

白先勇：永遠的尹雪艷

The Eternal Yin Hsueh-yen

By Pai Hsien-yung

Translated by Katherine Carlitz and Anthony C. Yu

I

Yin Hsueh-yen somehow never seemed to age. Of those fashionable young men who had been her fans more than ten years ago at Shanghai's Paramount Ballroom, some had grown bald and some were graying at the temples; some on coming to Taiwan had been downgraded to the level of idle "consultants" in the foundries, cement works, or artificial-fabric factories, while a small number had risen to become bank presidents or top executives in the government. But however the affairs of men fluctuated, Yin Hsueh-yen remained forever Yin Hsueh-yen. In Taipei, she still wore her white gauze *ch'i-p'ao*,¹ smiling as always her faint smile, and about the corners of her eyes not a wrinkle would show.

She was genuinely bewitching, though no one could say precisely where her charm lay. She never liked to use cosmetics; at most, she might touch her lips with a little Max Factor now and then, so faint as to be barely noticeable. Nor did she care for bright colors. All through the hot summer she dressed entirely in silvery white, appearing fresh beyond words. Indeed, she had lovely snow-white skin and a slender figure, with sweet, exquisite eyes set in an oval face, but it was not these features

¹A long gown slit at the sides and with a high collar that came into fashion in the late 1920's, so-named because it was supposed to have been modelled after the feminine dress-style of the Manchu "banner" people. In Cantonese it is called *cheongsam*, a word that has since been adopted into the English vocabulary.

that made her so extraordinary. Everyone who had set eyes on Yin Hsueh-yen said that, for some curious reason, every lift of her hand, and every movement of her foot, had an alluring charm the world could never match. While a yawn or a frown would have been unbecoming in others, with her it carried another kind of attraction. She spoke little: at crucial moments she might throw in a few words in her Soochow-accented Shanghainese that were ever so pleasant and soothing. Some patrons who could not afford to have her at their tables came nonetheless to the Paramount just to enjoy her radiant presence and listen to her soft Soochow speech, which seemed to make it all worthwhile. On the dance floor, with head slightly raised and waist gently swaying, she always danced so unhurriedly. Even when it was a quick foxtrot, she never lost control of herself, displaying as ever her ease and suppleness like a wind-blown catkin drifting along free of roots. Yin Hsueh-yen had her own rhythm; she moved to her own beat. No outside disturbance could affect her natural poise.

Inexplicable and innumerable as Yin Hsueh-yen's charms are, one thing added immensely to her mystery. As her fame grew, she found it difficult to avoid the jealousy of her sisters in the profession, who vented their spite by spreading rumors about her horoscope: that it was dominated by an evil curse, that the White Tiger stood in her way, and that whoever came near her would lose his fortune if not his life. Who would expect that it was precisely this well-publicized curse that made her doubly attractive to Shanghai's fashionable men about town? Their leisure and wealth

prompted them to adventure, to try their luck with this evil star, the queen of the Whangpoo metropolis.²

One of the men who thus tempted fate was Wang Kuei-sheng, scion of a leading family that was one of the kingpins in the cotton-spinning industry. Every evening he waited in his brand-new Cadillac at the door of the Paramount until Yin Hsueh-yen finished her rounds at the tables. Then together they would go up to the roof garden on the twenty-fourth floor of the Park Hotel³ for their gourmet late night snack. As they gazed at the moon and the bright stars in the sky, Wang Kuei-sheng said that if he could use his family's gold bars to build a ladder up the heavens, he would climb up there and pluck the crescent moon, to pin on Yin Hsueh-yen's hair. Yin Hsueh-yen just smiled, without giving him a word, as she extended her dainty orchid-like hand and slowly conveyed the crescent-shapes of black caviar canapes into her mouth.

