

馮夢龍：陳御史巧勘金釵鈿

The Case of the Gold Hairpins

By Feng Meng-lung, ed. (1574-1646)

Translated by P. C. Yao

*Like fortune's wheel mundane affairs go round,
Momentary weal or woe does not count.
Retribution is sure to come, though slow,
Heaven ne'er lets a man of virtue down.*

I

OUR STORY begins with an honest official named Lu of Stone Wall county in the prefecture of Kanchow, Kiangsi province. A roving Commissioner against Corruption, he was so upright and incorruptible that people dubbed him "Pure Water Lu". He had a son named Hsueh-tseng while Secretary Ku of the same county had a daughter named Ah Hsiu. As the two families had associated with one another for generations, it was natural that Ah Hsiu became betrothed to Hsueh-tseng and Ku and Lu regarded themselves as in-laws to each other. However, the wedding was delayed first by the death of Hsueh-tseng's mother and then by that of the father, Commissioner Lu himself, while still in office. These developments obliged young Hsueh-tseng to observe mourning for three years, during which his circumstances steadily deteriorated until a few hovels were all that remained of his home and he had to worry about his subsistence.

Seeing Hsueh-tseng's straitened circumstances, Secretary Ku wished to break off the engagement and said to his wife née Meng, "The Lu family's reduced to penury. One can hardly hope that

Hsueh-tseng would be able to complete the 'six preliminaries'¹ and set a date for the wedding ceremony. In fact, it may never take place. I'd rather look elsewhere for a good match than risk the lifelong happiness of our daughter."

"True, the Lu family is poor," replied his wife, "but how can you go back on a childhood betrothal?"

But Ku said, "Now all we need to do is to send a messenger to tell Master Lu that the parties have grown up, and he should delay the wedding no more. You see, both families have pursued an official career, and regard decency as something to be strictly adhered to. He cannot just say 'Sorry, I haven't the wherewithal for a wedding' or leave his house and enter mine without being properly dressed. So I don't think it requires any stretch of

¹The "six preliminaries" 六禮: 1) sending of gifts to the home of the bride-to-be; 2) asking for her name and other relevant particulars in order to cast a horoscope and foretell the marriage's success or failure; 3) informing her family of the favourable results of the cast on the match; 4) sending a present of silk to confirm the match; 5) requesting the naming of a propitious wedding date; 6) going to escort the bride home for the wedding ceremony.

the imagination to see his voluntary withdrawal from the engagement. Then I'll get a bill of divorcement from him and that'll sever our relations for good."

"But aren't you aware that Ah Hsiu is a bit odd and unconventional?" returned his wife. "I'm afraid she will not agree."

"She is not free to disagree, since ethics require that a daughter bow to her father's wishes before marriage," rejoined Ku. "Try to make her understand matters, if you please, and patiently if necessary."

Thereupon, Madam Meng Ku proceeded to her daughter's boudoir and told her what was on her father's mind. As she had feared, she found her daughter's response swift and resolute.

"Surely the right thing for a woman to do is be faithful to one man to the end of her days," said Ah Hsiu. "It's barbarous to arrange a marriage in terms of money; it's inhuman for father to be so snobbish. I can never obey."

"Now your father's going to urge Hsueh-tseng to go through with the ceremony as soon as possible," said her mother. "If he can't afford it and chooses to break the engagement, then please put up with fate and do nothing."

"Oh, what a piece of advice!" protested Ah Hsiu. "If he's unable to carry the match through for lack of means I vow to abide by my troth and marry no other man in this life. Remember Ch'ien Yu-lien² who drowned herself in the river and has through the ages stood out as the paragon of chastity? Why should I find it difficult to end my life if Father chooses to press me?"

Madam Meng Ku deplored her daughter's obstinacy but sympathized with her as well. Presently it occurred to her that it would be a good idea to send for Master Lu, make him a gift of some valuables and ask him to go through with the "preliminaries" as soon as possible—without the knowledge of the Secretary, of course.

One day Ku set out for East Hamlet to collect rents and was expected to be away for a few days. Having confided her scheme to her daughter and secured her acquiescence, Madam Ku summoned

²According to legend, Ch'ien Yu-lien, wife of Wang Shih-p'eng of the Sung dynasty, drowned herself by jumping into the Ou River after her step-mother attempted to force her to re-marry a wealthy man named Sun Ju-ch'uan.

the gardener Lao Ou to her presence and told him to ask Master Lu to come for a meeting at the backdoor of her residence. She further instructed him to do this and that, warning him to keep the matter to himself and promising him a good reward.

When the old gardener came to Lu Hsueh-tseng's abode, he found a house with:

*An entrance looking like a deserted temple,
An interior resembling that of a broken kiln,
Windows, their bars gone, creaking and banging at the mercy of the wind,
A kitchen cold and dreary, without smoke or steam,
Walls partially collapsed and roofs leaking,
And chairs worn and beds torn.
A house like that could hardly shelter any man,
Let alone when it began to rain.
All the people talked of a mandarin's downfall,
But none pitied the descendants of an honest official.*

AT THIS POINT it should be mentioned that Lu Hsueh-tseng had an aunt married to a Liang family but now widowed, living at a place some three miles from the county town. Dame Liang had a son named Liang Shang-ping, who was recently married to a good girl, and the three of them were comfortably off.

On the day the old gardener called, Hsueh-tseng was away visiting his aunt to borrow some rice and only a white-headed kitchen woman was at home. So Lao Ou the gardener could do no more than deliver his mistress's message to her, telling her to get in touch with Master Lu as soon as possible and adding, "This is very kind of our mistress. Do ask him to come in the next few days when our master is away, and make no mistake. We're expecting him." With this he went home. The old woman realized that the message would not permit of delay nor could it be entrusted to another person, and having requested a neighbour to look after her house, she began limping and trudging towards the aunt's house. Thus, guided by her vague memories of the place which she had visited

in the company of her late mistress Madam Lu, and with the help of a few inquiries along the way, she reached the Liang family without much difficulty.

