TRADITIONAL CHINESE STORIES

 Themes and Variations

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THE MASTER THIEF

One day he noticed with great surprise that several people were walking back and forth in front of him, watching the dye shop in a suspicious manner. One of them came to him and whispered, “We’re doing business, and we’re going to steal the silk they’re dyeing. I came to ask you not to mention it.”

“That has nothing to do with me,” the official replied. “Why should I say anything about it?”

The fellow thanked him and left. The official thought to himself, “The dye shop has all its silk hanging high up on a busy street. This broad daylight, with ten thousand eyes watching, if they have the skill to steal, then they’re smart thieves indeed.” So he watched carefully to see how they would manage it. But what he saw was only the same group of people walking back and forth in front of him, sometimes on the left, sometimes on the right. As the hours passed, the number of people decreased. At dusk, everyone was gone.

“They fool,” the official said smiling. “They’ve put me on.” Then he returned to his room to order some food, and he found that all his belongings were gone.

SUNG THE FOURTH RAISES HEll WITH TIGHTWAD CHANG

From Ku-chin hiaoshuo

Translated by Timothy C. Wong

Money comes and goes like a near-ending stream; Don’t be miserly with wisdom andiquiet.
Look at the site of Shih Ch’ung’s Golden Valley: Once towering pavilions, now knobbles and briars.

It is said that in the Chin Dynasty there lived a man—Shih Ch’ung, styled Chi-lun. Before he became prosperous, he spent his time on a little boat along a large river, fishing with a bow and arrow for a living.

One time unexpectedly in the dead of night, someone banged on his boat and pleaded, “Chi-lun, save me!” Shih Ch’ung heard him and opened the mat window, sticking his head out to see what was the matter. Moonlight was setting the sky aglow and the water sparkled in reflection. In the moonlight, on the water’s surface, stood an old man.

“What urgent business has brought you here in the middle of the night?” Shih Ch’ung asked.

“Save me!” the old man cried out again.

So Shih Ch’ung promptly told him to get into the boat and asked him again what this was all about.

“I’m not a human being,” the old man answered. “I’m the old dragon king of the upper course. As I’m aged and weak, I’ve been bullied by the little dragon from the lower course of the river who, taking advantage of my years, picks fights with me. I’ve lost to him time and again and there’s no place for me to run to. He has challenged me to fight him again tomorrow, and I’m sure to get whipped once more. That’s why I’ve come to ask you a favor. Aim your bow toward the river at noon tomorrow where there’ll be two large fish battling each other. The one in front will be me, while the one pursuing from the rear will be the little dragon. I hope you’ll agree to help me out. Shoot an arrow at the big fish in the rear. If you can finish off the little dragon, I’ll naturally repay you richly for the favor.”

After hearing this, Shih Ch’ung solemnly agreed to do as he was told. The old man bade him farewell and, turning away, leaped into the river and disappeared.

At noon the following day, Shih Ch’ung readied his bow and arrow. Sure enough, just as it was getting to be noontime, he saw two large fish speeding along the surface of the river; Shih Ch’ung put his arrow across his bow and, keeping his eye on the fish in the rear, zinged it directly into his belly. The river turned crimson as the fish expired on the water’s surface. Then the wind
and the waves died down and nothing else happened. At midnight that night, the old man again came to the boat to offer his thanks. "Because you've done this good deed for me, I can now live peacefully," he said. "Come noon tomorrow, bring your boat to the seventh willow tree on the south shore at the foot of Mount Chiang 1 and wait for me. I'll repay you well." Then he was gone.

The next day Shih Ch'ung did as he was told: he brought his boat to the designated willow tree at the foot of Mount Chiang, [and went ashore] to wait. He saw three ghostly messengers emerge from the water surface and pull the boat toward them. Presently, the boat was returned, filled with such things as gold, silver, pearls, and jade. The old man also came out of the water and said to Shih Ch'ung, "If you want more treasures, you can bring your empty boat back here and wait." Thereupon he took his leave.

And so whenever Shih Ch'ung brought his boat to the willow tree and waited, he received a boat-load of precious things. In this way, he became an immensely rich man. He built up connections with the powerful with his wealth and repeatedly rose in the ranks until he became a marshal, thus achieving his heart's desire. Subsequently he bought a state residence in the city and constructed behind it the Golden Valley Gardens with pavilions, terraces, towers, and halls. Using thirty pecks of large pearls, he purchased a concubine named Green Pearl. He also secured other concubines, a number of maidservants, and maids-in-waiting, and coveted with them day and night, enjoying to the full his wealth and position. He cultivated the friendship of court officials and relatives of the emperor. Even the embroidered silk draperies in his house measured over ten li in length. In all of heaven and earth, one could not find luxury and splendor to compare with his.

One day he gave a banquet solely in the honor of the imperial brother-in-law, Wang K'ai, whose sister was the empress. When both Shih Ch'ung and Wang K'ai were half tipsy, Shih ordered Green Pearl to come out to pour wine for his guest. She was indeed dazzlingly beautiful. Once Wang K'ai saw her, he could hardly contain himself and licentious thoughts immediately stirred within him. When Wang K'ai took his leave at the end of the feast, his heart was so enamored with Green Pearl's charms that he longed for the chance to possess her. Now Wang K'ai had often matched his precious possessions with Shih Ch'ung's, but Wang's things never measured up. Because of this Wang had secretly harbored ill will toward Shih and wanted a chance to ruin him. But since Shih Ch'ung continued to entertain him lavishly, Wang could find no excuse to carry out his schemes.

Then one day, the empress invited Wang K'ai to a banquet at the palace. When Wang saw his sister he fearfully told her, "In this city there is a rich man whose familial wealth runs into the billions and whose precious and rare possessions are too numerous to even be described. He often invites me to banquets in order to compare our treasures, but even one or two of his things are superior to any hundred items of mine. So take pity on me, dear sister, and help me salvage my pride. Borrow some rare things from the imperial treasury so that I can compete with him." On hearing this the empress summoned the eunuch in charge of the imperial treasure. A large coral tree was brought out measuring three feet, eight inches high. It was the pride of the palace. Without asking permission of the empress, the emperor ordered it transported to Wang K'ai's residence. Wang K'ai thanked his sister and, upon returning home, covered it carefully with layers of Shu brocade.

The following day Wang prepared a large feast of rare delicacies and, transporting everything to the Golden Valley Gardens, invited Shih Ch'ung to join him. Beforehand he had ordered the coral tree taken to an empty pavilion in the gardens. When the two were enjoying the feast, Wang K'ai said, "I've a treasure for your personal use; I hope you won't find it worthless." Shih Ch'ung asked that the brocade be removed and smiled when he saw it. Then, with one whack of his walking stick, he shattered it to pieces. 

Greatly agitated, Wang K'ai cried out in agony, "This is the pride of the imperial treasury! Just because you can't measure up to me this time, you've destroyed it out of jealousy! What am I going to do?"

Shih Ch'ung broke into loud laughter and said, "Don't you worry. This is by no means an irreplaceable treasure."

Thereupon he invited Wang K'ai to a garden in the rear to look over his own coral trees. In varying sizes, they numbered thirty, some as tall as seven or eight feet. He took one of equal size to the one he had shattered and gave it to Wang to be returned to the treasury. He also took a larger one and presented it to Wang as a gift. Wang re- tired in shame, convinced that there were no trees in all the land to match Shih's. So in his jealous outburst, he formulated a wicked plan.

