

李漁：鶴歸樓

Tower of the Returning Crane

By Li Yu (1611-1680?)

Translated by Nathan Mao

*The Milky Way is shallow and clear.
The Cowherd and the Spinning-maid
stand on opposite banks of the river of
stars,
Eagerly awaiting their yearly reunion.
Tonight is the night of their rendezvous.
Each loves and is loved, relishing every
second of the fleeting night,
Praying that dawn should never come.
Haven't you, Sir, also witnessed human
separation and eternal parting?
A beautiful maid, once gone, will never
return.*

THIS POEM, written during the Yuan dynasty, describes the love between the legendary Cowherd and the Spinning-maid. Why is it chosen to introduce this story? Most poems about the legend emphasize the pain and sorrow of separation, but this one stresses their happiness and contentment in the brief time they spend together.

While the separation of loved ones is one of life's most sorrowful experiences, it is definitely not the worst that can happen. If one only thinks about those who wish to separate but cannot, it becomes obvious that on occasion even separation has its own peculiar blessings.

During the Cheng-ho years of the Sung dynasty (1111-1117) there lived in K'ai-feng-fu a young man named Tuan P'u, but called Yu-ch'u. He successfully passed the first degree examination at the age of nine, and from then on was considered a genius. He was ready for the second degree (*chu-jen*) examination, when he was nineteen, but refused to take it because he felt that if he passed it, he would immediately become a high official without having ever tasted the hardships of

life. Afraid of being spoiled by good fortune, he chose to wait a few years so that he would have time to mature.

He held a similar attitude towards marriage. He had lost both parents when he was young and, not having had the chance to perform his filial duties, he felt that he was as yet unprepared to be either a husband or a father. He therefore delayed getting married as long as he could.

Tuan had a good friend named Yu Tzu-ch'ang who was similarly talented. The two had many interests in common except that Yu had certain ideas about marriage which Tuan did not share. Yu considered marriage as one of the most basic and pleasurable experiences of mankind, and he refused to delay partaking of this experience either for love or for money. Despite his eagerness to be married, his standards remained high. Particularly, he wanted his bride to be the most beautiful girl imaginable. But there simply were none available who could meet his specifications. Consequently, he was just as single as his friend, Tuan Yu-ch'u.

One day Emperor Hui-tsung decreed that those scholars who possessed first degrees must present themselves for the second degree examination. Why was such a decree necessary? The country had for sometime been under attack on three fronts by the Nu-chen Tartars and the Kitan Tartars; from the border came calls for help several times a year and it had become increasingly difficult to recruit new officials to replace those who lost their lives in the line of duty. But young and talented scholars were not at all anxious to enter government service because they were afraid they would be drafted and sent to the border areas.

Tuan and Yu, therefore, took the second degree examination, but only reluctantly. They were afraid to pass it with flying colours and deliberately wrote their essays in a casual manner. They passed the examination despite their attempt to conceal their ability, Tuan doing slightly better than Yu.

AT THE same time in K'ai-feng-fu there was an official named Kuan who had two girls waiting to be married. One was named Pearl and the other Jade. Pearl was Kuan's daughter and Jade, his niece. Jade was like a daughter to Kuan; her parents had died when she was very young and she had been raised in her uncle's house. The two girls were superbly beautiful. But if one had to make a choice, he would probably say that Jade was lovelier than Pearl. In the capital there was a popular four-line verse describing their beauty:

Pearl is what you can hold in your hand;
But Jade is the rarest of gems.
So, if you cannot have both,
Sadly, take Jade and leave Pearl.

How did such a verse come to exist? When Emperor Hui-tsung was searching for imperial concubines, the eunuchs unanimously recommended Pearl and Jade for his consideration. When the emperor asked which one was prettier, they said it was Jade. Soon after the episode, this verse began to circulate widely among the people. From then on, the reputation of the two girls was established in the capital.