On arrival she found Lu Hsueh-tseng dining with his aunt, and after the usual greetings informed him in detail of the message the Ku family's gardener had brought. The aunt was delighted and said it was a fine gesture and urged her nephew to lose no time in going to the appointment. Hsueh-tseng was overjoyed but rather self-conscious of his shabby clothes, and he asked his cousin Liang Shang-ping to lend him a decent gown to wear. Now this Liang was an unscrupulous villain; as soon as he had heard the message his mind began scheming. So he replied, saying, "Oh yes, you can have a gown from me. However, it's too late to go to town today. You know official residences being what they are, I don't think it advisable for you to venture there at night; because although your mother-in-law's sent a message, not all her servants would know about it. I would suggest you stay

here tonight and set out for town in the morning."

"Yes, you're right, cousin," replied Hsueh-tseng.

"Well now, I have to go to East Hamlet and talk over a little business with someone there," said Liang. "I'll let you have the clothes as soon as I come back." He then told his mother that the old woman should also stay overnight as she must be tired after trudging such a distance. His mother patted him on the back for being so thoughtful and both visitors were asked to stay for the night. But who would have thought of his real, treacherous design to ensure by detaining the woman that no one could tell where the real Lu Hsueh-tseng was and upset his plan for impersonation! Indeed,

*Of his heaven-deceiving tricks no one will
beware,
Nor is there a ghost the traps he sets on
earth to bare.*

Then, after putting on new clothes, Liang Shang-ping sneaked off and headed straight for

Readers familiar with the birth of the ancient Chinese short story in the Sung dynasty are well aware of the strong colloquial element in this genre of popular literature. Composed by professional storytellers, such tales of historical, Buddhistic and folklore themes were originally meant for the entertainment of audiences in market-places and tea-houses. Passed down the ages in written versions, they preserved their construction and style, though some received varying degrees of elaboration and revision from later literati. In the years of the late Ming, under the editorship of Feng Meng-lung and his associates, some 120 shorter stories, chronologically far apart, were given their final shape and collected into three anthologies now known collectively as the San-yen 三言. The present story, No. 2 in Yu-shih ming-yen 喻世明言 whose items were largely taken from an earlier collection Ku-chin hsiao-shuo 古今小說, is identified as a work of rather late date, and its narrative is usually grouped in the late-colloquial category.

An apt description of the narrative style of both this story and "The Case of the Dead Infant", which was carried in Renditions No. 2, is found in Professor Jaroslav Průšek's book Chinese History and Literature: "The storyteller, by directly addressing his listeners, by his rhetorical questions and fixed turns of phrase, keeps reminding us that it is a true tale that he, the storyteller, is relating to his audience. . . . The storytellers paid particular attention to the dialogue which was always compact and yet fluent; because of the special structure of Chinese, it was almost always in the form of direct speech. Today we still feel that the storyteller acted the dialogues, accompanying them with a variety of significant gesture, and that alongside the epic and lyrical elements an important part of the storytellers' compositions was its dramatic colouring."

Secretary Ku's house in the county town.

IN THE MEANTIME, under instructions from Madam Meng Ku, the old gardener had left open the garden gate at the back of the house and was keeping vigilance thereabouts. The sun had gone down behind the western hills. Presently he saw in the gathering darkness a young man neatly dressed, staring at the entrance and moving about in a hesitant manner. The gardener went forward and asked, "Is it Master Lu, please?"

"Yes, it is," answered Liang Shang-ping with a bow. "I'm here in response to a call from Madam Ku. Please do me the favour of reporting my arrival."

Thereupon, the gardener ushered him into an arbor for a rest and went in to announce him. Before long word came through a housekeeper that Madam bade him proceed to the inner chambers for a meeting, and scarcely had he stepped out of the arbor when two maids each holding a gauze lantern arrived to escort him. They proceeded this way and that and passed by a large number of rooms before a sudden sight of red chambers and painted towers heralded arrival at the inner chambers. At that moment Madam Ku was seen waiting to receive her guest, pushing a red curtain aside with one hand and holding a candlelight with the other. Liang Shang-ping was flustered: first, a man of humble origin, he had never seen such riches and splendour before; second, he was afraid his rusticity and lack of culture would betray him; and third, harbouring evil designs as he did, he could not but feel ill at ease. So, as he went forward to greet Madam Ku, he showed such coarse manners and hummed and hawed so much that Madam said to herself, "Strange! He doesn't behave like a son of an official family at all." However, a second thought crossed her mind, "Does not the proverb say 'A man in poverty is never in want of stupidity'? The young man is destitute, so how can I blame him for his lack of proprieties!" With this she pitied him all the more.

After tea, Madam ordered dinner served, at which she bade her daughter be present to meet her betrothed. At first Ah Hsiu declined, but after her mother's repeated urgings she thought, "Father wishes to repudiate the match. If he succeeds we would be parted forever, and tonight would be my last chance to meet my intended husband. If I

could do so I would die without regrets." So she stepped out of her boudoir and bashfully approached her mother, who said, "Come here, my dear, and meet Mr. Lu. The usual greetings will do." The supposed Master Lu made two bows in her direction; she reciprocated with a couple of curtsies and was about to retire, when her mother said, "You two are plighted to each other, dear, why not stay for a while?" and made her sit beside herself. The impostor watched Miss Ku with a steady gaze and, seeing her exquisite beauty, started itching to the marrow, while Ah Hsiu had not the slightest doubt about the man's identity; her heart filled with distress and compassion for her fiancé, she bent her head and could hardly hold back her tears. Thus, Truth sat face to face with Falsehood for a while, each turning over its own thoughts.

Soon dinner was ready. On Madam Ku's word there were laid two tables, one at the upper end of the room for the guest, and the other, at a cross angle to the first, for the hostess and her daughter. When they were seated Madam Ku said, "Please forgive me for this hasty invitation and lack of propriety. I am only trying to help consummate our match." The sham Master Lu with his guilty conscience blushed scarlet and managed no more than the words, "I'm grateful!" Madam Ku went on to tell of her daughter's vow of abiding faithfulness to him, and, though his response showed a lack of warmth and interest, with a 'yes' here and half a 'no' there, she thought that could be due to his shyness and saw no reason to suspect him. During the dinner the impersonator was restive and fidgety and declined to drink, feigning poor capacity, and Madam Ku did not insist.