One day, Wang K'ai had an audience with the emperor and he informed His Majesty: "There is in this city a rich man named Shih Ch'ung who holds the post of marshal. His wealth rivals that of the nation and, he lives in extreme extravagance. I'm afraid he's even better off than Your Majesty. Unless he is removed quickly, he will probably be a source of unforeseen danger."

This convinced the emperor, who issued a verbal edict to his guards to have Marshal Shih Ch'ung arrested and thrown into prison. All his possessions were confiscated. Wang K'ai was deter- mined to get Green Pearl for himself and sent soldiers to surround her quarters and seize her. But Green Pearl thought to herself: "My hus- band's life has been ruined by this man's slander and I don't even know whether he's dead or alive. Now that this man wants to take me by force, how could I submit to him? I'd rather die than suffer such shame!" Thereupon she leaped to her death from her upper-story dwelling in the Golden Valley Gardens, to the profound regret of all.

When Wang K'ai heard about this, he became furious and ordered Shih Ch'ung executed in the marketplace. At the moment of his execution, Shih remarked with a sigh, "It's all because you people covet my riches."

"Since you knew that excessive wealth can bring about one's ruin," the executioner replied, "why didn't you get rid of it earlier?"

Shih Ch'ung was unable to answer him and, stretching out his neck, received the blade. Master Hu Tsung wrote a poem which says:

From the moment the beauty fell from her jade-like position Untangling arrows descended on the house of Chin. Even the trees, sole remains of the Golden Valley Gardens, Were bent with mourning against the setting sun.

I've just related how Shih Ch'ung met with calamity because of his wealth and how in the course of flaunting his treasures and his women he met his nemesis in the person of Wang K'ai, the imperial brother-in-law. Now I'll tell you about a rich man who minded his own business and never went about looking for trouble. Never- theless, because of his unrespecting miserliness, he brought upon himself some unusual happenings that made for an entertaining story. And what was this rich man's name? Listen and I'll tell you: this rich man's surname was Chang and he was called Fu. His home was located in Kai-feng, the Eastern Capital. For generations, his family had been well known as pawnbrokers, and he was addressed as Squire Chang. This Squire Chang had a foil; he would even want to:

Pluck tending from the banks of floes,
Cut the thigh from the leg of a pullet-fowl,
Put the gold leaf on the face of an old buddha statue,
Scrape the black from the skin of a black bean [for paint],
Save the sprig to use as lamp-fuel,
Rush a pine tree for flying oil.
This man had four great wishes:

First, that his clothes would last forever,
Second, that his food would stay in his stomach forever,
Third, that he would pick up valuables in the streets,
And fourth, that he could have his sexual pleasure with the deeds in his sleep.

In sum he was a real skinflint who would not ever think of spending a solitary cent. If he should chance upon a penny on the ground, he would seize it and shine it up like a mirror, knead it as if it were a musical stone, nip it out as if it were a saw. He would call it “my baby,” kiss it, and stick it in his purse. When the people saw how tight he was, they gave him the nickname of Squire “Tightwad” Chang.

It was one day, and Chang was lashing on cold rice water and ice in the back of his shop while his two clerks were counting cash out front. Then a man appeared wearing nothing on his entire upper body, which was tattooed with designs and writing so that it resembled brocade. He had on trousers of white gauze cinched up in a sloppy manner. Clutching a bamboo ladle in one hand, he peered around Boss Chang’s place, bowed deeply, and begged for alms, saying, “Please have mercy on this beggar.” Seeing that Chang was not around, one of the clerks flung a couple of pennies into the ladle.

Just then, from behind the latticed screen, Chang noticed what had gone on and hurried forward. “Aha!” he gloated. “What do you think you’re doing, Mr. Clerk, throwing two pennies to him? Two pennies every day and in a thousand days there’d be two whole strings of cash!” Striding forward hurriedly, he seized the man with the ladle and, in one quick motion, emptied all the money in the ladle onto the shop’s pile of cash. Moreover, he ordered his shopkeepers to give the beggar a beating, so that even the passersby felt indignant when they saw it. The man with the ladle took all the blows without daring to resist; he merely stood in front of Chang’s door, wagging his finger and cursing.

Sung went up and covered her eyes with his two sleeves. “Third Brother, what do you think you’re doing, frightening me like that?” she giggled.

With a jerk, Sung secured her by the waist and, brandishing his sword, warned her, “Quiet! You make any noise and I’ll kill you!”

The woman turned into a mass of shudders.

“Sir, please spare my life,” she begged. “Let me ask you: how many traps are there between here and the storehouse?”

“Ten paces or so from my room,” she answered, “you’ll come across a deep pit in which there are two ferocious dogs. Beyond that there are five guards, drinking and gambling, who take turns at the watch. The storehouse is over there. Once inside, you’ll find a paper figure holding a silver globe in its hands. Beneath the figure are triggering mechanisms. If you step on them, the silver globe will tumble to the floor and roll along a predesigned rut straight to the squire’s bed to wake him up for your arrest.”

“Is that so?” said Sung. “Who’s that coming over behind you?”

Unaware of the trick, the girl turned her head. Sung dispatched her with a blow of his sword down her shoulder, and she crumpled in a splash of blood.

Coming out of the room, Sung took about ten steps and went around the pit from the west. When he heard the two dogs barking, he took the dumplings from his bosom, filled them with a special kind of drug, and, advancing closer, tossed them to the dogs. Their delicious smell was irresistible, and the dogs devoured them in two gulps and soon rolled over unconscious. Sung went on and heard the shouts of about five or six people rolling dice. Taking out a small vase, Sung placed some of the drug into it, struck a flame with a piece of flint, and set the contents on fire. Every-
case. When the constables saw the four lines on the wall, Chou Hsuan, one of the more experienced among them, said, "This man, sir, is none other than Sung the Fourth."

"How do you know?" Officer Wang asked.

"In line one," Chou replied, "we need to note the word 'Sung,' while in 'throughout the Four Seas' of line two we should take out the word 'four.' In line three, we find the words 'has been,' and in line four begins with the word 'here.' Taken together, these words would form the sentence 'Sung the Fourth has been here.'"

"I've long heard that among professional thieves there is one called Sung the Fourth who is a native of Cheng-chou and who is greatly skilled in his trade," said Wang. "He must be the culprit." So Wang dispatched Chou Hsuan and a group of constables to Cheng-chou to arrest Sung the Fourth.

After an arduous but uneventful journey, they arrived at Cheng-chou and asked for directions to Sung's place. When they got there, they saw a small tea shop in front of his house. They went in for some tea and an old man went to the stove to brew it for them. "While you're at it," they told him, "why don't you invite Sung the Fourth out to have tea with us?"

"The Master has been laid up with a slight illness," the old man replied. "I'll go in and convey your message.

Soon they saw the tea brewer again, clutching a bowl in his hand. "Please wait a few minutes, sir," he muttered. "Sung the Fourth has asked me to buy him some gruel; he'll join you after he has eaten it."

The constables waited anxiously, but the old man who went off for gruel never returned, and Sung the Fourth never appeared. They grew impatient, and when they finally entered the house to look, they found an old man all tied up. They took him to be Sung the Fourth and were coming up to arrest him when he spoke up. "I'm the tea brewer for Sung the Fourth," he said. "The one who went off with the bowl to buy gruel is Sung himself."

