

"As a result of further consultation the whole staff was in full agreement with the head of the office and insisted that there was no alternative to the opening of the coffin. The mourner objected strenuously but he was all alone and could not stop the official group from opening his father's coffin. To the amazement of all present, nothing more than a corpse was found in the coffin. The mourner was so angry that he seized the official by the head and tried to drag him away. Fortunately his subordinates came to his rescue, and the matter was finally settled after long hours of squabbling lasting from that afternoon till dawn next day. In the midst of the row the informer fled.

"The settlement included the replacement of a high-grade coffin, sacrificial rites performed by the head of the office in mourning clothes and compensation amounting to five thousand taels. From

then on, several funeral processions passed by; but even when we were absolutely sure that there was smuggling involved, no one dared interfere with any of them again. In fact, as I see it, all the later funeral processions were organized under false pretences, and each one of them was a smuggling trick. The whole thing was indeed well-planned. The idea was to fool the authorities first with a real funeral procession and frighten them out of their wits, so that they would not dare to interfere with the following operations."

"What an unworthy son," I said, "to have gone so far as to let the body of his own father be desecrated!"

"Are you really so stupid?" Shu-nung asked. "This could have been any dead beggar, not his father!"

A Bannerman at the Teahouse

Wu Wo-yao is known to have used contemporary jokes, anecdotes, and gossip to string together his "bizarre happenings". Probably the most often repeated is the one about the impecunious Manchu Bannerman at his morning tea. "Bannermen", the descendants of Manchus (and some Mongols and Chinese) who were in the military service of the early Ch'ing emperors, are frequently made fun of in the book, and this story may properly be regarded in present-day parlance as an "ethnic joke". Here it is retold in English by Gloria Bien.

Kao Sheng was a native of Peking. Before he found a job, he would get up early every morning to go to the teahouse and sit for hours over a bowl of tea. In the small teahouses in the capital, a bowl of tea cost only two pennies, the equivalent of four pennies in provincial money. If one brought his own tea leaves, the charge was just one penny.

One day when Kao Sheng was at the teahouse he saw a Bannerman come in for tea, bringing his own tea leaves. He opened a paper packet and emptied the tea leaves into the bowl.

"I'm afraid you don't have enough tea leaves," said the waiter.

"What do you know?" humphed the Bannerman. "This here is the best Dragon Well tea from France, across the Atlantic Ocean where the Redhairs live. Just three or four leaves are enough. If you use more, you'll end up not wanting to drink tea for a whole year!" All the waiter could do then was to brew his tea for him.

Having overheard this bit of conversation, Kao Sheng was curious, so he went over to have a look. There in the middle of the man's bowl floated three or four leaves of ordinary jasmine tea. The water in the bowl, far from turning a red color, was not even tinged with yellow; it was nothing but a bowl of plain boiled water. Kao Sheng secretly

wanted to laugh. After a while, the man drew out two pennies from his pocket and bought a sesame biscuit, then proceeded to eat it, a bit at a time, chewing very carefully as though really savoring its taste. He ate for more than an hour before finishing the biscuit. Suddenly, he stretched out a finger, moistened it with his tongue, and started writing on the table-top. He would take one lick, then write one stroke. Kao Sheng was really puzzled, and thought to himself, "Can this man be so industrious that he practises calligraphy even in the teahouse?" Very attentively, he watched to see what the man was writing. It turned out that he wasn't writing at all. It was just that in eating the biscuit, although he had been extremely careful, he could not help dropping some of the sesame seeds on the table. Now he was afraid that if he licked them up with his tongue or swept them into his mouth with his hand, it would not look good to others and he would lose face. So, he just pretended to be writing, and picked up the seeds with a wetted finger.

After the man had been finger-writing for a long time, not a single sesame seed was left on the table. Suddenly he looked off into space like a man lost in thought. In a little while, he started as if remembering something and gave the table a sound slap with his palm. Then, licking his fingers, he started writing again. What happened was, two sesame seeds had fallen into the cracks on the table, and no matter how he licked his fingers and practised calligraphy, he could not get them out. Therefore, he pretended to have forgotten something and then, as if suddenly recalling, slapped the table hard enough to make the sesame seeds jump out so that he could get them to his mouth.

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**A BANNERMAN AT HIS MEAN-
EST.** *From a popular edition of
the novel, Kwong Chi Book Com-
pany, Hong Kong.*

Having finished this business of finger-writing and eaten the last of his biscuit, the Bannerman remained at his table a long time, not willing to leave. It was already noon, when a little boy came running in and said to him,

"Daddy, hurry home, Mama wants to get up now."

"If Mama wants to get up, let her get up. What do you want me home for?" said the man.

"Daddy came out with Mama's trousers on, and Mama is worried because she has no trousers to wear!" said the little boy.

"Nonsense!" said the Bannerman loudly. "Aren't Mama's trousers in the leather suitcase?" So saying, he made a face to signal the boy to leave quickly. The boy didn't understand, but went on saying,

"Daddy must have forgotten. The leather suitcase was sold long ago, and that pair of pants was pawned the day before yesterday to buy rice. Mama also told me to say we have only a handful of rice left at home, not even enough to feed the chickens, and to say to hurry and buy half a pint of rice so we'll have enough for lunch!"

"Get out of here!" the man shouted. "No one here wants to borrow money from me. Why do you come around pretending we're so poor?"

The little boy was so frightened he dropped his hands to his sides and, with a few "Yes sirs", backed out of the teahouse.

"Those hateful people," the Bannerman muttered as if to himself. "Every day they want to borrow money from me. Where would I get all that money? I can only pretend I'm poor, and talk poor. The children get so used to hearing such talk that they can't open their mouths without talking the same way, whether or not there are people around. Now really, there's no need for that in this teahouse. After all, we people live by the grace of His Majesty the Emperor, and how is it possible for us to be as poor as all that?" Still speaking, he got up and was about to leave. The waiter stopped him for money. He laughed and said,

"That boy made me so angry I forgot to pay for the boiled water." He reached his hand into his pocket and searched wildly. After searching for a long time, he couldn't produce so much as a hair of a penny, so he said, "Please charge it. I'll settle with you tomorrow." The waiter wasn't willing, but what could you do; the man didn't even have half a penny on him. No matter how you pressed him, he would say he'd pay tomorrow or he'd pay a little later, adding that the waiter must be blind not to see that his lordship was not the kind who would owe people money.

"I only want one penny from you for the boiled water." said the waiter. "I don't care if you're a first lord or a second lord. If you give me one penny, I'll say you are a regular fellow; but if you can't pay the penny, whether you're first or second lord you'll have to leave something as a pledge. You should know that I can't go to your honourable mansion just to collect a one penny debt."

The Bannerman was flustered, but all he could fish out from his pocket was a handkerchief. The waiter shook it out to see; it was a square of blue, imported cloth, extremely filthy, looking as though it hadn't been washed for a half year.

"All right," he snickered. "If you don't come to redeem it, I can use it for wiping tables anyway."

Only then was the Bannerman able to slip away.

-Translated by GLORIA BIEN