After dinner they sat chatting for a while before Madam gave orders for the eastern chamber to be made ready for the guest. At this the pseudo-son-in-law feigned a desire to go home and rose to take leave.

"There's no need for ceremony between us," said Madam, "as few relations are closer than ours. As a matter of fact, we've yet something important to say to you."

The impersonator was secretly pleased and, on being informed that the eastern chamber was ready, thanked the hostess with a deep bow and left with a maid lighting him on his way.

Meanwhile, Madam Ku led her daughter to her

private chamber. There, having sent her waiting-maids away, she took out from her coffer a quantity of valuables including eighty taels of silver, two pairs of silver cups and sixteen articles of gold ornament worth some one hundred taels of gold in all, and said, "That's all I have, my dear. You may personally take and give these to Hsueh-tseng to help him pay for the nuptial gifts and wedding ceremony."

"How can I go to him, mother?" Ah Hsiu responded. "It's so embarrassing."

"You see, my child, propriety provides expedients as well as rules, and there are priorities in all matters. Now things have reached a delicate stage; if you don't go in person and urge him to expedite matters with the affection of one long betrothed to him, how's he likely to pursue them with diligence and application? Moreover, a poor boy knows little of the world; when left unguided with this quantity of valuables, he might turn to some other quarters for advice and could easily fall a victim to trickery and squander them all. In that event my efforts would be wasted and regret would be of no avail. Now go—wrap these up in a parcel and carry it inside your sleeve so nobody could see it."

Ah Hsiu could not but comply with her mother's wishes, but she said, "How can I go by myself?"

"The housekeeper'll go with you," said Madam Ku. With this she sent for the woman and told her to escort the young mistress to the eastern chamber in the still of the night to have a word with Master Lu. "When Young Mistress goes in," added she in a whisper, "you'll wait outside lest your presence should impede the flow of their conversation." That remark certainly got home.

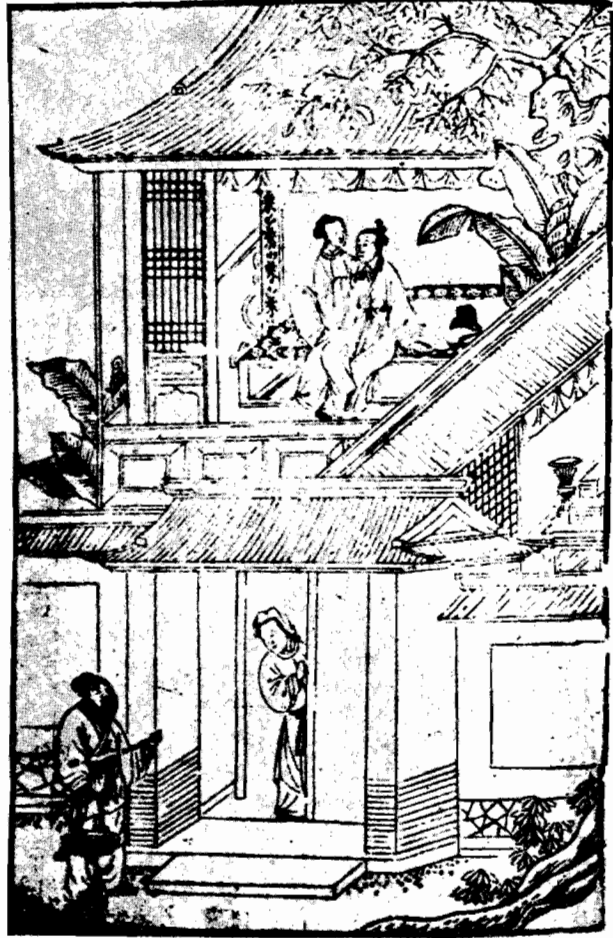
In the meantime, intrigued by what went on and curious to know what was afoot, the impersonator was sitting up late and, sure enough, he heard a knock at his door shortly after the first watch, and in came the housekeeper announcing the arrival of her young mistress for a meeting.

II

THE IMPOSTOR rose quickly and received Miss Ku with alacrity. They renewed salutations. And strange as it may seem, while the impersonator had

been awkward in speech in the presence of Madam Ku he proved himself a gallant of a kind, able to pay his addresses in words sweet and tender to the young lady he was now face to face with. At first Miss Ku was shy and reserved, then away from the watchful eyes of her mother, she gradually took heart and got used to the presence of a man. So the two of them chatted amiably for a while before Ah Hsiu unburdened her heart and in so doing could not help shedding tears of sorrow. Pretending to respond to her feelings, the impostor drummed his chest with his fists, wiped his eyes and blew his nose, sighed and groaned, and generally put up a show of grief. He then attempted to comfort her, begged her to restrain her sorrow, and making use of the intimacy, began taking liberties with her person. Standing outside the door, the housekeeper heard the couple weeping and sobbing; she too was moved to tears, not realizing that while one was sorrowing from the depth of her heart the other was shedding crocodile tears. Ah Hsiu took the parcel of gold ornaments and silver out of her sleeves, and after repeatedly urging the need for action, handed it to the impostor. As soon as the impostor received it he grasped her hand and with a gentle pull took her to his breast; then, blowing out the lamp, he poured out his unbridled passion in a manner that combined threat with entreaty. Ah Hsiu was alarmed but did not dare raise her voice lest the servants should be attracted thither and endanger the larger scheme. She had no alternative but to yield to his impudence. Her misfortune is described in this verse composed to the tune of "Like a Dream":

*In a boudoir not easily accessible
Behind curtains embroidered and beautiful
Lives a cultivated girl,
As in a shell is nurtured a pearl.
She ventures out to meet her fiancé,
But, instead, gets into the clutches of a knave.
Alas, defiled by him is she,
Like a flower whose honey's sucked by a bee.
It's wrong to cheat her out of her maidenhood,
It's wrong to ruin her marriage prospects for good.*



*Insatiable as a snake attempting to swallow an elephant,
Unwary as a cicada threatened by a mantis with danger imminent.*

It is often said that "action without deliberation is always followed by contrition." That Madam Ku should have arranged to have Master Lu presented with valuables in private in order to help complete the match was doubtless an act of extreme kindness; it was also a matter of the utmost importance to the parties concerned. Why she had acted so rashly and failed to ensure that the old gardener gain at least a personal acquaintance of the true Master Lu is verily beyond one's imagination. Even after the first blunder had been made and the impostor presented himself undetected, she might still have avoided the disaster if she had confined herself to advising him and handing over the valuables herself and then telling the old gardener to escort him back to the Lu home.