Just as one, or both, of the girls was about to enter the palace to be imperial concubines, the Tartars surrounded the capital. The siege lasted

Li Yu, or Li Li-weng, the early Ch'ing playwright and devotee of the popular arts, is often cited though not firmly established as the author of the erotic novel Jou P'u T'uan (The Prayer Mat of Flesh). Li lived in Hangchow and Nanking, composed a variety of poetry and prose, wrote and produced popular dramas, and dedicated himself to the pursuit of pleasure. The Twelve Towers is a collection of tales of life and love in 17th century China, each named for a certain lou – which may be a tower, a chamber, or any other kind of dwelling symbolic of the story's theme. The title of our story is Ho-kuei lou, or "Tower of the Returning Crane". It is told that in Han times, a man long prevented from returning to his home was finally able to do so only after he had been transformed into a crane. Thus the expression 化鶴歸來 (returning as a crane), signifying "never to return in the present incarnation". An English version of the book The Twelve Towers, prepared by Nathan Mao, will be published in 1973 by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. It is a free translation of Li Yu's original, from which this story is taken.

two months. When the Tartars finally retreated, one outspoken official advised the emperor not to take any more concubines just then, because the country was at war and the emperor should devote himself to affairs of state rather than to his private pleasures. Very reluctantly and with inexpressible regret, the emperor relinquished the idea for the moment. Consequently, the two girls were spared his royal attentions.

When the results of the second degree examination were announced, Kuan realized that there were two talented and promising scholars in his area who were still bachelors. Having faith in their futures, Kuan started the negotiations and arrangements which would lead to their marrying his two girls.

When he heard the news, Yu was exuberant at his good fortune but was curious as to which of the two would be his. Kuan had already decided that Tuan should marry his daughter Pearl and that Yu should marry Jade. His reason was that Pearl who was a year older than Jade, deserved to marry Tuan who had done slightly better than Yu in the second-degree examination.



Cover-design of a modern edition of *The Twelve Towers*.

To many it seemed that his relatively poorer performance in the examination was winning for Yu the greater prize — a beauty coveted by the emperor. Needless to say, he was happy beyond words. Tuan's reaction to the marriage was quite different. He felt that he did not deserve to marry anyone as pretty as Pearl and was afraid that Heaven might be jealous of such good fortune. In sharp contrast to his friend's exuberance, he became more cautious and restrained in his behaviour.

Though the girls were formally engaged to Yu and Tuan, Mr. Kuan delayed the marriage until after the third degree examination in which Yu, contrary to the previous results, did much better than Tuan. Yu's success in the examination was worrisome to Kuan. Should he or should he not maintain his original decision and marry his own daughter to Tuan? That decision had resulted from his belief that his daughter, the elder of the two girls, deserved the young man who had shown most promise in the examination. Previously that was Tuan; now it seemed to be Yu. Yes, he said to himself, Pearl should marry Yu because Yu would be given an appointment soon, whereas Tuan, on

the basis of his examination grade, might have to wait a long time. With his snobbishness overcoming any moral considerations involved in making the switch, he decided to have Yu for his son-in-law and Tuan for the husband of his niece, Jade.

The four lovers soon discovered Kuan's last-minute change in the partnership arrangements.

II

YU WANTED Jade, but had to marry Pearl instead. At first he felt that he had been short-changed; but this discontent soon disappeared. After all, Pearl was also beautiful; in fact, she was superior to Jade in deportment and had a better temperament. Though a romantic at heart, Yu gradually felt that Pearl was good enough for him to forget other women. The love that grew between Yu and his wife was so deep and all-pervading that Yu swore that he would never have a concubine even if Pearl didn't give birth to a son. They spent every possible minute together enjoying the bliss of married life.

In the meantime, Tuan discovered that his wife, Jade, had strong moral principles in addition to her beauty. He, too, was thoroughly content. But his new-found happiness did not eliminate the older fear that he was underserving. Who was he to merit such a rare beauty? Would she be his for the rest of his life? After all, the emperor had desired her and had been thwarted in his plans. Tuan's misgivings about his good fortune were so strong that he could not thoroughly enjoy his wife's company. Somehow he felt that he had usurped her from someone else, from someone who truly deserved her, deserved her more than he did.

Jade, of course, did not understand the complexities of Tuan's mind. She thought that her husband was worried about his career or about the possibility of being sent to the border. So she tried her best to comfort him.

"I'm not worried about where I might be sent," said Tuan. "And if I have to die for our country, I will. What worries me is whether I, a poor scholar, deserve so many blessings so early in life."

"Tell me about some of these blessings," his wife replied.

