of Granny Hsüeh in the East Alley of the Great Market Street." His anger mounting, he tore open the letter with one hand. Inside was a peach-pink sash of silk gauze, two yards or so in length. With this there was also an oblong paper box, containing a phoenix hairpin of fine white-tallow jade. A note read:

Granny Hsüeh, would you be so kind as to deliver these two small gifts to my dearest San-ch'iao as a remembrance? I will see her without fail next spring. Tell her to take good care of herself.

In a rage, Hsing-ko tore the note to shreds and flung them in the river. Picking up the jade hairpin, he hurled it to the deck where it broke in two. Then suddenly it occurred to him: "How stupid of me! I should keep this as evidence." He then picked up the pieces of the hairpin and, wrapping them up together with the sash, packed them away. Next he pressed the boatmen to get the boat under way.

He hurried home in a fit of impatience, but as the front gate of his house came into view, with-
out his realizing it, tears began to fall and he thought, "In the beginning there was such love and affection between us. That this horrible thing should have happened is due entirely to my greed for a pitance of profit, which caused me to go off and leave her living virtually the life of a young widow. I'm to blame for this disgrace, but it's too late for regrets now." He was getting more and more impatient, and he had wished he could reach home in a minute. But now that he was there, he was filled with bitterness and remorse. His pace slowed with each step he took. As he entered the door of his house, he had to swallow his anger and steel himself to meet his wife. Hsing-ko uttered not a word. San-ch'iao herself, overcome with guilt, felt her face flood with shame, and she dared not come forward to express her wifely solicitude. When Hsing-ko had finished moving his baggage, he stated only that he was going to see his parents-in-law. In fact, he went out and spent the night on board the boat.

The next morning when he returned home, he said to his wife, "Your mother and father have both fallen ill. Their condition is grave. Last night I was obliged to stay over to keep watch on them. You are uppermost on their minds, and they wish to see you. I've already hired a sedan chair, which is now waiting at the gate. You must go over there with all speed. I'll follow immediately behind."

When her husband had not come back the whole night, San-ch'iao had grown worried. Hearing that her parents were ill, she assumed it to be serious and was naturally alarmed. Hastily handing the keys to the chests over to her husband, she summoned an old maidservant to follow her and then got into the sedan chair and departed.

Hsing-ko stopped the servant and, drawing a letter from his sleeve, instructed her to deliver it to Mr. Wang, "When you have delivered the letter, come back in the sedan chair."

San-ch'iao returned home and to her surprise, found both parents in good health. Seeing his daughter return on her own like this, Mr. Wang, too, was amazed. He took the letter from the maidservant, opened it, and found that it was a document of divorce. It read:

I, Chiang Te, the undersigned of this Document of Divorce, a native of Tsao-yang in the Hsing-yang Prefecture, through the arrangements of a go-between I was formally betrothed in youth to the woman Wang. Contrary to expectations, after entering her husband's home, this woman committed numerous misdeeds, as defined by the seven statutes of divorce. Out of consideration for the affection between husband and wife, a statement of these is not made public. I willingly consent to her return home and have no objections to her marrying again if she so wishes. I certify that this Document of Divorce is genuine.

Dated this _____ day, of the _____ month, second year of the Ch'eng-hua reign period [1466].

Also contained in the envelope were a peach-pink sash and a broken white-tallow jade phoenix hairpin. Wang read all this with great consternation, and then called his daughter over to ask for an explanation. When San-ch'iao heard that her husband had divorced her, without uttering a word, she burst into tears. Fuming with indignation, Wang marched straight over to his son-in-law's. Chiang Hsing-ko came forward hurriedly to greet him with a bow. Mr. Wang returned the courtesy, then said, "Son-in-law, my daughter was pure and innocent when she married you. Now, what sort of misdeeds has she committed that has made you divorce her? You owe me an explanation."

"It is not for me to say," Hsing-ko replied. "You had best ask your daughter to tell you."