Wang Kuei-sheng invested madly, seeking to triple or quadruple his fortune by any means, so that he could defeat one by one those wealthy suitors hanging around Yin Hsueh-yen and lead her home by the neck with a diamond-agate collar. In due course, Wang was charged with the serious crime of manipulating the market in collusion with government officials and found guilty. On the day he was taken to prison and shot, Yin Hsueh-yen cancelled her appearance for the evening as a gesture of mourning.

The one who eventually won Yin Hsueh-yen was Director Hung, chief of some government bureau and one of the hotshots in Shanghai's financing circle. When he had divorced his wife, abandoned their three children, and met all of Yin Hsueh-yen's conditions, she married him and moved into an elegant Western-style house in the

²One of the colloquial names for Shanghai was 黃浦灘 (Whangpoo Beach), named after the Yangtze tributary from whose muddy banks had sprung the onetime cosmopolitan city, known also to the world as a "paradise for adventurers".

³In Chinese, 國際飯店 (International Hotel). For the Shanghai streets and business establishments mentioned in this story, we use their original Western names, rather than translate literally—e.g., Park Hotel in this instance, and Avenue Joffre, Lyceum Theatre, etc. in the following.



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French Concession of Shanghai taken over from the Japanese. In a few months' time, Yin Hsueh-yen burst upon Shanghai's high society in the manner of a late-blooming pear tree, completely overshadowing all the other beauties.

She was certainly able to dominate any gathering. At brilliant parties where the exquisite daughters of wealthy families sat wrapped in their dark sable or red fox furs, she had only to appear airily in her waist-hugging, high collared silver-fox for all those present to feel themselves intoxicated with the light breeze in March and involuntarily drawn toward her. In the crowds she seemed a crystalline ice-spirit, her frosty charm a dangerous force. As she glided along with her zephyr steps, the sight of her called forth an answering fire from the eyes of these elegant men and women. This, then, was Yin Hsueh-yen: on the dance floor of the Jessfield Nightclub, in the corridors of the Lyceum Theatre, or in the living rooms of the aristocratic mansions on Avenue Joffre, leaning all

in silvery white against a sofa or a chair, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth, she summoned into her presence a host of bankers and bankers' assistants, cotton-mill bosses young and old, and *nouveaux riches* with their wives.

But Director Hung's horoscope proved in the end no match for Yin Hsueh-yen's evil sign. In a year he had lost his position; after two years he was bankrupt; and upon arriving in Taipei he could not even land an idle consultant's job. When Yin Hsueh-yen divorced him, however, she was magnanimous: all she took, aside from her own possessions, were her famous Shanghai chef and two Soochow maids.

II

Yin Hsueh-yen's new home was in an elegant section of Jen-ai Road. It was a new Western-style house with a living room spacious enough to accommodate two or three dinner-party tables, and Yin Hsueh-yen arranged her house with meticulous care. The living room furniture was a set of rosewood table and chairs. There were several old-fashioned high-backed sofas, piled with black-silk pillows on the covers of which were pairs of mandarin ducks done in Hunan embroidery. Sinking deeply into one of these sofas and resting against the soft, yielding silk pillows, her guests felt supremely comfortable. She had made the room so inviting that everyone remarked that, once seated in it, no one would want to leave. For mah-jong, there was a special parlour with tables and lamps arranged so as to answer perfectly the needs of the players. For guests who liked to play *ua-hua*, she had set aside a soundproof room where they could play and sing to their hearts' content.⁴ In the winter the rooms were heated, and in the summer air-conditioned, so that sitting in Yin Hsueh-yen's house one could easily forget Taipei's damp chill or humid heat. The antique vases on the tables were always filled with fresh flowers, for Yin Hsueh-yen was ever so particular about flower

arrangement, and the best blooms of the year were regularly delivered to her by Rose Florist on Chung-shan Road. All summer, the living room in Yin Hsueh-yen's house was permeated by the sweet, rich fragrance of polianthes tuberosa.