It was a thousand, nay, ten thousand pities that she should ask her daughter to come out and meet

the so-called Master Lu, then have the maid go by herself to the eastern chamber for a meeting with him, thus creating circumstances favourable to the events that followed. Under those circumstances something deplorable was bound to happen: even if the real Master Lu were placed in that situation he might be tempted to transgress, let alone an impostor of no scruples. Her rash action would surely become a subject for gossip for the rest of her life. Is this not a case of "a mother's mistaken love turns out to have ruined her daughter's life"?

Now let us digress no more, but proceed with our story. Having taken advantage of Ah Hsiu, the impostor let her go. At the fifth watch he was waken up by a servant sent by Madam Ku. After he had toileted and breakfasted Madam exhorted him again, saying: "My husband'll soon return. Please go ahead with your preparations and don't

dilly-dally." He then took his leave and slipped out of the rear garden. While on his way home he told himself, "I've seduced a maiden of an official family and got this quantity of valuables without giving myself away. What a great piece of luck! But what if Lu should show up at the Ku house today? Haven't I heard it said that Secretary Ku will come back soon? Now let me detain Lu till tomorrow; if Ku is back then, he won't dare go. Then not a trace of my affair will be left behind."

With this he went to a wine shop and drank and ate to his fill and did not direct his steps homeward until much of the afternoon had worn away.

Meanwhile, Master Lu was anxiously waiting to start but could do no more than wait for lack of a decent suit of clothes to wear. His aunt also became restless; she sent a farm hand to East Hamlet to look for her son but the man found no trace of him. So she approached her daughter-in-law, née Tien, and asked: "Can you find a good gown for Master Lu?"

"I can't get at his clothes," said Tien. "They're locked up in his trunk and no keys've been left with me."

At this juncture we might say a word about this lady Tien of East Village in Stone Wall county. Indeed she was not only handsome to look at but also well-read and well-mannered. Her father Senior Licentiate Tien was a well-known figure cast in a heroic mould in that county. For some reason he incurred the enmity of an official and got into trouble. Fortunately, Liang Shang-ping's father went to his aid by putting in a good word for him with Commissioner Lu. Having heard of Tien's good reputation, Commissioner Lu interceded strongly on his behalf, and he was saved from disgrace and disaster. In requital for the Liang family's help, Tien married his daughter to Liang Shang-ping. Like her father, Miss Tien was of a heroic bent of mind and, noticing her husband's stupidity and inclination to villainy, was disappointed and displeased. She always addressed him as "country lad", with the result that their relations became strained. That is why even a domestic trifle like clothing was taken care of by the "country lad" himself and not by his wife.

AS HAS BEEN told, the aunt and the nephew had been waiting anxiously and were nearly out of their patience when Liang Shang-ping returned, his

face flushed.

"You idiot! Your cousin's been waiting all this while for your gown," his mother upbraided him. "Yet you spent the night away from home and drank to this sottish state at God knows where. Imagine our anxiety; we'd nowhere to look for you!"

Liang made no reply but went straight to his bedroom, where he took the valuables out of his sleeve and secreted them. He then came out and said to Master Lu, "I'm sorry I was unable to get away from some business and delayed you one day. It's getting dark now; you might as well go back tomorrow."

"Never mind today or tomorrow," his mother refuted him. "Just lend him a gown and let him tend to the rest as he properly pleases!"

"I'm afraid I've to borrow shoes and socks as well," said Master Lu.

"There's a pair of shoes of blue brocade being soled at the shoemaker's next door," replied Liang. "I'll urge him to hurry tonight and let you have it tomorrow morning."

Master Lu had no alternative but to stay for another night under the circumstances.

When tomorrow came Liang Shang-ping feigned a headache and slept till it was well past breakfast-time and the sun had risen high up in the sky. Then he got up and slowly, piece by piece and article by article, he took out a gown, a pair of shoes and a pair of socks—all designed to delay Lu's departure and ruin his chance of marriage.

Master Lu did not put them on straightway but had them wrapped up in a parcel and handed it to the old woman who had come for him. The aunt also made ready a bag of rice and some vegetables and, having sent for a farm labourer to take these and escort Master Lu home, said, "When preparations for your marriage are complete please let me know and save me worries."

As Master Lu bowed and turned round to depart, Liang Shang-ping, pretending to see him off, said, "Now cousin, I'd advise you to pay this visit with caution. After all, you don't know whether they harbour good or bad intentions. In my opinion you'd better call at the front gate and enter with dignity; as their son-in-law designate, you don't have to worry about being chased off, do you? They sent their old gardener to invite you; that's evidence enough, so don't play your part

cheap. If they mean well," he went on, "you'll be received properly; if they break their promise then don't hesitate to reason with them, wrangle if necessary, and let their neighbours know all about it. Should you enter by their rear garden, which is a region of wild growths, you might meet with a treacherous attack and have no way to beat a retreat."

"You're quite right, cousin," responded Lu. Indeed,

*Fine words in his presence
But evil deeds behind his back,
Here is a heartless criminal,
Posing before a good man as his pal.*

On his return home Master Lu put on his gown, socks and shoes, but wanted a headcloth which he had not borrowed because of the difference in size. So he took off the old one, rinsed it with clean water, told the old woman to borrow an iron from a neighbour and pressed it smooth, not forgetting to mend its frayed edges and restore them to their original colour with black ink. It took him over two hours to have this headcloth renovated somewhat and he spent a further period wearing and adjusting it left and right, this way and that. He then asked the old woman to look him up and down to see that he had been properly dressed in every respect, before setting out for Secretary Ku's residence.