"She does nothing but cry, and won't say a word," Wang said. "It's unbearable! My daughter has always been an intelligent girl. I can't imagine

*The seven grounds on which a wife could be divorced in traditional China were: (1) failure to give birth to a son; (2) adultery; (3) disobedience to parents-in-law; (4) quarreling; (5) stealing; (6) jealousy; (7) contracting a malignant disease.

*Ch'eng-hua (1465–1487) is the title of the only reign period of Emperor Hsien-tsung of the Ming period.
her ever committing an untoward act. If it's a matter of some small slip of hers, I hope that for my sake you will forgive her. You two were betrothed at the age of seven or eight and since you have been married have never had so much as a quarrel between you, but have lived in good harmony. Now you've been home from your trip no more than a few days. What fault of hers has suddenly come to your attention that makes you so heartless? You'll certainly be ridiculed by all for your injustice and lack of consideration."

"I won't presume to say much, father-in-law. Only, there was handed down in our family a pearl shirt, which was kept by your daughter. Ask her now if it is still there. If it is, I will say no more. If it is not, then you must not blame me."

Wang returned home at once and questioned his daughter. "Your husband is asking you only for some sort of pearl shirt. Tell me the truth, who have you given it to?"

What her father relayed to her hit her right in the face, and she flushed crimson with shame. She could not bring herself to speak, but began to wail louder than ever, giving her father such a fright that he did not know what to do.

"You mustn't go on crying like that," Mrs. Wang entreated her. "Tell your mother and father the truth so we can help you sort things out."

But the girl would not tell and continued her dolorous sobbing without cease. Mr. Wang had no choice but to hand the divorce paper along with the sash and hairpin over to Mrs. Wang and ask her to try to coax their daughter into telling the truth.

In a state of perplexity, Mr. Wang went over to chat with the neighbors. Noticing how red and swollen her daughter's eyes had become, Mrs. Wang began to grow fearful that she had endangered her health. Comforting her with a few words, she went down to the kitchen to warm some wine to try to help dispel her grief.

Alone in her room, San-ch'iao began to wonder to herself how on earth the incident of the pearl shirt had ever slipped out. Nor could she figure out where the sash and hairpin could have come from. After pondering for some time, she said to herself, "Oh, I understand. This broken hairpin means 'the mirror is broken and the hairpin is rent,' and the sash is obviously intended for me to hang myself. He remembers the affection we once shared and could not bear to make it public. It is because he wishes to preserve my good name. To think that four years of love and affection could be destroyed in a single day! And the fault is all mine for turning my back on my husband's devotion. Even if I were to live on in this world, there's little chance that I would ever know a moment of happiness. Better to hang myself now and put an end to it once and for all." With that she shed more tears. Then placing stools one atop the other, she tied the sash to a beam and prepared to hang herself. But her span of years had not yet been completed. She had left the door of her room open, and just at that moment Mrs. Wang happened to enter with the jug of fine wine she had heated. The sight of what her daughter was preparing to do threw her into a panic. Without setting the wine jug down, she dashed forward to pull her down. In her rush, she kicked over the stools, and mother and daughter were sent sprawling in a heap while the jug of wine overturned with a splash. Mrs. Wang scrambled to her feet and helped her daughter up.

"How foolish you are!" she cried. "A girl in her twenties—a flower not yet in full blossom. How could you do such a stupid thing? Who's to say your husband won't one day have a change of heart? And even if he does divorce you, with your looks, do you think no one will want you? No doubt you will find some other good match, and can then be assured of a life of comfort ever after. Now try to take things easier. There's no need to be so distressed."

When Mr. Wang came back and learned of his daughter's suicide attempt, he, too, tried to reason with her for a while and directed his wife to make
The Pearl Shirt Reencountered

sure she was prevented from making any further attempts. After several days, San-ch’iao saw the futility of it and gave up the idea. Truly:

Husband and wife were once birds in the forest.
As the ultimate fate comes upon them, each flies away.

As the story continues, Chiang Hsing-ko, taking two pieces of rope, bound Bright Cloud and Warm Snow, then questioned them about the case under torture. At first they refused to admit anything, but unable to endure the lash, they finally confessed everything in detail from beginning to end. By then it was plain to see that it was all brought about by the evil enticements of Granny Hsüeh, and that no one else was to blame.