Yin Hsueh-yen's new home soon became a gathering-place for her old friends and new acquaintances. When her old friends came they spoke of times gone by. In a nostalgic mood they talked of the good old days and released their pent-up emotion before Yin Hsueh-yen as if she were an eternal symbol of the Paramount days, a living witness to the luxuries of their Shanghai life.

"Baby, look how your godpa's hair has all turned white! But you're like an evergreen—you look younger all the time!"

Mr. Wu had been general manager of a bank in Shanghai and a regular customer at the Paramount. When he arrived in Taipei he became a gentleman of leisure, having obtained a sinecure with a foundry. Whenever he saw Yin Hsueh-yen, he teased her in this half-playful and half-plaintive way. His hair had indeed turned completely white, and he hobbled from severe arthritis. His eyes were infected with trachoma, and his lashes were caught under his eyelids; from constant watering his eye sockets had already started to fester, exposing their pale pink flesh. In the winter, Yin Hsueh-yen would place the electric heater by his knees and offer him a cup of *t'ieh-kuan-yin* tea, saying with an indulgent smile:

"Come now, godpa. You're stronger now than you've ever been!"

And Mr. Wu's feelings were soothed and his confidence restored. He winked his farsighted eyes with their rotted lashes, and in front of everybody in Yin Hsueh-yen's living room sang an aria from the opera⁵ in his old cracked voice:

"Just like a dragon in shallow water, I'm prisoner on a sandy beach . . ."

Yin Hsueh-yen enchanted women just as she mystified men. The group of women who associated with her had been murmuring behind her back since their Shanghai days. When she rose to prosperity they said spitefully, "No matter how

⁴In this traditional game *ua-hua* 挖花, which is something like mah-jong, expert players often like to chant aloud to add atmosphere to the game.

⁵In the original story the aria is identified as 坐宮 ("Seated in the Palace"), which is from the popular opera 四郎探母 (*The Fourth Son Visits His Mother*).

high you climb, you'll still be nothing but a dance hall hostess!" and when her benefactors found themselves in trouble, they sighed, "You can't escape fate; these people should never have been mixed with such an unlucky woman." And yet for more than ten years, not one of these ladies could bring herself to part with Yin Hsueh-yen. When they came to Taipei they swarmed around her new home like bees; they were forced to admit the hold she had over them. Yin Hsueh-yen knew how to pick out the latest-fashion brocade shoes at the Little Garden Boutique; she knew everything there was to know about the Shaohsing plays at the Red Chamber Theater. When the opera star Wu Yen-li sang her favorite role of "Meng Li Chün", Yin Hsueh-yen could get free seats in the front row. And she knew intimately all the places that sold Nanking and Shanghai snacks in the downtown West Gate district. And so these ladies, under the leadership of Yin Hsueh-yen, toured West Gate, attended Shaohsing plays, ate cassia-flavored dumplings at the "Three-Six-Nine", and banished from their minds all thoughts of the unpleasant things that had happened to them during the past ten years or more. A glorious musky fragrance of eternal Shanghai seemed to emit from Yin Hsueh-yen's body, and it so intoxicated these middle-aged women in their present reduced circumstances that they began involuntarily recounting the pleasures of eating crab-roe noodles in Shanghai's famed "Wu-hsiang-chai" restaurant. When they became fretful, which they did easily and often, Yin Hsueh-yen bestowed on each her boundless sympathy, patiently heard out their tales of the injustices they had suffered, and at the necessary moment spoke a few comforting words to soothe their ruffled tempers.

"So I'm losing, so what! I might as well lose everything! There's that old mule at home with his moneybags—if I don't lose them for him, somebody else will!"