Everyone was shocked on hearing this. "He's really as good as his name," they sighed. "We've been remiss. He's hoodwinked us."

There was nothing they could do but hurry out the door to chase him. But there was not the slightest chance they could catch up with him. All they could do was split up and go after him in different directions, and I needn't go into any more detail about this.

What happened was that when they were busy having tea, Sung the Fourth, from his inner quarters, noticed their Eastern Capital accents. He stole a peak at them and found them to be constables. He thought something was up and so he put on a show of cursing and scolding. Meanwhile, he exchanged clothes with the son of the old man and, lowering his face, came out pretending to be in a hurry to buy rice gruel. Because of this, no one suspected anything.

Now let me tell you about Sung who, having escaped, thought to himself: "Where should I go now? I have a student, a native of the Ping-chiang Prefecture," named Chao Cheng. I've had a letter from him saying that he is now in Mo County. I might as well go stay with him."

So Sung changed his clothes, put on the costume of a jujer, and covered up his face with a fan, pretending to be blind. Taking his time, he gradually made his way to Mo County. When he got there, he came across a small tavern:

*Soochow in modern Kiangsu Province. Soochow is also known as Kiu-nu, after Mount Ku to outside the city.

"Clouds swirl in the embouching mist, wine pennants flutter; The time languishes in these peaceful days. Here the warrior can bolster his heroic courage; The beauty can dispel her melancholy mood. In the early dawn three-foot willows droop along the banks Where a sign-stick shoots out from among the spriglet blossoms. A man may not have fulfilled yet his life-long dreams, But let him enjoy his song and enter into the realm of wine."

Sung felt hungry and entered the tavern to buy himself a few drinks. The waiter had brought him his order and Sung had downed a few cups when he saw a bright-looking youth enter the tavern. As to this fellow, how do you suppose he was dressed?

A brick-chested cap, tied at the rear; A single-breasted black silk gown with belt. Broad trousers below, And silk shoes at a slant.

"Greetings, sir," the youth called out and Sung recognized him as none other than his student (Chao). Because people around were away, Sung did not dare address him as an old acquaintance, but simply invited him to sit down. Chao exchanged a few pleasantries with Sung and took his seat, ordering an additional tumbler from the shopkeeper and helping himself to a drink. "Where have you been all this time, sir?" Chao asked in a low voice.

"Have you had any business lately?" Sung asked in return.

"Some. But I've already spent whatever I made on wine and women. I heard you came up with something yourself in the Eastern Capital."

"It wasn't much," Sung replied. "Only got forty or fifty thousand strings of cash out of it." Then he asked Chao, "Where are you heading right now?"

"I want to take a little trip to the Eastern Capital and have a little fun along the way. I'd like to have something to talk about when I go back to the Ping-chiang Prefecture."

"You can't go."

"Why not?"

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"For the following three reasons, you won't go," said Sung. "First, you're a native of northwestern Chekiang, and you know nothing about the Eastern Capital. There's very few in our line of business who know you there. To whom would you turn for help? Second, the hundred-eighty-li wall surrounding the Eastern Capital is called 'Wall of the Leaning Ox.' Now we are no more than 'hayseed thieves,' and it has been commonly said that 'when hay enters an ox's mouth, it is not long for this world.' Third, there's five thousand sharp-eyed constables there, and a general inspector heading three investigative offices."

"None of these things scares me. Sir, don't you worry," said Chao. "I won't be nabbed so easily."

"Since you don't believe me and insist on making the trip, I'll tell you what," said Sung. "I'll go to an inn and put this package of small valuables I got from Tightnoud Chang next to my pillow, if you can steal it from me, you may go ahead to the Eastern Capital."

"As you say, sir," said Chao. The discussion thus concluded; Sung paid the fourth the bill and went to an inn with Chao. The clerk there, seeing Sung come in with another person, greeted the two of them. Chao went into the room and Sung, and then said good-bye and went off by himself. By this time the sky was getting dark. What did it look like?

Duskling mist calls the distant peaks, And a thin fog curls up in the glowing sky. Crowds of stars sparkle together, and the moon glows in competition.

The emerald brilliance of the distant river rises with that of the mountains.

In the deep forest, an ancient sentry States a few words from his bell; By the moonlight shoreline, from a tiny ship Day from fisherman's lengthy fires.

On a branch, a cackling calls to the moon; Among the flowers, butterflies rest in fragrant clusters.

When Sung saw that night was near, he thought to himself: 'Chao Cheng is crafty. I'm his teacher;
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Chao, "where I peeled off the paper and, with a tiny saw, cut off two bars from the window. Then I eased myself inside, went over to your bed, took the package, and climbed back out the window. I reconnected the bars with tiny nails. Then I pasted the paper over them once more and, look as you may, you won't detect any signs of tampering."

"All right! All right!" cried Sung. "You're sharp. I won't deny you're pretty clever. If you can steal this package of mine again tonight, then I'll admit you really are something.

"Fine," said Chao. "That'll be a cinch. He returned the package to Sung. "I'll leave you for now; sir, see you tomorrow."

Sung remained silent, but he was thinking to himself: Chao Cheng is as skilled a burglar as I am. Now that I've let him take away my package, things look really bad for me. I might as well pack up and run." So he summoned the desk clerk and said to him, "Friend, I'm moving on now. Here's two hundred in cash. May I trouble you to buy a hundred in cash worth of roast pork, and ask for extra pepper and salt. Also buy fifty in cash worth of steamed cakes. The remaining fifty in cash is for you to buy yourself a drink."

The clerk thanked him, went downtown, and bought the meat and cakes. On his way back, someone accosted him from a teashop some ten doors away from the inn: "Mr. Clerk, where are you heading?"

The clerk looked up and saw that it was the friend of Sung the Fourth. "Listen, sir," said the clerk, "the old man wants to leave. He asked me to buy roast pork and steamed cakes for him."

"Let's have a look," Chao Cheng said and opened up the lotus-leaf wrapping for an examination of the contents. "How much cash worth of pork is this?"

"A hundred," was the reply. Chao then took out two hundred in cash from his bosom and said, "Leave this meat and these cakes here. I'm giving you another two hundred in cash. Will you do me the same favor and buy the same things you've just bought? You can keep the balance for a drink."

The clerk thanked him and went off, returning presently with the food. "Sorry to have troubled you," said Chao. "Let me wrap that meat up again for the old man. When you see him, tell him for me to be a bit careful tonight."

The clerk nodded and left.

Returning to the inn, he handed over the meat and steamed cakes to Sung. Sung took them and thanked him. "The gentleman who was with you earlier told me to warn you about being careful tonight," the clerk told Sung.

Sung packed his bag, settled his bill, and hung his bedding on his back. Carrying in his hand the package of things he had stolen from Tightwad Chang, he left the inn. Walking a short distance, he was soon on the road to Fa-chiao Town. He reached a river crossing, but the ferry boat was on the opposite shore. He waited, but it did not come over and his stomach began to feel the pang of hunger. He sat down on the ground, placing the package of valuables in front of him. Then he opened up the wrapping of the roast pork, split open one of the steamed cakes, added more pepper and salt to a few fatter pieces of meat and, rolling them in the cake, took a couple of bites. Suddenly everything turned topsy-turvy, and he fell over right where he was sitting. All Sung could see then was someone dressed as an army captain seizing the package of valuables and going off. He could only open his eyes wide and watch him go. Unable to either shout at him or chase him down, Sung had to let things happen as they would. The captain took the package, crossed the river, and was gone.