The next morning Hsing-ko got together a band of men and they descended on Granny Hsüeh’s place, sending the things in her place flying about like falling snow. They stopped just short of tearing the house down. The old woman knew she was in the wrong and stayed out of sight. Not a soul came forward with the slightest protest. Seeing how things were, Hsing-ko felt himself vindicated. Returning home, he called in a procress and sold her the two maids. For the chests of valuables in the upper rooms, numbering sixteen altogether both large and small, he wrote out thirty-two sealing strips and sealed them up with the strips placed crosswise, never once opening them. And why was this? Once Hsing-ko and his wife had been deeply in love, and though it had ended in divorce, he was still in great anguish. The sight of these objects would recall their owner to mind. How could he bear to open them and look inside?

At this point our story forks. Let us talk about a certain Wu Chieh, a chin-shih from Nanking, who was appointed county magistrate of Ch’ao-yang in Kwangtung. His journey over the waterways to his post took him past Hsiang-yang, and as he had not brought his family along, he decided he would choose for himself a pretty concubine. Along the way he had looked at a number of girls but had found none to his liking. Hearing that San-ch’iao was famed throughout Tsao-yang for her beauty, he set aside a gift of fifty taels and commissioned a go-between to negotiate with her family. Wang delightedly agreed, but fearing that his former son-in-law might raise objections, he went himself to the Chiang residence to inform Hsing-ko. Hsing-ko raised no objection, and on the eve of the wedding he hired men to deliver the sixteen trunks from the upper rooms, the original seals left intact and the keys included, to Magistrate Wu’s boat to be handed over to San-ch’iao for her dowry. At this she was overwhelmed with embarrassment. When others came to hear of it, some praised Hsing-ko for his generosity, some ridiculed him for his foolishness, and others reviled him for his spinelessness—so different are the minds of men.

But enough of this chatter. Let’s go back to Ch’en Ta-lang, who, after disposing of his cargo in Soochow, returned to Hsin-an, with San-ch’iao uppermost on his mind. Morning and night he would look at the pearl shirt and then moan and sigh. His wife, P’ing-shih, suspected that there was something strange about this shirt, and so, when her husband had fallen asleep, she quietly stole it and hid it in the ceiling beams. In the morning when Ch’en got up and was ready to put it on, he could not find it and demanded it from his wife. She denied having any knowledge of it. He flew into a rage, upending boxes and emptying out chests in an all-out search. But finding it nowhere, he assailed his wife with a stream of wild abuse. Driven to tears, she launched into a noisy quarrel with him. This raged on for several days.

Finally, in a state of exasperation, Ch’en hastily gathered up his money and, taking along a young servant, set off again [by boat] to Hsiang-yang. As he approached Tsao-yang, he was suddenly set upon by a band of robbers who made off with his entire capital and murdered his servant as well. Ch’en was quick-witted enough to make his way to the prow of the boat where he managed to hide
himself above the helm, and thus narrowly escaped. Seeing that going back home was now out of the question, he planned to put up at his old lodgings and get a loan from San-ch'iao to tide him over until he could set himself up again. Heaving a sigh, he resignedly left the boat and went ashore. When he arrived at Mr. Lü's house outside the city of Tsao-yang, he explained what had happened. Now, he said, he was going to go ask Granny Hsueh to borrow some money from an acquaintance so that he could carry on with his trade.

"You perhaps haven't heard about it," said Lü. "That old woman got herself into a scrape from leading Chiang Hsing-ko's wife astray. Last year when Hsing-ko came home, he demanded some sort of pearl shirt from his wife. Apparently she had given it to her lover and couldn't produce it. Hsing-ko divorced her on the spot and sent her home. Now she's been remarried as the concubine of a chin-shih Wu of Nanking. The old woman's house was knocked to pieces by Chiang. After that she didn't feel it was safe around there for her anymore, so she cleared out to a neighboring county."