"Early in life, I became known as a genius; though I am young, I have already passed many important examinations; and now I am blessed with a rare beauty like you. But I fear that every stroke of good luck has its countershare of misfortune. Any one of these blessings could create sad misfortune for me. Madam, do you know anything which would prove my fears groundless?"

"No, but do you have any plans to avert trouble should it come?" asked his wife.

"In my opinion, the best one can do is to be sparing in using his allotment of happiness. He should train his body and mind for adversity as well as for good fortune. When luck is with him, he should not over-extend himself by spending recklessly on fancy clothing, food or lodging. For if he is spoiled during periods of success, he will not develop the stamina to stand the suffering that is found to come with adversity. The same applies to marital relationships. No matter how close to each other husband and wife may be, it is possible they will have to separate one day. The more they love each other when together, the more they will suffer when separated."

Jade was deeply impressed by her husband's interpretation of the mystery of life. All she wanted was for her husband to be appointed to a peaceful place where they could be together for the rest of their lives.

But Tuan felt and spoke like a doomed man. "I have had my share of the good life," he said "and I therefore anticipate that drastic misfortunes will come my way. Even if these were peaceful times, I would still have my share of misfortunes. But now, in a time of trouble and war, it will be much worse."

Such a pessimistic point of view! Jade was heartbroken and tears unwittingly streamed down her cheeks. To console her, Tuan said, "Don't feel so sad. Prepare yourself in advance for bad luck to strike. Don't use up your share of happiness at one time; save some for later. When trouble comes, be prepared to receive it with tranquillity. If I get an appointment, no matter where it is I will try to take you with me. No matter what happens, I hope that we can face the future together. People say that death is worse than parting; but I believe that parting can be worse than death. Even if we die in a foreign land, as long as we die together it is

better than to be separated. But I am afraid that fate may have other plans for us."

"Why did you say that separation is worse than death?" asked Jade "Please explain what you meant."

"If husband and wife are separated," Tuan replied, "They will miss each other and suffer every day. They will not be able to eat during the day nor sleep at night. Their longing for each other will age them prematurely and cause them untold agony. On the other hand, if the husband or the wife dies, the survivor will not cling to any illusion of a reunion and thus will become reconciled to fate."

Impressed by this part of her husband's philosophy, Jade decided then and there that she would remain a virtuous widow should her husband die, and felt that she could accept the challenges of fickle fate.

SEVERAL months passed peacefully; then came the news of their appointments. Yu was assigned to the Board of Revenue and Population, and Tuan to the Board of Works. Jade was thoroughly happy and felt that she could now relax, but her husband felt differently.

"Don't be too happy yet," Tuan said to her, "have you not heard the story of the Old Man of the Border Region who unexpectedly won a horse and thought that he had had a stroke of good luck? Well, it was that very horse that broke his son's leg. Apparent good sometimes portends hidden evil."

Thinking that Tuan was too much given to morose contemplation, Jade paid little attention to his warning. For how was she to know that this indeed would be the beginning of bad luck?

At this time there circulated in the capital a doggerel about the emperor:

When the city gates are closed,
Be open to suggestions;
But when the city gates are open,
Be closed to suggestions.

Indeed, the emperor did accept suggestions from his officials when the Tartars were outside the city walls, and he dropped the idea of acquiring additional concubines when told public opinion would be against it. But he accepted such

suggestions only temporarily to placate the people. When there no longer was any immediate danger, he became his old self and regretted his earlier decision to forsake his pleasure. To his chagrin, he discovered that the first and second beauties of the land had, in the interim, been married to two new officials, Tuan and Yu, whom he considered upstarts. The emperor was jealous of them and considered that they had usurped what was to have been his.

The emperor's jealousy grew until it became so intense that he said to his ministers, "These two 'starving' men have married the first beauties of the land. Assign them to two distant posts so that they will not be able to return home in three to five years. I want them and their wives to become the contemporary version of the Cowherd and the Spinning-maid, separated by the Milky Way, with only small hopes of reunion."

"We need to pay tribute to the Tartars just about now. Why don't we assign them to escort the tribute?" one of the cabinet ministers suggested.

"This seems to be an easy assignment which does not involve much hardship," replied the Emperor.