When Master Lu arrived and presented himself at the gate, the gatekeeper, seeing a stranger, said, "My master's gone to East Hamlet." At this Lu, showing the good upbringing his official family tradition had given him, replied without a moment's hesitation, "Please, then inform your mistress that Lu Hsueh-tseng is calling."

The gateman, now aware that the caller was Master Lu but still ignorant of the purpose of his visit, said, "My master is not in, so I dare not announce you."

"I'm here at your mistress's bidding," returned Lu. "Just inform her of my arrival; you won't be blamed for that."

So the gatekeeper went in and reported, "Master Lu is at the gate, asking to see you, Madam. Shall I usher him in or tell him to leave?"

On hearing this Madam Ku gave a start. She said to herself, "He went back the day before

yesterday, why's he come again?", and then to the gateman, "Show him into the hall."

She then told her housekeeper to go and find out what his purpose was. The housekeeper came out and scarcely had she glanced at him when she turned back and reported excitedly to her mistress, "This is not the real Master Lu, Madam; he's a man altogether different from the one we had the night before last. The previous one was fat and dark-complexioned; this one's thin and fair-complexioned."

"What?" exclaimed Madam Ku, much mystified and skeptical. She proceeded to the back of the hall and looked through a curtain, and there, sure enough, she saw a different man. Bewildered and not knowing what to do, she told the housekeeper to go out and question the man about details of his family affairs. As she did so the man answered with complete confidence and knowledge and without a single error. This made Madam Ku recall the suspicions she had had in her mind when she first received the previous Master Lu, and also made her feel that the present visitor looked like her real son-in-law, judging from his fine appearance and polite speech. When asked about the purpose of his visit, he replied, "I've come in answer to your mistress's command transmitted through your gardener. Business detained me in the country, however, and I wasn't back until this morning. Then I hastened here to call on your mistress. I beg her pardon for the delay."

"This must be the truth," said Madam Ku to herself. "But where could that impersonator come from the night before last?"

She then hurried back to her room and told her daughter what had happened, adding, "Oh, things should have come to this pretty pass! I must blame your father for all this and for his unreason. However, it's no use regretting now. Luckily few people know it; let's forget it. But now that your betrothed has come at my request and we've nothing to give him, what're we to do?" Indeed,

*One false move leads to tragedy,
A well-planned game goes awry.*

AH HSIU WAS momentarily stupefied. One hardly knows in what words to describe the thousand emotions that sprang up from her heart: fright, shame, vexation, distress? None of them, all of

them, a bit of one, a bit of another, a mixture of several and a mixture of all. She felt as if she were pricked by a thousand needles all over her body and suffered indescribable pain. However, a girl of exceptional will and determination, she soon formed her own ideas and said to her mother, "Please see him, I know what to do."

Madam Ku assented and came into the hall to meet Master Lu. As she approached, Lu took an armchair and, having placed it at the upper end of the hall, said to her, "Mother-in-law, please be seated and permit me to pay my respects." After demurring a moment and declining the honour of the seat, Madam Ku stood beside it and accepted two obeisances from Lu, who was then helped by the housekeeper to rise and take a seat.

"Forgive me for failing to complete my matrimonial rites because of my reduced circumstances," said Master Lu. "Your magnanimity and faithfulness to me will forever be remembered."

Madam Ku, much troubled at heart, knew not what to say; instead, she told the housekeeper to shut the doors to the hall and ask Ah Hsiu to come out. But Ah Hsiu stood inside a curtain and refused to appear; she spoke through the housekeeper, "I am sorry to say that Master Lu should not have delayed himself in the country and failed to respond quickly to our desire to help."

"I could not come," Lu excused himself, "because I was taken ill in the country. I could not respond to your call earlier than today; how can I be blamed for failure?"

"I was yours three days ago," replied Ah Hsiu through the curtain. "But now I'm no longer fit to be your wife, nor can I give you much material help other than a pair of gold hairpins and another of gold flowers still in my possession. These I now present to you as a token of my regard. And now you should proceed to look for another good match and forget all about me." Thereupon, the housekeeper handed those ornaments to Master Lu, but as Lu was in the dark about the events that had taken place before his arrival and suspected her of going back on her betrothal, he would not consider accepting.

At this Ah Hsiu said, "Pray keep them, you will soon understand. Now please go back. Nothing is to be gained by remaining here." Her voice broke down; she burst out sobbing and hurried off to her room.

Lu Hsueh-tseng, becoming more suspicious, could restrain himself no longer but gave vent to his feelings at Madam Ku, saying, "Yes, I'm poor, but certainly I didn't come for just these two articles. Didn't you hear what your daughter had said? Apparently she wanted to break off our engagement. Why did you keep quiet and say nothing? If you can't use me better than this, then why should you ask me to come at all!?"

"My daughter and I remain faithful. The only reason is that you came late, and appeared to have taken little account of our match; that's why my daughter is upset. Please do not feed on suspicions."

But Lu Hsueh-tseng refused to be persuaded; instead, he recalled and recounted the numerous instances of friendly relationship that had existed between the two families when his father was still of this world.

"Now he's dead, the other's alive," he went on, "one family's impoverished, the other remains rich. Is that the reason for your change of heart? I've no one but you, mother-in-law, to appeal to for dispensation of justice. How this about-face can occur within a short span of three days is really hard for anyone to understand!"

So he grumbled and rambled on unceasingly. Madam Ku, though embarrassed and annoyed, was unable to refute his points nor was she able to get away from him.

At this juncture there was a sudden commotion from the direction of the inner apartments, and a maid came running and called out excitedly, "Madam, things are in a bad way! Do come quick to help the Young Mistress."

Fear-stricken, Madam Ku was in a cold sweat and hastened to her daughter's boudoir. She wished she had had two more legs to carry her faster, but as it was she had the housekeeper on her left helping her along at a kind of a run. On reaching the boudoir she saw her daughter hanging herself with a length of fine cloth over her bed. When hurriedly brought down, she was found to have expired and would not come to despite repeated calls from her mother and the maids. And the roomful burst out crying one and all.