Whenever Mrs. Sung lost at mah-jong, she poured out her resentment to Yin Hsueh-yen. In Taiwan Mrs. Sung had acquired the lumpy figure of a woman in menopause; her weight shot up to one hundred eighty-odd pounds. Bloated and swollen, she would pant if she had to walk too far. She was made bitter by the fact that her husband had taken a mistress and was behaving coldly toward her; to make matters worse, the mistress was a

lissome hostess at a girlie restaurant. Ten or more years earlier Mrs. Sung herself was quite a belle in Shanghai society, so she was particularly nostalgic. Yin Hsueh-yen was naturally the perfect confidante, the only one who really understood Mrs. Sung's suffering and knew how to comfort her during those moments when, unable to bear her grief any longer, she would cover her face and cry.

"There, there, Sister Sung," said Yin Hsueh-yen sympathetically, handing her a hot towel with which to wipe her face. "As the saying goes, 'Flowers don't last forever, neither do people.' Whoever heard of anyone being happy and prosperous a whole lifetime?" But Mrs. Sung, rebellious, said between intermittent sobs:

"I just don't believe my fate should be worse off than anybody else's! Look at you, for example—you'll never have to worry, someone will always back you up."

III

And indeed Yin Hsueh-yen did not have to worry: the stream of cars before her house was uninterrupted. Her old friends, of course, considered the place a blissful haven, but even her new friends felt in it a rare attractive force. The house maintained its splendor, for Yin Hsueh-yen never let it fall below the impressive standards of the establishments on Avenue Joffre in Shanghai. To be sure, some of her guests were no longer fashionable people, but they had their status, they had their style; and when they entered Yin Hsueh-yen's house, they all felt their own importance. Even if it was a title that was abolished ten or fifteen years ago, the way in which she used it in greeting, so warm and cheerful, made it sound like a royal summons that quite restored one's feeling of superiority. As for her new friends, they simply regarded her house as the ideal place to establish social connections.

What most attracted them was, of course, Yin Hsueh-yen herself. She was an expert hostess, with a perfect reception for each and everyone of her guests, whatever their age or position. When they entered her living-room and sat on those sofas with their black silk pillows, they felt a sense of homecoming, of utter contentment. So, whenever a

monthly subscription was taken up the bidding for the subscription money was held at Yin Hsueh-yen's house, birthdays were always celebrated there, and even when there was no special occasion, her friends would find some excuse for a mah-jong party there. On more than half the days of the year, Yin Hsueh-yen's house was brilliant with activity.

Yin Hsueh-yen herself rarely participated in the games. On the days of the parties she made the necessary preparations: sometimes two tables, sometimes three. She knew precisely her guests' temperament and manners on the mah-jong table, so the partners were always congenially matched, with never any hurting of feelings. She personally

supervised her two neat-looking Soochow maids who waited on them at the side. At noon she might serve Ningpo New-year's pudding or stuffed rice-dumplings cooked in Huchow style; for supper her chef prepared Nanking and Shanghai dishes: gold-and-silver ham,⁶ chicken flavored with anise and ginger, prawns eaten raw with soya sauce, and crabs smothered in wine. Yin Hsueh-yen herself designed a sort of rotating menu; each day a different selection of dishes was served. Around midnight the two maids would serve cool cologne-scented towels, and invite the embattled guests to refresh themselves. Then came the midnight snack

⁶Ham steamed and simmered with pork shoulder.

"Come now, godpa, you're stronger now than you've ever been!"

—illustrated by Ah Wu



of extra thin noodles in chicken broth. The guests were free with their tipping, usually leaving two to three thousand dollars on the table. The winners were naturally happy, but even the losers were relaxed and satisfied. When they had finished eating and playing, Yin Hsueh-yen had taxis waiting for them, and saw them off one by one.

When the games were at the peak of excitement, she would appear in casual attire and drift between the tables as lightly as the breeze. Moving gracefully back and forth on her tour of inspection, she seemed a priestess clad all in silvery-white, officiating at prayer and sacrifice on behalf of her warriors.

"Baby, look, your godpa's about to be cleaned out again!"

Whenever Mr. Wu began to lose, he blinked his festering eyes with their rotted lashes and cried out in a pleading voice to Yin Hsueh-yen.