All this came to Ch'en as no little shock. He felt as though a bucket of cold water had been poured on his head. That night fever and chills set in and he fell ill. The illness carried with it symptoms of melancholia and lovesickness as well as of nervous shock. He lay stricken in bed for over two months. Though occasionally he showed some signs of improvement, he was nowhere near a complete recovery. He became a burden to the host and servants, who grew impatient waiting on him. Made uneasy by this, he roused himself enough to write a letter home and called Lü in to talk it over. What he wished was to find someone who could deliver the letter to his home, pick up money for traveling expenses, and come back with a relative to look after him. This all suited the host perfectly, and as luck would have it, he had an acquaintance who was an official courier on a commission to deliver some documents to the Hui-Ning area. Traveling over land and water from station to station, he could make the trip quite quickly.

Lü took Ch'en's letter and gave it to the courier along with a little cash provided on his behalf, asking him to deliver it at his convenience. As the saying goes, "A lone traveler is free to choose his own pace. A courier on a mission hasn't a moment to lose." In a few days, he reached Hsin-an. After locating the house of Ch'en Ta-lang, the courier delivered the letter and flew off on his horse. How true that:

All because of a letter worth a pile of gold,
Another predestined marriage is brought into being.

Let us return to Ping-shih, who opened the letter to find that it was in her husband's handwriting. It read:

Regards from Ch'en Shang to his worthy wife, Ping-shih. After taking leave of you I ran into brigands at Hsiang-yang who robbed me of my capital and murdered my servant. I fell ill from shock and have been confined to bed in my old quarters at Mr. Lü's for two months now with no sign of improvement. Please ask a trusted relative to come see me right away, bringing along enough money for traveling expenses. Written from my bed in haste.

Ping-shih read this with a mixture of credulity and disbelief, thinking to herself, "The last time he returned home, he had lost a thousand taels of his capital. In view of that pearl shirt business, it's certainly the result of some sort of improper dealings. Now here he is again with this story about being robbed, wanting more money for traveling expenses. I'm afraid it's all lies."

Then she reflected, "He wants some trusted relative to come right away to see him. His condition must really be serious. There's no way of knowing whether he's telling the truth or not. At any rate, who should I ask to go?" She turned it over in her

10 Hui-chou and Ning-chou. Ning-chou is in northern Kiangsu.
mind, unable to allay her anxiety. Then after discussing the matter with her father, Mr. Ping, she packed up her valuables and family possessions, taking the servant Ch’en Wang and his wife along with her. With her father as her companion, she hired a boat and set off toward Hsiang-yang to see her husband. When they arrived in Ching-k’ou, the old man came down with a respiratory ailment and someone was found to escort him home.

Meanwhile, Ping-shih, with the rest of her party in tow, continued on her way. After several days they arrived on the outskirts of Tsao-yang and through inquiry found the house of Ch’en’s old landlord, Mr. Lü. As it turned out, Ch’en had passed away ten days previously. Mr. Lü had put out enough money to have him placed in a makeshift coffin. Ping-shih burst into tears and fell over on the floor in a faint, not regaining consciousness for some time. She then hastily changed into mourning clothes and repeatedly begged Mr. Lü to let her open the coffin for a look and transfer the body to a better coffin. Mr. Lü adamantly refused. Ping-shih had no other recourse but to buy some wood and have an outer casing made for the coffin. She also engaged Buddhist priests to say prayer services and burnt large quantities of paper money. Lü had already demanded twenty taels in cash to compensate him for his trouble, and let her fuss about as she liked while he remained silent.

After more than a month, Ping-shih decided to choose an auspicious day to escort the coffin back home. Taking note of how young and attractive she was, Lü guessed she would not remain a widow for long and, furthermore, as she seemed quite well off, he began reflecting that here his son, Lü Erh, was still unmarried. Why not keep her here and arrange a match? After all, wouldn’t it suit the purpose of both parties? Mr. Lü bought some wine and invited Ch’en Wang over for a drink. Asking Ch’en’s wife to put the suggestion to Ping-shih in a tactful way, he promised rich rewards. But Ch’en’s wife was a complete simpleton. What did she know of tact? With no regard whatever for what was proper, she came straight out with it before her mistress. Ping-shih was furious and gave her a sound scolding along with several slaps in the face. The landlord also received his share of the abuse. Angered though he was at this rebuff, Lü could not very well say anything. Truly:

Before the mutton dumplings reach your mouth, You’ve already gotten the stench all over you.