Overhearing that his betrothed had hanged herself, Lu Hsueh-tseng would not believe his ears and, thinking that it could be a subterfuge aimed at inducing him to go away, began shouting and gesticulating albeit all by himself.

Madam Ku, grief-stricken, sent for Master Lu. As he stepped into the boudoir, he saw there his betrothed lying stiff and lifeless on an embroidered quilt on a bed inlaid with ivory.

"My poor son-in-law," said Madam Ku tearfully, "now it's time to have a close look at your betrothed."

The sight of his dead fiancée stunned him to the quick, and he could not help breaking into a loud wail.

"My worthy son-in-law, you shouldn't stay here any longer," she continued. "I'm afraid there might be trouble; if so, you may be involved. Please go home without delay." With this she handed the four gold ornamental articles to him through the housekeeper and told her to see him to the gate. What could he do under the circumstances but restrain his grief and go away?

Nor could Madam Ku do less than arrange to have her daughter's body encoffined and her husband informed of the tragic hanging caused, ostensibly, by her daughter's disappointment at marriage difficulties. Secretary Ku was everwhelmed by sorrow and had a good cry before he undertook to hold funeral rites and had her daughter laid to rest. A verse written by a later poet sings her praises thus:

*Worth more than a pot of gold was her
promise to marry.*

But she fell into a knavish trap inadvertently.

*So, with a three-foot piece of muslin she
committed suicide,*

*To show that her heart is pure though her
body defiled.*

III

NOW LET US tell of what Lu Hsueh-tseng did on his return home. Looking at the gold hairpins and flowers, he wept for a while and heaved a few sighs, thought over the events of the day and tried to resolve the doubts and suspicions that came thick and fast into his mind. But as he did so the mystery shrouding them seemed to deepen; and finally he gave up the attempt to unravel it, but blamed his evil star for all his misfortunes.

The next day he wrapped up the borrowed gown, shoes and socks in a parcel and returned it to his aunt's. On learning his cousin's arrival, Liang Shang-ping slipped out. Lu told of Miss Ku's tragic death by hanging herself, to the shock and dismay of his aunt. Dame Liang sighed out her pity and comforted the young man with food and drink before he went off.

Later on, Liang Shang-ping came home and asked, "Cousin came here a while ago. Did he say he had visited the Ku family?"

"He went there yesterday," said his mother. "But Miss Ku blamed him for calling three days late and then took her own life by hanging—Heaven knows for what reasons."

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Liang Shang-ping. "What a pity! What a charming girl, too!"

"What? Did you see her? Where?" asked his mother.

Liang Shang-ping, realizing that he had betrayed himself, tried to cover up but it was too late, so he had to make a clean breast of his impersonation.

Dame Liang was appalled and began reviling her son, "You godless beast, what a horrible thing you've done! Don't you know that it was your late uncle who made the match for you! Now you've ruined your cousin's marriage, is that the way you return his kindness? And besides you've taken an innocent girl's life. Don't you feel the prick of conscience?"

She continued to reproach him vehemently, calling him a thousand beastly names. Liang Shang-ping could do nothing but keep quiet. So he attempted to get away from it all and walked up to his room, intending to hide himself therein, but his wife closed the door and rebuked him from within.

"You scoundrel, I'm sure you will be overtaken by retribution before long, and don't think for a moment that you'll end up in heaven! From now on, we shall part company; you go your way, I'll go mine, and let none of your evil deeds involve me."

At this, Liang Shang-ping, having already had a bellyful of pent-up anger and just looking for an outlet to vent it, exploded. Kicking the door open, he burst in and seized his wife by the hair and began beating her. Dame Liang had to intervene and shouted her son out of the house.

Smarting from the thrashing by her husband,

Mrs. Tien Liang beat upon her breast and wailed aloud; she became so agitated that she yelled out a wish to die rather than continue to live with her husband. Dame Liang could not persuade her to stay, and she left in a sedan-chair for her maiden home in East Hamlet.

Dame Liang, much upset and distressed, was in a daze; she also worried about leakage of information on her son's crimes, and did not get a wink of sleep that night. The next day she began feeling a chill and then a fever, and fell ill for seven days, at the end of which she died.

When the news of her mother-in-law's death reached her, Mrs. Tien Liang came back for the funeral. With anger still smouldering in his heart, Liang Shang-ping chided her, "You impudent woman! What the hell did you come back for? I thought you'd live in your parents' house for the rest of your life!" And a quarrel ensued.

"You've done evil deeds, infuriated your mother and sent her to an early grave," retorted Tien. "Now you want to bully me. But listen. Were it not for Mother-in-law's death, I'd never have come to face you, you country lad!"

"Ridiculous!" said Liang Shang-ping defiantly. "Have all the females died out, and I can't get myself a wife that I must retain a shrew like you! I'll divorce you right now and forbid you to come again!"

"I'd rather be a spinster for life than follow a wicked man like you," said Tien. "It would be a blessing to be divorced from you; I'll make a point of burning incense and joss-paper for it."

As if thrown together by ill-fate, Liang Shang-ping and his wife had never been a good match. Their contempt for each other reached a climax at this point. Acting out of anger of the moment, Liang wrote out a bill of divorcement, on which he affixed a finger-print, and handed it to Tien. She then made obeisances before her mother-in-law's tablet, had a good cry and left the Liang family for the last time. Indeed,

*He had the impudence to seduce another
man's fiancée,*

*But he had not the luck to keep his own
wife.*

*Divorced after a quarrel was a good girl
from the Tien family,*

Would you call it a blessing or a pity?

LET US NOW turn to look at what Madam Meng Ku was doing. She had sorely missed her daughter, and not a day passed without her having a good cry. Then she reasoned with herself that it was gardener Lao Ou who delivered the message, he also it was who ushered in that dark, corpulent fellow; it followed that he had either conspired with others or let out the confidential message entrusted to him.