"It's still early, godpa—in the next four rounds you're bound to make a 'Pure All-of-a-Kind',"⁷ Yin Hsueh-yen said comfortingly to this luckless old man, placing a black-silk cushion at his arthritic back.

"Miss Yin, you're my witness, I haven't played a single tile wrong and my luck's still terrible!"

The women also called out regularly from their tables to her for help. Sometimes when Mrs. Sung got fed up with losing she would forget herself and grab the pair of dice and start cursing:

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Shameless things! Let's see how long you can keep this up!"

Then Yin Hsueh-yen would go over to offer them a few sympathetic words. Her words inspired her guests with almost religious awe, and at the mah-jong table, where one's fate was all too often beyond one's control, they all drew on her auspicious words to restore their confidence and strengthen their will to fight. She stood to one side, a gold-tipped cigarette-holder between her lips, casually blowing smoke-rings and watching with condescending sympathy as this crowd of once-mighty men and once-beautiful women, some complacent and some despondent, some aging and some still youthful, fought each other to the death.

⁷In the "new" mah-jong game, the winning hands are given various fancy names; "Pure All-of-a-Kind" is one that scores high, as are "Garden Full of Flowers" and "Four Happinesses at the Gate" mentioned later in the story.

IV

Among her new guests was a middle-aged gentleman named Hsu Chuang-t'u, a graduate of Chiao-t'ung University in Shanghai. Tall, imposing and robust, he cut a handsome figure in his well-tailored Western clothing. He was one of Taipei's newly-risen industrial magnates. With the industrialization of the city, many new enterprises had sprung up, and the resourceful and quickwitted Hsu with his knowledge of modern business administration had already assumed the management of a large cement concern, though he was barely forty. His wife was a perfect companion, and his two children were adorable; with a happy home and a career full of promise, Hsu Chuang-t'u was an ambitious, vigorous businessman.

He paid his first visit to Yin Hsueh-yen's house as a guest at the party she gave for Mr. Wu's sixtieth birthday. He was Mr. Wu's nephew, and came to the party with his uncle. That evening, Yin Hsueh-yen had taken extra care to dress elegantly. She wore a short-sleeved *ch'ih-pao* of white brocade, fastened with a row of large round ivory-colored frogs. On her feet were softsole shoes of embroidered white satin, touched with pale pink begonia petals at the toes. To attract good luck she for once wore a scarlet tulip the size of a wine-cup at her right temple, and long silver pendants hung from her ears. The living-room where the birthday celebration was held had also been specially arranged to give an air of festivity; the tables were decorated with freshly picked polyanthes tuberosa, and as Hsu entered he was greeted at once by a sweet, penetrating fragrance.

"Baby, I've brought you a most honored guest," said Mr. Wu, resplendent in a new silk robe, despite his bent back. Laughing, he introduced his nephew to Yin Hsueh-yen, saying as he pointed at her:

"Look at this god-daughter of mine! She's so good to me! I'm old and beat and she still throws a birthday party for me. I say to myself: Here I am without a job, an old forgotten cripple, tortured every day by this damned rheumatism—hell, I may not deserve it, but I'm going to enjoy this party she's giving me. As for my nephew here," he continued, turning to Yin Hsueh-yen, "so young and full of promise, he rarely lets himself go—today he's just joining us old fogies to have some fun. My lil' Baby here is a perfect hostess—

I leave Chuang-t'u to you. Take good care of him!"

"Mr. Hsu's here for the first time, and he's your nephew, of course he's a bit special," said a smiling Yin Hsueh-yen, the scarlet tulip in her hair trembling vivaciously.

And Hsu Chuang-t'u did indeed receive special treatment. Yin Hsueh-yen sat at his side during the meal and helped him with the food and the wine. Leaning toward him, she whispered:

"Mr. Hsu, this is the specialty of my own chef—how does it compare with what you find in restaurants?"