Lü then began to incite Ch’en Wang into running away. Ch’en also saw no point in his staying around, and so he talked it over with his wife and made her his accomplice. With one on the inside and the other on the outside working in cooperation, they stripped Ping-shih clean of all her money and jewelry, and then the pair of them absconded during the night.

Fully aware of what had happened, Lü turned his criticisms on Ping-shih: “You should never have brought such scoundrels along with you. Luckily, they stole their own mistress’s things. What a mess it would have been if it had been those of someone else!” Grumbling that the presence of the coffin was hurting his business, he told her to have it removed right away. Furthermore, remarking that since it was not good for a young widow to be staying there, he pressed her to leave. Ping-shih had no counter to his arguments and was obliged to rent another place and have the coffin moved over and installed there. The bleakness of these circumstances can well be imagined.

Next door to her there lived a woman named Seventh Aunt Chang, who was as active as she was sociable. Hearing Ping-shih sobbing, she often came over to comfort her. Ping-shih often asked her to pawn a few articles of clothing to help meet expenses and was very grateful for her help.

11 Modern Chen-chiang County in Kuangsi.
THE REUNITED COUPLE

Before a few months were out, all her clothes had been pawned. Since as a girl she had learned to sew quite well, she began to consider teaching needlework in a wealthy family to get by until she could decide what to do next. When she discussed this with Seventh Aunt Chang, the latter said, “It’s not for me to say, of course, but a wealthy family is no place for a young woman like you. The dead are gone, but the living must keep on living. You’ve a long life ahead of you. Surely you don’t want to spend the rest of your days as a seamstress? Besides, such people have a poor name and are looked down upon. And here’s another thing: what are you going to do about this coffin? That, too, is quite a burden for you. To go on paying rent is no solution.”

“All this has crossed my mind before, but I can think of no other way.”

“Well, I have a plan, but you must not be offended when I tell you. Here you are, a lone widow, hundreds of li from home, without a penny to your name. You’ve no hope of ever moving the coffin back. Aside from the difficulty of making ends meet, it’ll be hard enough just to maintain your widowhood. And even if you do hold out for a time, what good will that do? In my humble opinion, your best bet would be to put your youth and good looks to advantage, find a good mate for yourself, and then get married to him. With the money you get from betrothal gifts, you can buy a plot of land for your husband’s burial, and you’ll be well taken care of besides. That way, neither you nor your dead husband will have any regrets.”

Ping-shih found this all sensible, and after pondering the matter for a while, she sighed and said, “All right, then. No one can ridicule me for selling myself to bury my husband.”

“If you’ve made up your mind, then I have a prospect already lined up for you. He’s about your age, very nice looking and quite wealthy besides.”

“If he’s very wealthy, then I’m afraid he wouldn’t want someone who’s been married before.”

“He himself is marrying for the second time. He even told me, ‘It makes no difference whether this is her first or second marriage, as long as she’s presentable.’ Now, how could someone of your grace and charm fail to please him?”

As it turned out, Seventh Aunt Chang had been commissioned by Chiang Hsing-ko to find him a wife. Since his previous wife was of such outstanding beauty, he wanted only to find someone equally pretty. Though Ping-shih was not as attractive as San-ch’ia, she was more than her match in ability with her hands and with her mind.

The following day, Seventh Aunt entered the city and spoke with Chiang Hsing-ko about it. When he heard Ping-shih was from the lower Yangtze region, Hsing-ko was especially pleased. In all of this, Ping-shih was not asking for a cent in the way of betrothal gifts. All she wanted was to buy a plot of good land for the burial of her husband.

After a few trips back and forth by Seventh Aunt Chang, the two parties agreed.

We won’t become tedious here, but will tell instead how Ping-shih attended to her husband’s burial, and wailed loudly when the sacrifices were over. Eventually she resigned herself to setting up her husband’s memorial tablet and put aside her clothes of mourning. Before the appointed day, Chiang sent over clothes and jewelry and had all her clothing redeemed from the pawn shop. On the wedding night, drums and flutes were loudly played, and the bridal chamber was lit with colorful candles. In fact:

Though from past experience the rites have grown familiar,
The warmth and depth of feeling is greater than before.