After a long time, Sung regained his faculties. "Who in the world is that captain who made off with my package?" he tried to think. "The roast pork that the clerk bought for me must have been drugged." Containing his anger, Sung hailed the ferry boat, crossed the river, and went ashore, thinking all the while about where he should go to look for that captain. Down at the mouth and in need of food and drink, he chanced upon a village tavern, and this is what he saw:

A wooden gate, half open, a tattered pennant drooping low. The rustic wine seller, how he knew about a man named Hisung-ju who had worked as a dishwasher? The smooth tavern maid who kept silkworms, it's hard to compare her to Cho-ch'ik, who presided over the wine tavern. The large characters on the wall are the poem written, while tipsy, by the village schoolmaster. The humped gosso on the hunger was left as security by a farmer, a lover of wine. The northern couch is lined with coarse bres and broken bottles. Faintly on the wall, covered with dust, a palimpsest drawing of drunken immortals.

Sung thought he might as well go in and drown his cares in a bit of wine. The tavern waiter greeted him and brought the wine, which he drank glumly. When he was on the third cup, he saw a woman come into the tavern:

Shiny hair, a powdered face; white teeth, ruby lips. A turbam tied at eyebrow level, a silken skirt touching the floor. Flower at an angle on the side of her hair, A smile adorning her face. She may not be the equal of a pandered beauty. But she's at least a common tavern maid.

The woman entered the shop and greeted Sung the Fourth. Then she sang a song, clapping her hands in rhythm. Sung looked at her closely, and her face seemed somehow familiar. Taking her for a prostitute, he invited her to sit down. The woman settled herself opposite Sung and, calling for another order of wine, downed a cupful. Sung took her into his arms, gave her a
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pinch or two, and began to caress her. Then he started to feel her chest and exclaimed, "Hey, little girl, you haven't got any breasts!" He proceeded then to touch her privates, but felt only a dangling tool. "Dammnit!" Sung blurted out. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm no prostitute," the one in disguise, with arms akimbo, said. "I'm merely Chao Cheng from the Ping-chiang Prefecture in Soochow."

"You sneaky, insolent bastard!" Sung screamed. "I'm your teacher, and you made me feel your privates! Now I know it, that captain must have been you."

"Sure, that was all right."

"My package of valuables, where have you put it?"

Whereupon Chao Cheng ordered the waiter, "Return the package to the gentleman." The waiter brought it out and Sung took it. "How did you manage to get this from me?" Sung asked.

"I was sitting in the teahouse a few doors from the inn when I saw the clerk carrying a package of roast pork. I asked to see it and then told him to give some for me also. Then I added some drug to it and wrapped it up again, telling him to take it along to you. After that I made myself up like a captain and tailed you. When you fell over, I took the package away and waited for you here."

"You're really smart," said Sung, "You deserve to go to the Eastern Capital."

They quickly paid the bill and left the tavern together. Going on to an uninhabited area, Chao removed the flowers, washed his face in a stream, and changed back into male attire, complete with a dark, silk cap.

"Now that you're going to the capital," said Sung, "I'll give you a letter of introduction to see someone who is also a student of mine. He lives on the bank of the Pien River and he sells dumplings stuffed with human flesh for a living. He's called Hou Hsing, and since he's second among his siblings, he is known as Hou the Second."

"Thanks, master," said Chao. Then they went to a nearby teahouse where Sung wrote the letter and gave Chao some final instructions, and the two said their farewells, each going his separate way. Sung the Fourth stayed behind in Mo County.

That night, Chao checked into an inn, and when he opened Sung's letter, he said that it said:

Dear Second Brother and Sister:

How have you been since we parted company? There is presently a crook from Ku-su called Chao Cheng who wants to go to the capital to do business. I purposely am sending him to you. This fellow is not one of our members. His flesh is just right for use in your family business. Three times I have suffered from his innocence. So you must by all means get rid of this person, so that he will never be troublesome later to our brotherhood. . . .

After reading this letter, Chao's tongue hung out so far in shock that he could hardly pull it back. "Other people might be cowed and dare not go," he thought finally, "but I'll just see what he can do to me. I'll know how to take care of myself." So he folded up the letter again and sealed it as before.

At dawn, he left the inn and went ahead to Pachiao Town. Then he set out for Flatbridge and reached Ch'en-lu County. He went along the Pien River and, toward noon, saw a dumpling shop on the bank of the river. In front of the door stood a woman, her waist cinched with a scarf in a "jade well" pattern. "Sir, have some dumplings before you go on," she shouted out. On the sign outside the door was written: "The Hou Family Restaurant. Excellent Dumplings."

Chao figured that this must be Hou Hsing's place and went inside. The woman greeted him and asked him to order. "Wait," said Chao, and unslung a pack from his back. It was full of gold and silver hairpins, some with ornamented heads, some with two or three links, some plain—all swiped along the way.

When Hou Hsing's wife saw them, her greed was stirred. "This customer has some hairpins," she said to herself. "Even though I sell human-flesh dumplings and my husband's a thief, we never have that much. Just wait. In a while when he'll order some dumplings and I'll slip in a heavy dose. All those hairpins will be mine."

"Bring me five dumplings," Chao called.

"Right away," answered Hou's wife, taking up a dish. She put five dumplings in it and added to them pinches of a drug powder from a box by the stove.

"The drugs must be in that box," murmured Chao to himself. He took a packet of drugs from his bosom and called, "Please get me some cold water for my medicine." Hou's wife brought him half a bowl of water and placed it on the table. Saying he was not buying dumplings afterward, Chao swallowed the medicine and then took his chopsticks to break open the dough. He took one look at the filling and said, "My father told me not to buy dumplings on the banks of the Pien River because they are all made with human flesh there. Look at this piece. There's a fingernail, and it must be part of a human finger. And on this piece of skin are all sorts of little hairs; it's got to be flesh from the public area."

"Seriously, sir," protested Hou Hsing's wife, "how can you say such things?"

Chao Cheng ate the dumplings and heard the woman say "Fall" while she stood in front of the stove, watching for Chao to topple over. But nothing happened. "Bring me another five," ordered Chao.

"I guess it's because there was too little of the drug. This time I'll put more inside," thought Hou's wife. Chao Cheng again took out his packet and took some medicine. "What kind of medicine are you taking?" the woman could not help asking.

"It's something dispensed by the judge of the Ping-chiang Prefecture called 'cure-everything pilly,'" Chao replied. "It's good for whatever ails a woman, whether it be headaches or troubles with pregnancy or childbirth, or for malfunction in the spleen, or for gastric pain."

"If you could spare a dose," said Hou's wife, "I'd like to try it."

Chao Cheng took out a different packet from inside his robe and gave a hundred or so tiny pills to Hou's wife, who took them all and passed out in front of the stove. "This woman was going to do me in," said Chao. "But I've now taken care of her. Someone else might run away at this point, but I'm going to stay right here." With deliberate nonchalance, he loosened his belt right there and began to pick fries off his body.

Presently a man carrying a load of goods returned. "He must be Hou Hsing," said Chao. "Let's see what he'll do.

Hou and Chao nodded to each other and Hou asked, "Have you had your dumplings yet, sir?"

"I've had them," answered Chao.

"Hou," said Chao, "have you figured out the bill?" He looked here and there for her. Finally he found her on the floor in front of the stove, spittle rolling out one side of her mouth, mumbling incoherently something about being drugged.