At the end of the meal Yin Hsueh-yen herself served him a bowl of almond-flavored ice bean-curd, crowned with two bright red cherries. Afterwards, when they settled down to mah-jong, Yin Hsueh-yen frequently came and stood behind Hsu Chuang-t'u to watch him play. Being unskilled at the game, he often played the wrong tiles, and by the eighth round he had lost half his chips. At one point, when he was about to discard a "five-disc", Yin Hsueh-yen leaned forward and stopped him by placing her delicate hand on his.

"Mr. Hsu," she said, "You mustn't let this one go."

Hsu Chuang-t'u won that very game with a "Garden Full of Flowers", and got back at one stroke more than half the chips he had lost. This raised a joking complaint from one of the other guests:

"Miss Yin, why don't you come over here and check *my* tiles! Look, I'm almost broke!"

"This is the first time Mr. Hsu comes here. It would be a shame if we let him go home a loser, wouldn't it?" Hsu turned his head and saw Yin Hsueh-yen smiling at him, her silver earrings dangling against her raven hair.

Toward midnight, the room was heavy with the fragrance of polianthes tuberosa. After the hot wine *hua-tiao*⁸ at dinner and the excitement of his lucky hand "Garden Full of Flowers", Hsu Chuang-t'u felt a bit tipsy as he was taking his leave.

"Miss Yin, thank you for being my teacher, otherwise I'd have been a complete flop at mah-jong tonight," he said to her gratefully as she walked him to the door. Yin Hsueh-yen looked like the Goddess of Mercy as she stood in the doorway all in white, her arms folded across her breast.

⁸A Shaohsing rice wine of good quality.

"It's nothing," she said smilingly. "You come again some other day, Mr. Hsu. We'll continue our research in mah-jong." Two days later he did come again—to pursue the mysteries of mah-jong with Yin Hsueh-yen.

V

Hsu Chuang-t'u's wife sat in her wicker chair, staring listlessly at the doorway. Her face was growing daily thinner, and her eyes seemed to peer from deeper and deeper caverns. When her god-mother old Mrs. Wu came to see her, she took Mrs. Hsu's hand in alarm.

"Oh, my dear girl!" she cried. "It's only been a month since I've seen you—how have you lost so much weight?"

Old Mrs. Wu was a woman of more than sixty, with a large build and not a single gray hair. Her feet had once been bound, but she still walked with a quick, sprightly step. She had travelled to Mt. Ch'ing-ch'eng in Szechuan for Taoist instruction, and had become the disciple of a learned priest from the White Cloud Temple. The priest picked her because of her uncommon gifts, and passed his mantle on to her when he flew up to heaven. She now ran a Taoist parlor in her Taipei home. In the center of the room she placed a photograph of her late teacher, under which was hung an eight-foot-square banner of yellow silk. She announced that the spirit of her teacher often appeared to her on this banner and gave her instructions, and that because of this she was able to foretell the future and avert misfortune. She had many followers, most of them middle-aged women, some of whom were quite socially prominent. Although they were financially secure they nevertheless felt empty at heart, and so on the first and fifteenth of each month they would stop their mah-jong or subscription-bidding and come in groups to Mrs. Wu's parlor. There they piously chanted, genuflected, and distributed alms to comfort the afflicted in order to find peace for themselves and their families. For those who were seriously ill, or who were worried about family quarrels, Mrs. Wu was generous with her promises to seek divine help from her departed teacher.

"My dear, you sure look wretched!" she said

to Mrs. Hsu, measuring the lady carefully with her eyes. Then she shook her head and sighed. Mrs. Hsu could bear it no longer; hanging her head and bursting into tears, she poured her heart out to her godmother.