"That is not entirely correct, Your Majesty," the minister said. "Escorting gold or silk to the Tartars is a most difficult assignment, because the Tartars frequently accuse the officials-in-charge of theft and require them to make up the alleged losses. It takes the official-in-charge of the gold tribute two to three years before he can return home and the official-in-charge of the silk tribute sometimes ten."

This made Emperor Hui-tsung very happy. He ordered Yu to be in charge of the gold tribute and Tuan the silk. The more difficult task was given to Tuan, because he was married to Jade, the most beautiful woman in the land. His hardship should therefore be proportionately greater, the way the emperor figured it.

III

NEEDLESS to say, Yu and Tuan were most unhappy on receiving these assignments, but what could they do? The time left before their departure had to be devoted to purchasing and

collecting the items to be sent to the Tartars. When this task was completed, they returned home to bid their loved ones farewell.

Emotionally and mentally unprepared, Yu could hardly tear himself away from his wife, Pearl. Over a wet pillow, he repeated his farewell many times; but he was hopeful of returning in a few months, since his father-in-law, Kuan, had promised to make up any alleged loss should the Tartars accuse him of theft.

Jade, in the meantime, prepared clothes and shoes for her husband, all she thought Tuan would need for the next ten years. Tearfully she said to him, "I doubt very much that you will return in less than five years, and I have made clothes and shoes for you to take along. When you look at them, it will be like seeing me again. For everywhere you shall find my fingerprints. Think of me often and be worthy of my love for you." Choking with emotion, she could not continue.

"I appreciate what you have done for me, but I am afraid that you have wasted your time," replied Tuan. "Don't consider this trip as a temporary separation, or even a long one, but rather as eternal parting. Poor as I am, how could I ever afford to make up the difference when the Tartars accuse me of theft? The moment of my arrival at the Tartar camp will be my doomsday. I will not need this clothing. For even if the Tartars spare my life, I will certainly have to undergo plenty of suffering. I can't imagine they would let me wear these things? And if I take them with me, the Tartars will confiscate them anyway. Why don't you keep them here? Maybe they will be useful some day."

"But if you don't return, what will be the use of the clothing and the shoes here?" asked Jade.

Tuan was about to add something, but he stopped and sighed. Pressed hard by his wife, he went on, "Don't you know what the *Book of Odes* says about death? — 'When one man dies, another steps in. After my death, someone else will move into these rooms. If there is someone to occupy these rooms, won't he also be able to use the clothing? These garments, already made, will save you much work later on.'"

Up to now, Jade had only felt sad, but now she was furious. Exploding with rage, she castigated her husband: "A man like you must have an

iron heart. I spent hours and hours working for you and what do I get in return? Not one word of kindness but instead slander and accusations. How can you maintain that you are a loyal official but that I am not a virtuous wife? If this is your attitude, I shall burn all the clothing and hope that will erase your doubts about my faithfulness." As soon as she said this, she proceeded to burn the clothing and the shoes she had made, as if she were burying in the flames her love for her husband. Tuan watched his wife's every move, and remarked that she should not go to such extremes. But he made no effort to put out the fire or to comfort her.

With the fire blazing and her tears flowing, Jade moaned, "Look at Yu and Pearl. See how affectionate to each other they are! In our family, you either talk about separation or about death; you never say anything comforting. What use do I have of a marriage like this?"

"You should not compare yourself to Pearl, for from birth she has had better luck than you," replied Tuan. "Why didn't you ask for a good loving husband in your previous life? You must have committed some wrong in that life for you to have earned a cold and difficult husband like me. If you had married someone else, you would probably now be doing like Pearl and Yu. As you know, the emperor is still looking for concubines and you may still be chosen. Maybe this will not happen, but since I am going to be away for such a long period of time, at least, I cannot help thinking about it. You know, the sages have said that both life and death are predetermined and that wealth and honour are in the hands of Heaven. If you are predestined to remarry, you will, no matter how sweet I am to you now; and if you are predestined to be a virtuous widow, whatever I say now will not change that situation." He then packed his old clothes and left untouched whatever was unburned of the clothing his wife had made. Finally he wrote the words *Ho-kuei lou* (Tower of the Returning Crane) on a tablet and hung it outside their house, thus indicating that he would never return alive.