"I know now," said Hou Hsing. "This woman was unable to recognize a business comrade and must have been tricked by that customer outside."

So he went to Chao Cheng and apologized, "Brother, my country wife was blind not to know you. I hope you'll forgive us."

"What is your name, brother?" asked Chao.

"I'm Hou Hsing."

"And I'm Chao Cheng of Ku-su."

The two bowed toward each other, and Hou Hsing gave his wife an antidote.

"Here," said Chao, "my teacher Sung the Fourth has a letter for you.

Hou Hsing took it and glanced at it and read its contents, including the final part which said "You must... get rid of this person." When Hou finished, he was filled with anger and hatred and said to himself, "He was insolent three times to my teacher. Tonight I must take his life."
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To Chao Cheng he simply said, "I've been aware of your lofty reputation for a long time, and it's fortunate that I can meet you." He promptly prepared a feast to serve his guest and, after supper, settled Chao down to sleep in the guest room. He and his wife then went about serving their late-night customers outside.

Meanwhile, in his room Chao noticed an offensive smell and, looking around, found a big basin underneath the bed. Sticking his hand there, he felt a human head and then a hand and a foot. He moved all this out to the back door and, stringing the pieces together on a rope, hung everything up on the eaves over the entrance. Then he shut the door and went back to the room just in time to hear the woman say, "Husband, let's begin!"

"Not yet, wife," Hou cautioned. "Let him sleep a little more deeply."

"I saw him take out two or three hundred gold and silver hairpins today. After we do away with him tonight, I'll stick them all over my hair and, tomorrow, show them off to people."

"Aha!" thought Chao Cheng on hearing this. "The two of them want to take my life after all. But it doesn't worry me."

Now Hou Hsing had a son about ten years old called Pan-ko, who, sick with malaria, was confined to bed. Chao Cheng went into his room, carried him to Chao's own bed, covered him with blankets, and then sneaked out the back door. Before long, Hou Hsing's wife, carrying a lamp, and Hou a huge firewood axe, pushed open the door to Chao's room. Seeing a sleeping figure under the covers, they hacked him, blankets and all, into three pieces with a couple of whacks. When Hou lifted up the covers to look, however, he could only exclaim, "Heaven help us! The person we've killed is our own child, Pan-ko." The couple started to wail as Chao shouted at them from behind the back door: "Why have you murdered your own child for nothing? Chao Cheng is right here!"

Hou Hsing was naturally furious when he heard this and, taking up his axe, he sprinted out the back door after Chao. Pop! Pop! Pop! His forehead langed into some objects which turned out to be a human head, a foot, and a hand, all hung together on the eaves like parts of some giant toy. Ordering his wife to move them back into the house, Hou continued his chase. Chao saw behind him Hou closing in and in front of him a creek. Now Chao, as a native of Ping-chiang, was used to the water. With a leap, he plunged into the creek. In pursuit Hou also jumped into the water. With a stroke and a kick, Chao was on the opposite bank. Hou also knew how to swim but was somewhat slower. Reaching land first, Chao took off his clothes and wrung them dry. Hou went up and, from the fourth watch to the beginning of the fifth, tallied him for about twelve li, all the way to a bathhouse by the Heaven-Obeying Gate (also known as the Hsin-cheng Gate) of the capital. Chao Cheng went to wash his face and dry his clothing over the fire. As he was washing, someone pulled both legs from under him and flippantly flung them to the floor. When Chao saw that it was Hou Hsing, he knocked the latter down with his two bare knees and, holding him down, pummelled him thoroughly.

It was at that moment that an old man dressed as a jailer appeared and, coming up, told them "break it up, for my sake." Chao Cheng and Hou Hsing lifted their heads to see that it was none other than Sung the Fourth. They both greeted Sung and immediately bowed to him. Sung recon­ ciled the two of them and took them to an herb­ tea shop for a cup or two. There, Hou reported to Sung what had happened.

"Let's let bygones be bygones," said Sung. "Chao Cheng is going to be the Eastern Capital tomorrow. The fellow selling fried dumplings at the foot of the Gold Bridge there is also a member of our brotherhood. His name is Wang Hsiu-jein, and in the ability to get up and around on rooftops, he has no peer. That's why he's been given the nick­ 4 nam 'Sick Kittie'. He lives in the rear of the Great Hsiang-ko Monastery. He now has on his peddler's stand a large gold-flecked jar with a glaze fired in the kilns of the Chung-shan Prefec­ ture in Ting-chou. He values it as much as his own life. Do you think you can steal it from him?"

"No problem," said Chao Cheng. "Wait until the city gate opens; then I'll meet you at Hou Hsing's place around noon."

Chao Cheng put on his brick-shaped cap tied at the rear and his double-breasted black silk gown and went ahead to the foot of the Gold Bridge. There he saw a vendor's stand with a large gold­ flecked jar on it. Behind the stand stood an old man:

With a single-layer green gauze cap from Yüeh-chou 5 And a willow-patterned cotton shirt
Around the waist, a scarf of the "pale wolf" pattern.

"This must be Wang Hsiu," said Sung to himself. He crossed over the bridge and spied a bit of red rice from a shop roof. Then he plucked a few leaves from a vegetable stand. He put the rice and the leaves into his mouth and chewed them. Then he went over by Wang's stand again and, tossing down six pennies, bought a couple of fried dumplings while purposely letting a penny fall to the ground. When Wang went over to pick it up, Chao spat the chewed-up rice and leaves onto his cap, and then ambled off with his dumplings. He hung around the Gold Bridge until he saw a younger skipping by. "Hey, little boy," Chao called. "Here's five pennies. You see that dumpling seller, Mr. Wang? On his cap is a pile of insects and ant droppings. Go tell him about it, and don't say I told you too." Sure enough, the child went over and said, "Mr. Wang, look what's on your cap." Wang Hsiu took off his cap and, thinking the 5 A magnificent Buddhist temple in Kuei-feng.
4 A famous mountain-precipice producing area in Ch'i-yang County in modern Hopei. 6 To the northeast of Ting-ch'ing County in Shantung Prov­ince.

in mess was really insect droppings, went into a tea­ house to wipe it off. But when he came out to look at his stand, the gold-flecked jar had disappear­ ed. For when Chao Cheng saw Wang Hsiu go into the teahouse, he was quick to take advantage of the latter's momentary inattention; snatching the jar and tucking it up his sleeve, he sped away.

He went directly to Hou's place. Both Sung and Hou were startled to realize what had happened. "Hello, I don't want his stuff," said Chao. "I'll just return it to his wife."

Then he went into his room to change into an old, tattered cap, a pair of old hempen shoes, and a worn-out cotton shirt. Clutching the gold­ flecked jar in one hand, he went straight to the rear of the Great Hsiang-ko Monastery. He sought out Wang's wife and greeted her saying, "Your husband told me to come back here to ask you for a new shirt, an undershirt, a pair of pants, and new shoes and socks. The gold-flecked jar here is to show I'm telling the truth."

The wife had no idea that it was a trick. Taking the jar, she brought out the various items of cloth­ ing and turned them over to Chao. Chao took them and once more went to see Sung the Fourth and Hou Hsing. "Master," he said, "I exchanged the gold-flecked jar at his house for all the cloth­ ing here. In a while, let's all go together and re­ turn everything as a joke. Meanwhile I'll just put them on and go have a bit of fun."