"Oh, godma, you've seen it all along," she said through her sobs, "we've been married all these years and he'd never said a harsh word to me, much less blow up like that before. You know that whatever he does he wants to win—he always says that a man should think more about his business than anything else. We came to Taiwan, and it hasn't been easy, these ten years or so—it's taken such a lot for the cement factory to get going, and finally he's made it. But when I see him drive himself so hard, going to all those social functions for the sake of the business, what can I do but worry myself sick? I really don't care about his business so much as his health. So long as he stays well, it doesn't matter how hard things are on the children and me. But would you believe it? This last month he's a changed man. He's been staying away from home two or three nights in a row! I barely asked him a question and he got so furious he started throwing dishes. He even gave the children a terrible thrashing the day before yesterday. And now people are telling me he's got some woman outside, somebody who's popular and smart. Oh, godma, what does an honest woman like me know about these things? How can I help looking like this?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Wu with a clap of her hands, "if you hadn't brought it up yourself, I'd never have mentioned it. You know how I hate to gossip. But since you think of me as your own mother, naturally I'm on your side. You know that fat Mrs. Sung—her husband, the manager, had some hostess from the May Flower Bar, and she came running to me weeping and wailing, asking me to pray to my old teacher for her. So I looked at her husband's horoscope, and to be sure there was trouble in their way. Mrs. Sung made a devout pledge before the Master's altar and I recited twelve texts of scripture for her, and then what do you know, her husband obediently came running back! Then I said to her, 'Stop spending all your time with those foxy women! You should be praying and doing good deeds!' Then she told me all about your husband. This Yin Hsueh-yen, what type of woman do you think she is? If she doesn't have a thing or two up her sleeves, how could she

have this hold on people, even on a good, honest man like Mr. Hsu? Oh, it's happened many times before—just look at history: Pao-ssu, Tan-chi, Fei-yen, T'ai-chen⁹—what a bunch of trouble-makers! You think they were human? They were demons, every one of them! When times are chaotic, they all come down to earth and create trouble for people. God knows what this Yin Hsueh-yen was in her previous incarnation! The way I look at it, you had better conjure up something to save your Mr. Hsu from this calamity!"

"Godma," said Mrs. Hsu, bursting into tears again, "you know my husband isn't really a man without conscience. Even though he didn't say anything, I know he feels sorry every time he comes home after staying away. Sometimes he just sits by himself, smoking furiously, and I can see the veins in his forehead standing out—he really looks frightening, but I don't dare go and console him, so I just worry myself to death. These last few days, he acted as if he were possessed—coming home shouting that everyone in his factory was making trouble for him. He blew up even at his workmen; yesterday he fired several of them. When I told him he shouldn't be too hard on those ignorant people, he started yelling at me too! He's acting so strangely, not at all like what he used to be, I can't help worrying!"

"That's exactly it!" exclaimed Mrs. Wu knowingly. "What could he have done to bring this on himself? Give me his horoscope, and I'll look into it."

Mrs. Hsu copied out her husband's date and time of birth and gave them to Mrs. Wu.

"Godma," she said, "I'm counting on you."

"Don't worry," said Mrs. Wu. "My old Master is known to have unlimited powers. He'll help solve all difficulties and problems!"

But her old teacher's powers were not adequate to the task of saving Hsu Chuang-t'u. One day, as Hsu was pounding the table and cursing out at one of his workers, the man, mad with rage, stabbed

⁹Pao-ssu 褒姒, concubine of King Yu of Chou 周幽王, the lady "who would not laugh"; Tan-chi 妲己, favorite of the infamous tyrant, King Chou of the Yin (Shang) dynasty 殷紂; Chao Fei-yen 趙飛燕, known to be "light-as-a-swallow", evil influence in the life of Emperor Ch'eng of Han 漢成帝 (see *Renditions* No. 1, p.11); T'ai-chen 太真, or Yang Kuei-fei 楊貴妃, whose romance with the T'ang Emperor 唐明皇 is the subject-matter of several articles in this issue.

him clean through the chest with a drill.