Chiang observed the dignity of the bride’s manner and felt a deep respect for her. One day when he happened to come in from the outside, he found her in the midst of straightening out a
trunk of clothing. Inside there was a pearl shirt. Recognizing it, Hsing-ko asked in astonishment, "Where did that shirt come from?"

"There's something strange behind this shirt," replied Ping-shih, and she proceeded to tell him how her former husband had carried on about it and how they had quarreled and parted in bitterness. She then added, "Before when I was in need, I thought several times of pawning it, but since I didn't know its origin, I was worried lest it start a scandal, so I didn't dare let it be seen. To this day I myself have no idea where the thing came from."

"Was your former husband Ch'en Ta-lang, also known as Ch'en Shang? Fair-complexioned and beardless, with long fingernails on his left hand?"

"Yes, that's him all right," replied Ping-shih.

Hsing-ko's tongue hung out in astonishment and, pressing his palms together, he raised his eyes to heaven and said, "From this becomes manifest the laws of Heaven. How truly fearful it is!"

Ping-shih asked him what he meant, and he told her, "This pearl shirt was once an heirloom of my family. Your husband seduced my wife and received from her this shirt as a remembrance. I first knew about the affair when I met him in Soochow and saw the shirt. I returned home then and divorced her. Who could have foreseen that your husband would die away from home? When I remarried this time, I heard only that my new bride was the former wife of a Ch'en, a trader from Hui-chou. Who would have guessed this was none other than Ch'en Shang! Isn't this a case of retribution paid out in kind?"

When she heard all this, Ping-shih felt her hair stand on end. From then on, their affection for each other deepened.

This, then, is the story of Chiang Hsing-ko's reencounter with the pearl shirt. As the verse goes:

_Fully manifest are Heaven's laws, which must not be ignored. In the exchange of wives, who benefited most from the trade?_ Clearly, the debt has been returned with interest paid. A marriage destined for a hundred years, suspended only for a time.

We will now go on to tell how, a year after Hsing-ko had found himself a wife, he set off again for Kwangtung to do his trading. Then fate came to intervene. One day he was at the pearl dealers' in Ho-p'u and had just concluded a deal, whereupon the elderly dealer proceeded to pick out one particularly large pearl from the lot and take it for himself, refusing to give it up. Irked by this, Hsing-ko yanked at the old man's sleeve, trying to get at the pearl, but the force he exerted was more than he realized, and it knocked the man over. He fell to the ground and lay there still. Hsing-ko hurried to help him up, but found that he had already breathed his last.

The old man's family and neighbors rushed over in a swarm, yelling and screaming, and seized Hsing-ko. Without waiting for an explanation, they gave him a severe beating, then locked him up in an empty room. That same night an accusation was written out and at the break of day, when the county magistrate called the morning session of court, the accusation was presented together with the defendant. The magistrate accepted it for consideration, but because of other official business which had to be attended to that day, he gave orders that the accused be kept in custody to await judgment the following day.

Can you guess who this magistrate was? His name was Wu Chieh, and he was a chin-shih from the Nanking area—none other than the second husband of San-ch'iao. His original appointment had been to Ch'ao-yang; when his superiors saw how upright he was, they had him transferred to a post in the pearl-producing region of Ho-p'u.

That night Wu Chieh sat carefully examining the accepted cases beneath his lamp. San-ch'iao was there idly looking over his shoulder when her eye chanced to fall upon the charge of homicide

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12 Formerly a pearl-producing area in western Kwangtung.
brought by Sung Fu against one Lo Te, a trader from Tsao-yang. Who else could it be if not Chiang Hsing-ko! She felt a sudden painful twinge as she recalled their love in former days. Tearfully she began pleading with her husband, "This Lo Te is my elder brother. He was brought up by my mother’s family, the Lo’s. Somehow while on his travels he committed this grave offense. Please, for my sake, spare his life and let him return home."