Chao then dressed himself in Wang's things and went back to the city. He went to the Sung Family Pleasure Grounds for a stroll and bought some wine and pastries. Then he left the area and was crossing the Gold Bridge when he heard someone call out, "Chao Cheng!" He turned to see that it was Sung the Fourth, along with Hou Hsing. The three of them went together to the Gold Bridge where they saw that Wang Hsiu was still selling fried dumplings.

"How about having some tea with us, Wang Hsiu?" said Sung. Wang greeted his teacher and Hou. Then he
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looked at Chao Cheng and asked Sung who he was. Sung was about to tell him when Chao dragged him aside and told him not to give away his name: "Just say I'm a relative of yours. You'll see my reasons later."

“What is his name?” Wang asked again.

“He is a relative of mine. I brought him here to the capital for some fun,” Sung replied.

“In that case,” said Wang Hsiu, “I'll leave my dumpling stand at the teahouse for a while. Let's all go for some wine at a quiet tavern outside the Heaven-Obeying Gate.”

They went into the tavern. The waiter brought out the wine, and they all downed a few rounds. "Master, I was so upset this morning," said Wang Hsiu. "I had just carried my stand out there when a man bought dumplings dropped a penny on the ground. I went to pick it up and didn't know that some kind of insects crapped on my cap. When I went into the teahouse to wipe it off, the gold-flecked jar disappeared. I've been stewing all day."

"That man has an awful lot of gall," said Sung. "But we must count him clever to have succeeded in pulling a trick on you. Don't get all worked up about it. When we have time tomorrow, all of us will help you look for this jar. It's only a simple matter, and we'll find out what happened no matter what. You won't lose anything." Chao Cheng only chuckled to himself at this. All four of them had had their fill of wine and, as it was already dark, each headed for home.

Now let's talk about Wang Hsiu. When he got home, his wife asked him, "Hushand, some time ago did you ask someone to bring the gold-flecked jar home?"

"I never did," said Wang.

"Well, it's here," said his wife, bringing it out.

"But he took a few clothes away."

Wang could not guess who it might have been when, suddenly, he recalled: "Today that relative of Sung the Fourth's was wearing a set of clothing that looked very much like mine." He kept wondering about it and the whole thing depressed him. Presently he took some wine and, putting aside all his cares, drank himself into a stupor with his wife. Then he took off his clothes to go to sleep, saying to his wife, "We, too haven't done anything together for a long time."

"You're an old man," said the wife. "So don't go having wild ideas."

"Haven't you heard, wife," said Wang, "that 'Youth can curb desire, but the aged burn like fire'?

He had by then moved alongside his wife and started in on his business. He was still at it when Chao Cheng, taking advantage of their drunkenness, opened the door and sneaked in under the bed. He flung the chamber pot against the bedroom door when he realized the two of them were having their sport. Startled, Wang Hsiu and his wife jumped up as if they had seen a ghost. They saw someone crawl out from underneath their bed, carrying a package in his hand. In the lamplight, Wang could make out the man with whom he and his companions had been drinking that afternoon. "What are you up to?" he asked.

"Sung the Fourth told me to return your package," said Chao.

Wang took it and saw that it contained a pile of clothes and demanded again, "Who are you?"

"I'm Chao Cheng of the Ping-chiang Prefecture in Ku-su."

"Ah, so that's it," said Wang. "I've heard of your fair name for a long time now. It's a great pleasure to make your acquaintance." Then Wang kept Chao there to spend the night.

The following day, they took a casual stroll together. "You see that great mansion at the foot of the White Tiger Bridge?" said Wang Hsiu. "It is Prince Chien's residence. There's quite a store of wealth there."

"We'll work on it when it gets darker," said Chao.

"All right, then." Around the third watch that night, Chao Cheng dug a tunnel to Prince Chien's storehouse and made a haul of thirty thousand strings of cash and one ivory-white jade belt with a muted flower pattern in an encircling dragon design. Wang Hsiu kept watch on the outside, and returned to hide out with Chao in his home.

The following day, Prince Ch'ien wrote a letter to Magistrate T'eng, and the latter reacted angrily when he read it. "How can we tolerate this kind of burglary right here in the capital?" he fumed. Right away he dispatched the inspector Ma Han and ordered him to catch the robber of the Chien residence within three days.

When Inspector Ma received his orders, he made all the constables work around the clock. In returning home, he passed by the Great Huang-kou Monastery. There he encountered a man with a brick-shaped cap tied at the rear and wearing a purple shirt who came up and asked, "Some tea, Inspector?" Together they went into a teahouse, and a waiter brought them tea. The man in the purple shirt took out a packet of pine nuts and walnut kernels and put them into the two cups.

"May I have your name, sir?" said the inspector. "My surname is Chao and I'm called Cheng," replied the man. "I'm the one who robbed the Chien residence last night."

When Inspector Ma heard this, he felt a chill running down his spine, but he could do no more than wait for other constables to come by and help arrest the man. He drank the tea and suddenly everything turned upside-down: he'd been duped! "The inspector is drunk," Cheng called out, and holding him up, took out a pair of trusty scissors and snipped off half of one of the inspector's sleeves, [which contained his money] tucking it into his own. He paid the bill and told the waiter that he as going out to "get someone to take care of the inspector." Then he went off by himself.

After a while, the effect of the drug in Ma's stomach wore off and he came to, only see that Chao was gone. He returned home for the night.

At dawn the following day Inspector Ma escorted Magistrate T'eng to the palace for the morning audience. Riding his horse, the magistrate was just on the point of entering the Gate of Proclaiming Virtue when he saw a man in a black shirt and a wraparound hat with curved corners blocking the way. This man shouted out a loud greeting and said, "Prince Ch'ien has an official letter to present to you." Magistrate T'eng accepted it; the man bowed and went off. But even as the magistrate, still mounted, was reading the letter, he discovered that the buckle of the official goldfish belt around his waist had disappeared.

The letter read as follows: The Ku-su thief Chao Cheng humbly informs the honorable magistrate: All the articles that came from the Chien residence were really stolen by me. Your Honor wants to find my hideout, it is as far as the ends of the earth, and as near as your hands before your eyes.

On reading this the magistrate became even more agitated. When he returned to his tribunal after the audience, he immediately went to his courtroom and sought out official complaints from the people. Those who had written deposits were to have placed them in a special box. When he had read about ten documents, he noticed that one of them did not accuse or complain about any injustice, as was normal procedure. On that document was written only a little dirty, to the tune "The Moon over the West River":

As surely as waters return to the ocean
Outlaws to the capital flow.
Inspector Ma, the inspector-in-chief, now knows
The vest is not the main man. 1
I've even taken the prince's belt of jade,
And, lifting his goldfish, dealt the magistrate a blow.

[In other words, a petty officer shouldn't behave as if he were the big boss.]

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Now who is in the world is that so-and-so?
An earthy belt of cloth, beside the little moon’s glow.

“T’s Chao Cheng again,” the magistrate said when he finished, “What a master thief he is!” So he immediately sent for Ma Han to ask him about the progress of the case.

“Because I couldn’t recognize the thief Chao Cheng,” Ma reported, “I had a run-in with him yesterday. He’s really a pro. I did find out, however, that he’s the student of Sung the Fourth of Cheng-chou. If we can apprehend Sung, then we’ll have Chao as well.”