VI

Mr. Wu served as the chairman of the committee that arranged his nephew's funeral. The constant activity cost him another attack of arthritis, and he hobbled more than ever as he bustled in and out of the Ultimate Bliss Funeral Parlor, supporting himself with a cane. On the day of the funeral, a chapel was erected inside the parlor, and the white massed wreaths and funeral scrolls sent by Hsu Chuang-t'u's relatives and friends were strung all the way to the front entrance. The banner from Hsu's colleagues at the cement factory bore this eulogy in large characters—"A Hero is Lost to Us." From nine in the morning on, the funeral guests arrived in an uninterrupted stream. Mrs. Hsu had cried herself into a daze; in her flaxen mourning clothes, with her two children at her side, she knelt by the altar and thanked the people for coming. Mrs. Wu had arrived at the head of a team of twelve Taoist priests who, decked out in their robes and carrying ritual dusters, established themselves at the rear of the chapel and proceeded to conduct the sacrificial service for releasing the soul from suffering. A dozen or so Buddhist monks and nuns had also begun chanting the sutras for the dead, praying for deliverance and purification.

By noon, the mourners had overflowed the hall. Suddenly a ripple of unrest spread from some point within the eddying crowd, and a respectful hush fell over the guests as they realized that Yin Hsueh-yen had entered unseen, like a breath of wind. She was dressed, as ever, all in white, and she wore no makeup. Lightly and gracefully she walked to the reception table, lifted the brush, and signed her name in a single easy flourish. As she made her way unhurriedly to the center of the chapel, the other guests all fell back, allowing her to proceed to the altar. Her face wore a sober expression as she stood before Hsu Chuang-t'u's portrait and made three deep bows. The sight stunned all of Hsu's friends and relatives who were present. Some appeared startled, others were angry, and the faces of still others were full of doubt and confusion:

but all stood as though transfixed by some secret force which none dared lightly challenge. Even though Hsu's violent death had moved some of his wife's family to put their blame on Yin Hsueh-yen, none had dreamed that she would dare show her face in this brazen manner. The tension of the moment rendered them all powerless. After bowing before the altar, Yin Hsueh-yen walked over to Mrs. Hsu, reached out her hand and stroked the two children on the head, and solemnly shook Mrs. Hsu's hand. Then, even as the mourners stared at each other in amazement, Yin Hsueh-yen, in her zephyr steps, strode out of the Ultimate Bliss Funeral Parlor. All of a sudden turmoil reigned in the hall. Mrs. Hsu suddenly fell on her knees in a dead faint. Quickly dropping her ritual duster, Mrs. Wu dashed over and carried Mrs. Hsu to the rear chamber.

In the evening at Yin Hsueh-yen's house a mah-jong party was going on again. Some of the players had fixed themselves up for partners that very day at Hsu Chuang-t'u's funeral. Mr. Wu once again brought two new guests: a Mr. Yu, the new manager of the Southland Cotton Mills, and a Mr. Chou, the director of Great China Enterprises. That evening Mr. Wu's luck was extraordinary: he won a succession of jackpots. He never stopped laughing and shouting, and the tears fell steadily from his inflamed eyes with their rotted lashes. During the twelfth round, he suddenly waved his hands madly and cried out:

"Baby, come here! Come look! I've got 'The Four Happinesses at the Gate'! This is a hand that comes once in a lifetime! North, South, East, West—they're all here! Plus a self-drawn final pair! They say this is such a rare hand that winning the Four Happinesses bodes ill on the player. But since I've been down in my luck all my life, winning this hand may well turn my fortune for the better. Come, Baby, look at this hand—isn't it lovely? Isn't it fun?"

Laughing and shouting, Mr. Wu scattered the mah-jong tiles about the table. Yin Hsueh-yen came to his side, and very lightly pressing his shoulder, whispered to him smilingly:

"Godpa, brace yourself and win a few more hands. By and by you win from Mr. Yu and Mr. Chou, I'll come share your lucky money!"

(For Chinese text see page 140)