THE MOMENT of parting finally arrived. Yu, the lover, scrutinized his wife's face over and over again. Even when he was seated on his horse, he still glanced back at her many times, wishing to



retain a vivid memory of his wife, one that he could always have with him to admire. But Tuan acted as if he were going only on a short business trip and displayed no feelings whatsoever despite his wife's emotional trauma.

The two safely escorted the tributes to the Tartars, who followed the tradition of previous years and raised many difficult questions, accusing them of theft and asking them to make up the alleged losses.

Tuan pleaded that he had not cheated the Tartars of anything, that he had just passed his final state examination and had not been in government service very long, that his family was poor and he could not pay for the alleged losses and, finally that he would be willing to die should they insist on his death. The Tartars were very stubborn and refused to believe that Tuan was poor. They insulted him, they tortured him, then they remonstrated with him, trying to force him to write home and ask for ransom money.

As a stoic, Tuan put into practice his theory of "accepting the worst with a willing heart." When tortured, he thought of even worse tortures and felt relieved. After lengthy consideration he concluded that worldly punishments were preferable to those administered in Hell. The worst that could happen to him would be death, of which he was not afraid. If his horoscope prescribed that he should die young, he would

willingly die. No amount of torture could make him change his belief that fate controls the lives of men. So there was nothing for him to do except to endure. And endure he did, hoping that the next turn of the wheel of fortune would favour him once again!

Yu's treatment in the hands of the Tartars was different and much better. When they accused him of theft, he readily promised to make up what they said had been stolen and so he did, with his father-in-law's financial help. In fact, the Tartars were quite pleased with him and entertained him with good wine and delicious food. Five months later he was released. And home he went, leaving his friend behind, imprisoned in a foreign land.

It was a traditional rule at the Sung court that all officials returning from abroad must report to the emperor immediately. Upon his return to the capital, Yu went first to the palace but the emperor was then engaged in other urgent affairs of state. Unable to see the emperor, he had to sleep in the palace quarters that night to await his turn at court. And what an agonizing night it was! He would have given away everything he owned to be in the embrace of his loving wife who was so near and yet so far.

Yu's wife, Pearl, suffered the same misery her husband did. That night, she too could not sleep. She paced the floor, wondering when they would again be united. Early the next morning she climbed up to the family lookout to wait to see her husband return. And home he did come, accompanied by a few minor officials and servants, but wearing such a long face! When he saw his wife, Yu broke down and was unable to speak.

Yu's sadness stemmed from the new assignment he had just received from the emperor. He had to attend to it immediately and could not even stop at his home. He had managed to come home but without official permission.

How did Yu happen to receive another assignment so soon? Recently, the Nu-chen Tartars had repeatedly sent messages to the Sung emperor, asking him to join forces with them against the Kitan Tartars. The Sung emperor had been unable to come to a decision until he received an ultimatum from the Nu-chen Tartars, threatening to attack the land of Sung if it refused to join with them. The ultimatum terrified Emperor Hui-tsung

and he held lengthy discussions with his cabinet ministers from morning until night. That was on the day Yu returned from abroad.

If Yu had come home one day later, the job of supervising the rations and pay for the troops would have been given to someone else, but his luck was against him. When he finally prostrated himself before the emperor, the latter was even then seeking someone to fill the post. The emperor remembered that Yu had married one of the women he wanted and considered that for this the punishment Yu had received from the Tartars had not been adequate. The emperor, therefore, first complimented Yu on his good work and then gave him the new appointment to be effective immediately.

POOR PEARL, so loving and so sweet, only a moment ago so happy and so eager about her husband's return, was now a different person. Her tears of happiness had been transformed into a flood of sorrow. She felt sorry for herself and deeply resented the fickleness of fate. Again and again she described to Yu how much she had missed him during the months they were separated. With so much to say and so little time, where and how was she to stop?

Pearl's inability to control her emotions deeply irritated the officials accompanying her husband. Professional army men, they scorned Yu and his wife for their emotional weakness, protesting, "Soldiering is a serious business, and a soldier must put aside family considerations. Who does not have a wife and children? If everybody were like you two, how many days would we need before we could leave the city? It would not look very good if our superiors should find out that you have given priority to family matters over affairs of state."

But Yu was as emotionally upset as his wife and tried to delay the parting as long as possible. He was uncertain as to when he would see Pearl again and felt bitter and forlorn. Why should fate torture him so? Suddenly remembering that he had a letter from Tuan to Jade, he left it with his wife for delivery.