T’eng suddenly reminded Magistrate T’eng of the case in which Sung had robbed Chang Pu’s storehouse, a case not yet solved. So he summoned Officer Wang Tsun and told him to cooperate with Ma Han in seeking out and apprehending the thieves Sung the Fourth and Chao Cheng.

“It’s hard to trace down those culprits,” reported Wang. “I beg Your Honor to set a longer time limit, and you must also post an official reward. If someone greedy for the reward money comes forward with information, this case will be easily settled.”

T’eng agreed to this and set one month as the deadline for the apprehension of the criminals. He accordingly wrote out an official proclamation:

Anyone who discovers and reports the whereabouts of the stolen goods will receive one thousand strings of cash from the government.

Ma Han and Wang Tsun took the document and went to Prince Chi’en’s residence to report it to him and to beg him to add to the reward money. So Prince Chi’en pledged another thousand strings. Then the two went to Squire “Tightwad” Chang’s place to ask him to also post a reward.

But considering that he had already lost valuables worth fifty thousand in cash, how could he possibly be willing to put out any reward?

“Squire, you’ll lose a lot if you don’t spend a little,” everyone told him. “If the robbers can be apprehended, the great pile of lost goods will revert back to you. Even the magistrate has put out a reward on your behalf, and the prince has also signed up for a thousand. If you’re nonetheless unwilling, it won’t look good for you when the magistrate finds out.”

Squire Chang was unable to argue with this and so he wrote out yet another reward poster, reluctantly pledging five hundred strings. Inspector Ma took all the posters and posted them outside the tribunal, and then he conferred with Officer Wang and each of them went off to carry out their investigations.

Large horde of people gathered to read the posters. Sung the Fourth also read them and went off to confer with Chao Cheng. “Damn that Wang Tsun and that Ma Han,” said Chao Cheng. “There’s been no ill-feeling between us in the past, but they insist on increasing the reward money to get us. And damn Squire Chang the tightwad. All the others put up a thousand strings of cash; he alone posts only five hundred. He really rates us cheaply! Let’s give him something else to worry about; only then will I be satisfied.”

Sung the Fourth also resent Officer Wang for having sent the constables to arrest him and Inspector Ma for reporting to the authorities that Chao Cheng was in league with him. So they pooled their ideas and came up with a plan they both approved with enthusiasm. Chao then handed over the ivory-white jade belt stolen from Chi’en’s place to Sung, and the latter, in turn, picked out a few of the most renowned pieces of jewelry from the package of valuables from Tightwad Chang and handed them over to Chao. The two then went their separate ways, each to carry out his own part of the plan.

Now let’s follow Sung the Fourth who, having just started on his way, ran into the man with the bamboo ladle who had been begging outside Chang’s door that day. Sung got hold of him and took him outside the Heaven-Obeying Gate, all the way to Hou Hsing’s place, for a rest. “I need your help today,” he then told him.

“Whatever my benefactor might want of me, I wouldn’t think of saying no.”

“T’s a thousand strings of cash in it for you, to feed your family.”

The man was startled. “My goodness,” he cried. “I’m not worthy of receiving all that.”

“Just do as I say,” said Sung, “and you’ll do all right.”

He took out the jade belt and told Hou Hsing to dress up as a palace officer. “Take this belt to Tightwad Chang’s pawnshop and pawn it for money. This belt is priceless, but just ask for three hundred strings of cash and say to him, ‘I’ll come back to redeem it in three days; if I can’t make it, I’ll ask for money for another two hundred strings. Meanwhile you keep it in your shop and guard it with care.’

Hou Hsing went off and did everything he was told. Now Squire Chang was a greedy sort and, once he laid eyes on the belt and saw the prospect of earning some interest, he did not bother about the article’s origin and accepted it as security for the three hundred strings of cash.

After Hou Hsing took the money and reported back to Sung the Fourth, Sung told the beggar to go take down the poster on Prince Chi’en’s gate and claim the reward. When Prince Chi’en learned that the stolen article had been located, he ordered the beggar to be brought before him so that he could interrogate him personally.

“When I went to the pawnshop to pawn something,” the man told him, “I just happened to see the clerk selling the white jade belt to a customer from the north and asking a price of a thousand five hundred taels. Someone was saying that it came from Your Highness’s residence, and so I’ve come to report.”

Prince Chi’en dispatched more than a hundred soldiers and, with the beggar showing the way, they hurried to Tightwad Chang’s residence. Before anyone could say anything, they searched the pawnshop’s storeroom and came up with the white jade belt. When Squire Chang came out to explain, these soldiers—now why would they bother with reasons?—slopped a noise around his neck and brought him along with his two chief clerks to face the prince. After Prince Chi’en had examined the belt and found that it was the genuine article and that the informant had not lied, he wrote out an order for the beggar instructing his treasury to give the latter the thousand strings of reward money.

Mounting his sedan chair, Prince Chi’en then went personally to the K’ai-feng (tribunal) to pay a call on Magistrate T’eng, delivering Chang and his subordinates for questioning. Because he had been unable to arrest the culprits himself, the magistrate was extremely embarrassed to have the prince deliver them. “You reported to our court the other day that you were robbed and listed all kinds of valuables,” he chided Chang. “I’ve been wondering how you, a commoner, could have accumulated all that wealth. Now I know that it’s because you’re involved with thieves! Now speak honestly: who stole the jade belt for you?”

“My possessions are inherited from my ancestors, and I’ve never been a thief or a fence,” Chang replied. “This belt was brought to me by a palace officer late yesterday afternoon and pawned for three hundred strings of cash.”

“Don’t you know about Prince Chi’en’s losing an ivory-white jade belt with a patterned flower pattern and an encircling dragon design? Pursued the magistrate. ‘How is it you didn’t consider its origin and just gave out the money? Where is that palace officer now? It’s clear your explanation is sheer nonsense!’

He shouted for the jailers to apply torture to Chang and his two clerks; they were beaten until their skin split open, their flesh curled, and blood flowed freely. Chang was unable to bear the pain and volunteered to accept the responsibility of locating the man who had pawned the belt within three days. If he proved unable to meet the time...
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limit, he agreed to accept the blame. The magis- trate did have some doubts of his own; so he only had the two clerks held in jail and, putting Chang under guard, granted him permission to report within three days.

His eyes brimming with tears, Chang left the tribunal and went to sit down in a tavern, offering his guards a few drinks. They were just lifting their cups when an old man strolled in from outside to ask, "Which one of you is Squire Chang?"

Chang put his head down and dared not reply. The guards asked, "Who are you, sir, and why are you looking for Squire Chang?"

"I have some good news for him. I made a special trip to his pawnshop and heard that there was a trial going on at the tribunal. So I came on over."

Only then did Chang get up to say, "I'm Chang Fu. What kind of good news do you have for me? Please sit down right here and tell me about it."

The old man drew close to Chang and sat down. "The things you lost from your storehouse," he asked, "did you ever find out where they went?"

"I never did."

"I know a little something, and I've purposely come to tell you about it. If you don't believe me, I'm willing to show you the way. Only after you've seen the stolen articles will I dare to claim the reward."

Squire Chang was overjoyed. "If I can recover those fifty thousand strings worth of goods, he thought, "even if I have to pay a fine to Prince Ch'ien, I'll still have something left over. If I use a little bribe here and there, I can get free of all these troubles." So he asked, "Since you are so sure of yourself, may I have the thief's name?"

The old man whispered a few things into Chang's ear and Chang became greatly surprised. "That's not possible!" he exclaimed.