"It will have to depend on how the trial goes. If the charge of murder is proved valid, I’ll be in no position to pardon him." Her eyes brimming with tears, San-ch’iao dropped to her knees and beseeched him piteously.

"Now, don’t get upset. I have a way," he comforted her.

The next morning when court was in session, San-ch’iao again clutched at the magistrate’s sleeve and said through tears, "If my brother cannot be saved, I, too, must end my life, and we’ll never meet again."

As the magistrate took his seat on the bench, he called this case to be tried first. Sung Fu and Sung Shou appeared, crying and demanding vengeance for their father’s death. They submitted, "Angered in a dispute over some pearls, the defendant at once beat him unconscious, whereupon he fell to the ground and died. Your Honor, we await your judgment."

The magistrate asked for the testimony of the witnesses. Some said he was knocked down, others that he fell when pushed.

"Their father stole one of my pearls," Chiang Hsing-ko argued. "Angered at this, I began to dispute with him. Because of his old age, he was not so sure on his feet. He fell down on his own and died. It had nothing to do with me."

"How old was your father?" the magistrate asked Sung Fu.

"Sixty-seven."

"The elderly are prone to faint," observed the magistrate. "It was not necessarily due to a beating."

Sung Fu and Sung Shou insisted that he had been killed by a blow.

"Whether an injury was sustained or not must be determined by examination. As you say he was beaten to death, have the corpse submitted to the morgue, and we will hear the results of the examination during the evening session of the court."

Now the fact was that the Sungs were a prominent, respected family, and the old man had been a district alderman. How could the sons ever allow an autopsy on their father in a morgue? Together they kowtowed and said, "Our father’s death occurred in full view of everyone. We beseech you, Your Honor, to come and inspect the body at our home. We do not want a public examination."

"If there is no visible sign of injury to the bones, how can one expect the accused to admit his guilt? Without a postmortem report, how am I to report this case to the higher authorities?"

The two brothers merely persisted in their pleading. The magistrate became irritated with this and snapped, "As you won’t allow an examination, I cannot very well proceed with the case either."

Greatly alarmed by this, the two brothers began rapidly kowtowing and said, "We await Your Honor’s verdict."

"When a man is approaching seventy," began the magistrate, "death is to be expected. Now, supposing it turned out that he did not die from a blow and that an innocent man was wronged. Then it would only increase the guilt of the deceased. How could you, his sons, be at peace with yourselves, if after having seen your father reach such a venerable old age, you were to give him an ill name after his death? But if it is not true that he was beaten to death, it is true that he was pushed and fell. If Lo Te is not severely punished, then you will be left with no vent to your anger. I therefore sentence him to don
hempen clothes of mourning and conduct the rites in the manner expected of a son. He is to bear all expenses for the funeral. Do you agree to this?"

"We don't dare to disobey Your Honor's verdict," the two brothers replied.

When Hsing-ko saw the magistrate had settled the case once and for all without resorting to punishment, he was overjoyed. At that, the defendant and plaintiff all kowtowed and expressed their gratitude.

The magistrate then declared, "I will not make a record of the trial. The defendant will be put under escort and when the matter is concluded will report back to me, at which time I shall cancel the complaint." Truly:

An easy matter it is to do wrong in court. Accumulating hidden merit is likewise not difficult. Just look what Magistrate Wu has this day achieved. He righted a wrong and released the innocent, leaving both parties jubilant.

Meanwhile, from the time her husband went to court, San-ch'iao had felt as though she were sitting on a blanket of needles. As soon as she heard he had left the session, she went to meet him to learn the outcome.

The magistrate told her just how he had settled it. "For your sake," he said, "I didn't subject him to a single blow of the stick."

San-ch'iao thanked him over and over and then said, "My brother and I have been apart for a long time, and I'm anxious to see him again to ask news of our parents. If you could in some way arrange for us to meet, it would be a great kindness."

"That should be easy enough."