When Jade received her husband's letter, she thought that Tuan had written her an apology or at least a letter of comfort and love. But instead it dealt with eternal parting, something he had talked

about endlessly ever since their marriage. Only then did she realize fully that her husband had not changed at all and that he was one of the most unfeeling men alive. She finally relinquished all hopes for reunion and future happiness and started to earn her living by weaving, spending her earnings freely on herself. Consequently, she ate a more balanced diet and her health improved. In fact, after a few pounds were added to her thin body, she looked more attractive than ever before.

In the meantime, the rigours and discomfort of army life, and especially worrying about his wife, aged Yu considerably. His hair grew gray, and even white. He developed the haggard look of a sick old man, and was hardly recognizable from the handsome young scholar he once was.

Several years later the Kitan Tartars were finally defeated. But a court official, trying to please the emperor and knowing of his jealousy of Yu, recommended that the latter be stationed permanently at the border because of his long and successful association with the Nu-chen Tartars. This recommendation, of course, was immediately approved by the emperor. He promoted Yu to the rank of vice-minister of the Board of Revenue and Population and made him solely responsible for the annual presentation of silk and gold to the Nu-chen Tartars, a post similar to Yu's first one, except that he now had a much higher rank.

When he received this bit of "good" news Yu's "three souls and seven animal spirits" instantly left his body. He had never cared for his career and yet here he was trapped in it. All he really wanted was the pleasure of being with his wife but this seemed to be forever denied him. It began to seem as though there was nothing for him to live for and he even considered suicide as an end to his misery. Indeed he might well have ended his life had he not received a most opportune letter.

IV

THE LETTER was from his old friend, Tuan. Tuan knew that once the Kitan Tartars were defeated his friend Yu would be most anxious to go home and might even possibly do or say something that would result in more trouble for himself. He wanted to prevent Yu from having more bad luck, and advised him not to go home without per-

mission but to plead illness. But by the time the letter arrived, it was already too late, since the emperor had already given Yu his new assignment.

Nevertheless, Yu realized for the first time that of the two, Tuan had more foresight and was the more sophisticated. He regretted that he had not emulated his friend before. Had he done so, the situation might not have changed, but he might have suffered less. Even though it was late, Yu followed his friend's advice and pleaded illness, asking the emperor to relieve him of his new post. But as he expected, his request was denied. He must undertake the new assignment as commanded.

Yu found his new duties most onerous. The Nu-chen Tartars accused him of theft as they always did the official holding that position. He was unable to make up the alleged, and completely fictitious, losses this time because he no longer had the financial backing of his father-in-law. The losses claimed by the Tartars were so great that no ordinary official could afford to make up for them. Following his friend's earlier example, Yu put himself at the mercy of the Tartars who tortured and punished him in the cruelest ways imaginable.

On the other hand, the Tartars now left Tuan alone most of the time since they finally realized there was nothing they could gain by abusing him. In fact, Tuan was free to come and go at will. Had he wanted to go home, the Tartars would have freed him. But Tuan, an extraordinary man, had no immediate intention of returning to his wife, his home or his country.

When Yu was unable to stand the torture and punishment any longer, he managed to get word to Tuan asking him to intervene with the Tartars. After two years of brutality, the Tartars finally stopped punishing Yu when they became convinced that no one would ever ransom him. Yu and Tuan were now thrown together after years of separation, and each was now quite frank in expressing his thought to the other.

For instance, Yu told Tuan one day, "You seem to have been wise in whatever you did except when you were leaving home. You should not have been so cold and indifferent to your wife."

"Don't think of me as being either indifferent or cold toward my wife," replied Tuan. "I am really a most passionate husband. I love Jade

more than anything in this world. Wasn't my love for her obvious to you at least?"

"Yet you forced her to burn all the clothes she had made for you," said Yu. "You predicted that she would remarry. You never had a smile for her. You didn't even seem to be sad when you left home. How can you claim to be a loving husband?"