"I'm willing to go to the tribunal and write out an accusation. If I can furnish the genuine booty, I'll accept the blame for the crime myself."

Chang could not have been happier. "I'll trouble you to have a few drinks here with me," he said. "When the magistrate holds his night court, we can go and report together."

The four of them drank until they were slightly tipsy. The time soon came for the magistrate to hold his court. Squire Chang brought out a piece of paper, had the old man write out an accusation, and the four of them went together to the tribunal to report. Magistrate T'eng looked over what the old man, whose name was Wang Pao, had written; it said that Inspector Ma and Officer Wang had stolen Chang Fu's treasures. "The two of them have served for many years," T'eng thought to himself. "How could they do such a thing?" So he asked Wang Pao, "Aren't you making false accusations over some private grudge? What proof do you have?"

"I was working as a broker in Cheng chou, said Wang Pao, "when I saw a couple of people selling a lot of gold and jewels there. They said that they had more stashed away at home and would bring them when they wanted to do more business. I recognized them as constables from this prefecture and wondered how they came by so many valuable things. I've now seen Chang Fu's list of stolen items, and they coincide with the things sold; so I want to take Chang Fu to their houses for a search. If we don't find anything, I'm willing to accept the blame."

Magistrate T'eng had no doubts about all this. Nevertheless, he sent Inspector Li Shun to lead a group of alert constables and go along with Wang Pao and Chang Fu. At this time Inspector Ma and Officer Wang were running around the various counties investigating the two robbery cases and thus were not home. The group first went to Officer Wang's place, made an outcry, and rushed in. Wang's wife, carrying their three-year-old child, was matching a piece of date cake in front of the window and amusing herself with the baby. She was startled at the commotion and wondered what was going on. Afraid that all this racket would frighten the child, she covered his ears with her sleeve and took him into another room. The intruders followed on her heels and, surrounding her, demanded to know where she had hidden the stolen goods from Squire Chang's house. The woman's eyes became glazed, and she did not know what to say. Impatient at her silence, the constables proceeded to open up chests and overturn trunks, rummaging all over the place. They found a few silver hairpins and some clothes, but there were no stolen goods. Inspector Li was about to vent his frustration on Wang Pao when he saw the latter duck down and crawl beneath the bed. From a leg on the side of the bed next to the wall, he pulled a package and, grinning from ear to ear, brought it out. The group opened it up and saw that it contained a pair of gold cups with a flower design inlaid with various kinds of jewels, ten tortoiseshell cups rimmed in gold, and a string of prayer beads of pearls from the North Sea. Squire Chang saw that these were from his storehouse and, feeling a sudden shock of recognition, cried out loudly.

"The woman herself had no idea where these things had come from. Doubled over with fright, she could hardly close her mouth nor lift her drooping arms. The crowd did not bother to listen to explanations in any case and, taking a rope, tied a noose around her neck. Moaning and weeping, she entreated her child to her neighbors and had no choice but to go with the group."

The group then went to Inspector Ma's house and searched around; and it was again Wang Pao who poked around and located in the scaffolding under the eaves a package of pearls, along with such items as gold bracelets inlaid with precious stones—all of which Squire Chang identified. So the wives of both spouses were brought to the tribunal where Magistrate T'eng was still sitting on the bench waiting for answers. He saw everyone rush in and line up the many stolen articles on the floor, and he listened to the report that the goods had been found on the leg of a bed and under a roof and had all been properly identified by Chang Fu. T'eng was greatly surprised. "I've often heard that it takes a thief to catch a thief," he thought. "But I couldn't imagine Wang Tuan and Ma Han really doing this kind of thing."

He shouted out orders to lock up the two wives, and set a time limit for catching the culprit; the recovered booty he sent to the government storehouse for temporary safekeeping. The informant waited outside and, when the stolen articles were properly identified, received his promised reward.

"I'm someone from a family with means," pleaded Chang Fu to the magistrate, kowtowing all the while. "Regardless of what has happened, I really know nothing concerning the jade belt from Prince Ch'ien's residence. As for the stolen goods from my home, they've already been identified. But I'm loath to claim them and would be willing to offer them in restitution to Prince Ch'ien. I hope Your Honor will expedite the matter and release me and my two clerks, and may the gods bless you and your posterity forever if you do so."

Since Magistrate T'eng knew in his heart that Chang was innocent, he allowed him to leave on bail. Wang Pao followed Chang to his home, collected his five hundred strings' reward, and left. Now Wang Pao was no other than Wang Hois, the "Big Kitten," who was without peer in negotiating rooftops of tall structures. It was Sung the Fourth who designed the plan, deliberately sending Wang Hois to hide the things stolen from Squire Chang under the bed and the eaves of the two houses. It was also Sung who told Wang to change his name to Wang Pao, so that when he made his accusations and fished out the stolen goods, the government would have no way of knowing who he really was.

As for Wang Tuan and Ma Han, I can now relate how, having heard the news about the ar-
THE MASTER THIEF

rest of their wives, they hurried back from their work in the outlying counties to see Magistrate T'eng. The magistrate did not bother with explanations but started right in with torture, beating them until their flesh ripped open and demanding that they confess to having stolen Chang Fu's goods. But through it all the two refused to confess. The magistrate then ordered the two wives brought out from jail, and the four of them could only gaze at one another, completely at a loss for words. Even the magistrate did not know what to do and simply sent all of them to jail.

The following day he again summoned Chang to the tribunal and urged him to use his own resources to pay back Prince Ch'ien for his lost articles and to wait for an eventual settlement from the government for his own losses. Unable to resist this pressure, Chang could do nothing other than accept this proposal. But when he thought over everything later at home, he became tremendously frustrated and depressed. Moreover, he really could not bring himself to part with his possessions. So, in the end, he hanged himself in his storehouse. Alas for the famous Squire "Tight-wad" Chang! Because of his stubborn miserliness, he wound up bringing great calamity upon himself, losing even his own life. As for Officer Wang and Inspector Ma, they both eventually died in jail.

The gang of thieves, on the other hand, openly perpetrated crimes in the Eastern Capital, drinking good wine and bedling famous courtesans, and there was no one to stop them. During that period, the capital was in turmoil; no household enjoyed peace. It was not until Lung-ku Academician Pao became the magistrate that these thieves began to feel some fear and finally disbanded, allowing the city to experience peace for the first time. As evidence there is a poem:

Passionary and greed bring calamity.
The Eastern Capital was overrun by robbers and bands.
Only when Magistrate Pao arrived at last
Did we know that peace comes only with good officials.

THE TRICKSTER

The trickster is similar to the master thief in that his wit surpasses that of others; yet he differs from the master thief in not putting himself in direct competition with his own colleagues. The tricks of tricksters can be as varied as the types of persons who fall into their traps. A trick can be as simple as a husband's cheating his wife for a few drinks ("Liu Ling"); it can be as disastrous as a professional scoundrel launching a well-planned fraud (as in "The Swindler Alchemists").

The trickster, unless he is a professional one, may not be motivated by a desire for material gain. But whatever his intentions are, he is a clever and persuasive deceiver who takes advantage of a situation and a weakness of the victim—stupidity, greed, lust, or simple carelessness. In this sense, the trickster is a "con man," and a tale of this theme is normally about the exploitation of confidence. However, it should be pointed out that the trickster is not necessarily a negative character: he can be just a prankster whose mischief is the trademark of his life.