Dear audience, San-ch'iao, after all, had been divorced by Hsing-ko, bringing all feelings of love and obligation to an end. So, you will ask, how could there be so much emotional involvement? As husband and wife, they had, in fact, been deeply in love, and it was because of her wrongdoing that Hsing-ko could do nothing else but divorce her, unbearable as it had been for him even then. That was why on the eve of her remarriage, he had presented her with all sixteen trunks. Because of this, her heart had nearly melted. Now that she was in a position of wealth and honor, upon seeing him in trouble, how could she not come to his aid? This is what is known as returning kindness for kindness.

We now go on to tell how Chiang Hsing-ko carried out the magistrate's orders, scrupulously observing all the rites and not sparing himself any expense in the funeral. The Sung brothers could make no complaints. When the funeral services were over, he was escorted back to the tribunal to report. The magistrate called him in to his private chambers and offered him a chair. Then he said, "If it hadn't been for your sister's repeated entreaties, brother-in-law, I would have come close to treating you wrongly in this case."

Hsing-ko was bewildered by this and could make no reply. After a moment, when they had had their tea, the magistrate invited him into his study and asked his wife to come out to meet him. Wouldn't you say this fortuitous encounter was just like a scene from a dream? Neither of them bowed nor spoke, but they flew into each other's arms in a tight embrace, and burst into loud sobs. Wailing over a mother or father was never so heart-rending. Even the magistrate looking on found it more than he could bear and said, "Don't be so grieved. I can see you are not just brother and sister. Come on and tell me the truth. Perhaps there's something I can do."

They ceased their crying somewhat, but neither would speak. Finally unable to hold out against the magistrate's questioning, San-ch'iao knelt and told him, "I deserve ten thousand deaths for my sin. This man is my former husband."

Realizing that he could hide the truth no longer, Hsing-ko also knelt and told him every-
thing from their love for each other to their divorce and the subsequent remarriage of each. When he had finished, they fell to weeping again and even Magistrate Wu felt the tears streaming down his cheeks. He then said, "As you love each other so much, how could I bear to tear you apart? Fortunately there has been no child born during these years, so you've my permission to be reunited at once."

They bowed their heads to the floor many times to express their thanks to the magistrate.

The magistrate quickly called a sedan chair and escorted San-ch'iao out of the tribunal. He then summoned some men to carry away the original sixteen chests that had accompanied her and bade Hsing-ko accept them. Finally he ordered a member of his staff to escort the couple to the border of his district. Such was the goodness of Magistrate Wu. Truly:

*The pearls returned to Ho-p'u shine brightly once again.*

*The swords reunited in Feng-ch'eng are twice as wondrous as before.*

13 The pearl industry almost came to an end because of the insatiable greed of local magistrates. When Meng Ch'ang of the Eastern Han Dynasty became magistrate, he put an end to such exploitation and the pearls could be seen in the region again.

14 Chang Hua (292–300) once asked Lei Huan to interpret the phenomenon of a purple aura in the sky. Lei took it to mean two precious swords buried somewhere in Feng-ch'eng. Having dug out the pair of swords, Lei gave one to Chang. After both of them died, the two swords changed into two dragons and reunited.

The great virtue of Mr. Wu is something all admire. Would such a man crave riches or be driven by desire?

This man, who had heretofore been without a son, was later made minister of personnel. In Peking, he took a concubine who gave him three sons in succession, each of whom passed the imperial examinations. All agreed this was his reward for his good deeds. But all this came later.

Let's go on and tell how Chiang Hsing-ko brought San-ch'iao home, where she met Ping-shih. As the first in marriage, Wang-shih [San-ch'iao] took precedence. But whereas she had been divorced, Ping-shih had become his wife through formal arrangement and ceremony. Besides, she was a year older. Thus, Ping-shih was given the position of first wife and Wang-shih became second wife. They addressed each other as "sister," and from this time on, the husband and the two wives remained united. There is a verse which testifies to this:

*A loving couple are joined for a lifetime.

But how shameful when the wife returns as a concubine.

Blessings and misfortunes come not without design.

Heaven above is the just official easiest to come by.

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mean two precious swords buried somewhere in Feng-ch'eng. Having dug out the pair of swords, Lei gave one to Chang. After both of them died, the two swords changed into two dragons and reunited.