Having resolved thus, she waited till her husband had gone out visiting friends before she summoned Lao Ou to the hall and interrogated him. In this connection it is fair to say that Lao Ou did not let out the message at the time of his delivery; one might have found fault with Lu Hsueh-tseng here for wanting to borrow a gown etc., which gave the villain a chance to put his scheme into operation. We know that the impersonator had called at the Ku house some three days before the real son-in-law did, and Madam Ku knew it for a fact. However Lao Ou was muddle-headed enough to believe that the two callers were one and the same man, and he made a strenuous attempt to explain things away. But his explanations only infuriated Madam Ku, who ordered him held to the ground and given thirty strokes of the staff, which ripped his skin and ruptured his blood-vessels.

One day Secretary Ku strolled in the garden and, noticing litter on the ground, sent for the old gardener to sweep it clean. He was informed however that Lao Ou had been flogged by the mistress and was bedridden at the time. He then told his servants to help the man come and asked him why he had got into such a state. Thereupon Lao Ou gave a full account of how he had on the mistress's instructions delivered a message to Master Lu, inviting him to the house, and of the subsequent meetings in the chambers at night and so forth.

On hearing this Secretary Ku ground his teeth in anger and muttered to himself, "So, that's how things have come to this pretty pass!"

He then hastened to the magistracy in a sedan-chair and, after making a report to the magistrate, demanded that Lu Hsueh-tseng be arrested and made to atone for his daughter's life.

The magistrate told Secretary Ku to submit a plaint in writing. This done, runners were despatched and Lu Hsueh-tseng was brought to the magistracy for questioning.

Honest Lu told the court what had happened to

him, and, producing the pairs of gold hairpins and flowers, added, "Your Worship, these are what she gave me. But I know nothing of any meeting in the rear garden."

The old gardener was then summoned to give evidence. For one thing his eyesight was so dim that he did not recognize the impersonator distinctly the evening he came to the rear garden; for another his master had told him what he should say. So, when asked whether the prisoner in the court was the man whom he had seen call at the rear garden, he gave an emphatic affirmative. These, together with the influence Secretary Ku had exerted, prompted the magistrate to put Lu Hsueh-tseng to the torture. That was more than his flesh could bear and he admitted, "It was kind of Madam Ku to summon me and present me with gold hairpins and flowers by way of helping me pay my marriage expenses. When I saw Ah Hsiu her beauty roused my desire and I forced her to have illicit intercourse with me; I was wrong. On the third day I called again contrary to propriety, thus causing Ah Hsiu to hang herself out of shame."

Having taken the statement from Lu Hsueh-tseng and in view of the fact that he and Ku Ah Hsiu were only betrothed and not yet husband and wife, the magistrate convicted Lu of rape which led to suicide and, according to law, sentenced him to death by hanging. Lu Hsueh-tseng was led away and locked up in the condemned cell, and an official report was prepared and dispatched to a higher authority.

Madam Ku was shocked by the news of Lu's conviction. She also learned that there was no one in his house except an old woman who was now ill with fright, so no one was available for sending food to him. She said to herself, "My daughter's death had nothing at all to do with Master Lu. I'm sorry to have caused all this trouble to him."

She then managed to get some silver and instructed the housekeeper to ask a reliable person to use it with the prison warders, thereby ensuring fair treatment for Master Lu. She also pleaded again and again with her husband to spare Lu Hsueh-tseng's life, though such pleadings served only to heighten his anger. And the case soon became the talk of the town. Indeed,

*Good tidings leave home last,
Ill news travels fast.*

As it represented a blot on his escutcheon, Secretary Ku was determined to use all possible means to have Lu Hsueh-tseng sent to the gallows.

IV

AT THIS juncture let us introduce into our story a public character in the person of Chen Lien of Hukwang province, a young and discerning Censor whose specialty was the righting of wrongs. His father and Secretary Ku were admitted to the Doctorate of Philosophy³ in the same year. Because of this his relationship to Secretary Ku was that of nephew to uncle.

At that time Censor Chen was on his way to Kiangsi to take up his appointment as Inspector General. Before his entry to that province Secretary Ku called on him and requested his action against Lu. In deference to Ku's seniority he did not turn down his request on the spot but he had his own ideas as to how to deal with the case.

Censor Chen had assumed office scarcely three days when he named Kanchow as the first prefecture for his inspection and set out with a retinue for that city directly. So great was his prestige and so dignified his presence that all the officials, high and low, in that prefecture were scared and had their nerves kept on tenter-hooks.

Then the prisoners from the county gaols within the jurisdiction of the prefecture were brought to court and the review of cases began. When Lu Hsueh-tseng's case came up and after having read the statement made and examined the gold hairpins and flowers submitted, Censor Chen questioned Lu, "Were these gold hairpins and flowers given you on your first visit?"

"I visited once only, your Honour. I did not call a second time," replied Lu.

"But you say in your statement that you visited again three days later. How do you account for that?"

At this Lu Hsueh-tseng cried "Injustice! Injustice!" and went on to explain, "I was engaged to Miss Ku when my father was alive. My father was an honest official. After his death my circum-

³進士, a graduate of the third degree in the examination system of old China.

stances steadily deteriorated and I could not afford the marriage preliminaries. Secretary Ku, my father-in-law, would like to withdraw from the engagement, but my mother-in-law thought otherwise. It was she who privately despatched her old gardener for me and promised me gold and silk. I was detained in the countryside and did not call on her until three days later. Then I saw my mother-in-law only and did not see Miss Ku. I admitted rape under torture."

"You said you did not see Miss Ku. Then who gave you these gold hairpins and flowers?"

"Miss Ku was standing behind a curtain at the time," replied Lu. "She blamed me for coming too late and ruining everything. She refused to talk about our marriage nor could she present me with gold and silk. She said these hairpins and flowers were given me just as a memento. I thought she was only trying to repudiate our betrothal and started to argue with my mother-in-law. I never expected that my fiancée would hang herself; I cannot understand why even now."

"So you did not go to the rear garden that evening?" asked the Censor.

"No, your Honour. I really did not go."