"You are quite simple," responded Tuan. "No wonder you have suffered so much. You ought to know that young women love fun and gaiety and loathe loneliness. Had I shown my wife my true feelings before I left, she would have missed me night and day and spent her time hoping and praying for our reunion. Her hopes and anxieties would soon have become an obsession, consuming her body and soul, and most likely would have caused her death within a few years. If by chance I had been released to go home, I would have found her waiting for me in an early grave. Can't you see that open demonstrations of affection would have become deadly poison? I purposely gave her the impression that I would never return so that she could endure her days of loneliness without illusions. Haven't you heard the old saying that it is necessary 'to put one to death first, so that he may live again'? Essentially, I used the same approach with my wife."

"But what would happen if she were to take you at your word and marry again?" Yu asked.

"This approach can only be applied to people of a certain character," answered Tuan, "I trusted Jade completely. I knew that she would never marry again. But if it were someone other than Jade, I might well have used a different approach."

"Even so, wasn't it excessively cruel to write 'Ho-kuei lou' on the tablet signifying that you would never return alive?" asked Yu.

"I wrote that so Jade would not count the days before my return," said Tuan. "If one has to leave home for a year, it is better that he tell his wife he is leaving for two, thus allowing himself enough time so that no one will be disappointed. If all husbands practiced my philosophy, they would all live happily with their wives to a ripe old age. If you don't believe me, compare how Pearl looks with Jade's appearance when we return home."

Half believing and half in doubt, Yu said that while he agreed with his friend in principle, he still felt Tuan's method was inhuman.

YEARS went by and Yu and Tuan still lived in the land of the Tartars. Soon eight years had passed and much that was new had taken place. The Nu-chen Tartars had annulled their peace treaty with the Sung Empire; their troops had marched on the Sung capital, captured the two emperors, Hui-tsung and his son Ch'in-tsung, and deported them to Tartar territory.

It so happened that Yu and Tuan met Emperor Hui-tsung in exile. They respectfully observed the ceremonies appropriate to an audience with the emperor and burst into tears, lamenting the tragic ending of the Sung Empire. On learning who these two men were, Emperor Hui-tsung deeply regretted that he had been jealous of them and had caused them so much suffering for no good reason. For he realized that even if Pearl and Jade had become his concubines years ago, he would not have them now. So why had he made such a fuse anyway?

The Nu-chen Tartars had been interested in silk and gold before they captured the Sung Court. They had not released Yu and Tuan because they had hoped that they could exact money from their families. But now that they had the two emperors in captivity, they ceased to demand money and changed their policy from cruelty to generosity. To everyone's surprise, they freed most political prisoners.

Emperors Hui-tsung and Ch'in-tsung advised Yu and Tuan to return to China, but they refused to go. It would have been contrary to the teachings of Confucius to have deserted one's sovereign and sought comfort elsewhere. But the emperors changed their advice to a command, so the two finally bade them farewell and left for home.

Although Yu was under thirty, he looked like an old man with his hoary head and a gray beard. To look more pleasing to his wife, he dyed his hair and beard before he reached home. But when he arrived, his wife was not there to greet him. Thinking that she might be bashful after such a long absence, Yu went and paid his respects to his aged father-in-law before entering the inner

hall. There in the centre he saw a curtain hanging to which a strip of paper was attached. Approaching closer, he read with horror: "This is the coffin of Mrs. Pearl Yu." He pulled his father-in-law to one side and demanded to know the cause of his wife's death.

Tearfully, Mr. Kuan said: "Ever since you left, Pearl counted the days until your return. She washed her face every day with her tears. Finally she became ill and lost her appetite. There was no cure for her illness because it was caused only by excessive anxiety and sorrow. After the defeat of the Kitan Tartars, she thought you would come home but soon found that you had been assigned to another post. Utterly distraught, she refused to eat anything at all and starved to death, having left instructions that she should not be buried until you returned. She has been dead for three years." Seeing that his son-in-law could not control his grief, Kuan continued, "Don't be too sorrowful. If Pearl were alive today, you wouldn't recognize her. Before she died she had become sallow and withered, and she was as thin as a rail. She looked more like a ghost than a human being. Had you seen her, you would have been terrified by her looks."

Kuan's words reminded Yu of what Tuan had said about comparing the looks of the two women. If Tuan had been right to conceal his feelings towards Jade, then he, Yu, must have been wrong by showing too much affection for Pearl. Engrossed in such thoughts, he concluded that he was his wife's real murderer. He simply could not forgive himself; he could neither tear himself away from the coffin nor stop chanting obsessively that all men should follow Tuan's example.

WHEN TUAN returned home, he found his wife prettier than ever. Jade resembled Yang Kuei-fei more than she did Chao Fei-yen, the former being known for her luscious plumpness and the latter for her graceful thinness. Happy that his approach, even if seemingly cruel, had worked so miraculously, Tuan smiled and asked his wife if she had enjoyed herself during their years of separation. Jade refused to answer and turned her face away.

Pretending not to understand his wife's anger, Tuan asked in mock surprise, "Why do you look unhappy? It must be that you cannot forget the past and still want me to apologize. Actually I

am the most loving husband in the world and you should thank me for what you are today."

"What?" said Jade angrily. "Thank you? Pray tell me what I should thank you for."

"You should thank me for your many blessings," replied her husband. "In all these years, you have not only not lost one single ounce but have gained weight handsomely, nor have you aged the least bit. Now your husband has returned looking much the same as in his younger days. And most important of all, you are alive and happy. Whom should you thank? Think of your cousin Pearl. Where is she now? Look at her husband Yu. How does he look? Their separation became an eternal parting, whereas, it seems we were kept asunder only a short time. You are indeed more than fortunate to have me as a husband."

Jade remained unconvinced. She thought that her husband was using "sweet talk" to cover up his previous indifference.

While Jade considered Tuan's new declarations of love for her, her husband said, "If you don't believe me, don't you remember that I sent you a charm eight years ago. Look at it and you shall see the truth?"

"What charm?" Jade asked.

"The letter Yu delivered was a charm," said Tuan. "Didn't you receive it?"

"It wasn't a charm, it was a letter of eternal parting," replied Jade.

"No," Tuan retorted. "It was actually a palindrome-like verse which could be read forwards or backwards. Try reading it backwards and see what it means."

Jade read the poem-letter once more, this time backwards and realized that it was a song of Tuan's love for her. Her doubts about her husband's love vanished. Filled with happiness, she smiled warmly and thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

Tuan also seemed to become a different person. He was no longer morose but jubilant. To celebrate their reunion in the proper style, he gave orders that firecrackers be exploded and beautiful lanterns lighted, and he hired two bands of musicians to play for the occasion. It was as though they were just getting married, except that it was sweeter than their first wedding night because now Tuan had no worries or misgivings.

He knew that he had had his share of misfortune and that it was now time for him to enjoy life to the hilt. And what a passionate man he was!

LATER TUAN became a high official in the government and lived to be more than seventy, happy in Jade's companionship. The Tuans had five sons who successfully carried on the family's scholarly tradition.

Yu married again, but his second wife also

fell ill and died within a few years. It seemed that fate was determined to keep from him the one satisfaction of life, conjugal bliss. Though his married life consisted largely of bitter memories, his official career was one of prominence. He never cared for his career, yet he was richly rewarded in this field. Contrariwise he did care for love, but he was discouraged in this area time and again. Who can understand the will of Heaven?



THE OTHER ELEVEN TOWERS

In the English translation of The Twelve Towers the story "Tower of the Returning Crane" is re-titled "The Stoic Lover". The following is a list of the original titles of the other eleven "Tower" stories, in both Chinese and English, and their English titles as rendered in Nathan Mao's version.

Tower of Joining Reflections	(合影樓)	<i>The Reflections in the Water</i>
Tower of Matrimonial Contest	(奪錦樓)	<i>The Jackpot</i>
Tower of Three Dedications	(三與樓)	<i>Buried Treasure</i>
Tower of Summer Delight	(夏宜樓)	<i>The Magic Mirror</i>
Tower of Self-Reformation	(歸正樓)	<i>The Swindler</i>
Tower of Collected Elegance	(萃雅樓)	<i>The Elegant Eunuch</i>
Tower of Rolling Clouds	(拂雲樓)	<i>The Crafty Maid</i>
Tower of Ten Nuptial Winecups	(十盞樓)	<i>Marital Frustrations</i>
Tower of Ancestral Worship	(奉先樓)	<i>The Male Heir</i>
Tower of My Birth	(生我樓)	<i>Father and Son</i>
Tower of Heeding Criticism	(聞過樓)	<i>The Hermit</i>