The Censor paused a moment, saying to himself, "It's most unlikely that he was given only hairpins and flowers if specially invited to her house. Judging from the way Miss Ku spoke, which manifested hurt feelings, one feels certain that a third party had probably by impersonation stolen the things originally meant for him and there's even the possibility here of attentions forced on the girl which caused shame and suicide."

With this, the Censor gave orders for the gardener Lao Ou to be brought in for questioning.

"When you went to Lu Hsueh-tseng's house did you meet him in person?"

"No, I did not," replied Lao Ou.

"Since you did not meet him in person," the Censor asked, "how could you recognize as Lu Hsueh-tseng the man who had come to the rear garden that evening?"

"He claimed to be Master Lu and said he had come in response to the invitation. Then I ushered him in under my mistress's orders. How can I deny these facts?"

"After the man had been admitted to your house, when did he leave?"

"I heard it said that he was entertained to food

and drink by the mistress and also given many valuables. He left at the fifth watch."

At this Lu Hsueh-tseng cried "He wrongs me! He wrongs me!" The Censor stopped him and continued to interrogate Ou, "Was it you who ushered in Lu Hsueh-tseng when he called the second time?"

"When he called the second time, I understand he came to the front gate. I did not then know he called."

"Why then on the first occasion did he go to the rear garden to look for you and not to the front gate?"

"Because he did just as he was bidden by the mistress in a message I had delivered for her."

Then the Censor turned to question Lu Hsueh-tseng, "Your mother-in-law told you to go to the rear garden. Why did you go to the front gate?"

"Though I went at her bidding I was not sure of her intentions. I had to guard against any possible attack in the rear garden which could be deserted and wild. That is why I went straight to the front gate, and not to the rear."

Having examined Lu Hsueh-tseng and Lao Ou and found their testimony at cross purposes, the Censor became convinced that there was a hidden knot somewhere which must be cut before the case could be solved. So, pointing at Lu Hsueh-tseng, he again questioned Ou, "Now, look at this man closely and answer my question with care. Are you absolutely sure that he is the man who came to your rear garden?"

"I am not sure of the man's looks," returned Lao Ou, "because darkness was falling fast at the time. He looked somewhat like this man though."

"You said that you found Lu Hsueh-tseng not in at the time you delivered your message. Then to whom did you deliver it?"

"To an old woman who was the only person in his house. There was no one else present."

"Did you subsequently disclose the message to anyone else?"

"To no one but the old woman," was Ou's reply.

Having pondered for a while and realizing that he had not got to the root of the matter, without which he could not found his conviction or account for himself before Secretary Ku, the Censor pressed on with his questioning.

"You said you were staying in the countryside,"

he asked Lu Hsueh-tseng. "Now tell me how far it was from the county town, and when you received the message."

"It was some three miles from the north gate of the town, and I received the message on the same day."

Thereupon the Censor whacked the bench with his gavel and said in a stern voice, "Lu Hsueh-tseng, you lied when you said you did not go to Ku's house till three days later. First, you received that message, which promised you good things, on the same day; second, you needed to travel only a short distance. How can you have delayed your visit for three days? It does not stand to reason!"

"Pray calm yourself, your Honour," Lu implored, "and permit me to submit details for your judgment. I was in my aunt's house in the country, borrowing rice because of poverty." He went on, "When the message came, I wanted to return to the county town immediately, but conscious of my shabby clothes, I proposed to borrow a gown from my cousin and he agreed. However, he went out on some business that day and did not return until the evening of the next day. I was waiting for his clothes all that time and was thus delayed for two days."

"Did your cousin know the reason why you wanted to borrow clothes?" asked the Censor.

"Yes, he did."

"What does your cousin do? And what is his name?"

"He is engaged in farming. His name is Liang Shang-ping."

At this the Censor adjourned the case till the following day. Indeed,

*To make light of the case he won't in
conscience dare.*

*With a Buddha's heart he will delve into
it with care.*

*Verdicts are mostly upheld rather than
quashed.*

*That's why injustices seem to be every-
where.*

THE NEXT DAY the Censor's Court had only a side gate open and outside it a notice appeared and read:

"As the Censor is indisposed no official business will be transacted by him until further notice.

Date, etc."

And needless to say, senior officials came from the prefecture and its counties and called in the morning and evening to inquire after the Censor's health. Members of the audience, we will now pick up the thread of our story at the other end and say a word about Liang Shang-ping.

When he heard that Lu Hsueh-tseng had been condemned to death he felt much relieved. One day his attention was attracted by loud voices coming from the street, and peeping through an opening in a wall he saw a cloth merchant wearing a mourning cap and an oldish white gown⁴ and talking a Kiangsi provincial dialect. The merchant said that he was from the prefecture of Nanchang and had been trading in piece goods here when he received the news of his father's death and had to hurry home that very night, adding that he was anxiously looking for somebody to buy up his stock of cloth running to hundreds of rolls and was prepared to sell it cheap. A crowd had gathered; some wanted to buy a roll, others, two or three rolls, but the trader refused them all, saying, "Such piece-meal deals won't do. If my hundreds of rolls go at this rate when can I start for home? I hope a rich man would come forward and buy up the lot. I'm prepared to give him a big discount."

Liang Shang-ping listened for quite a while before he stepped out and asked, "Hullo, how much cloth do you have in stock? What's its cost price?"

"I've over four hundred rolls. It costs me two hundred taels," replied the trader.

"How can you get a big buyer on the spot," said Liang, "unless you're prepared to lose money?"

"Yes, I'm prepared to lose ten taels or so, so long as my goods can be disposed of quickly and I can get on my way."

Liang Shang-ping examined the cloth sample. He then boarded the boat carrying the cloth and, having turned over many rolls and had a close look at them, exclaimed, "Fine cloth! Fine cloth!"

"But you don't look like buying," said the merchant, "you've only disturbed my cloth packing and wasted my time."

"How do you know I don't look like buying!"

⁴White was and is the colour for mourning purposes in China.

"If you're serious, produce your silver," said the merchant rather bluntly.

"If you'll slash 20% off your cost price," returned Liang, "then I'll produce eighty taels and buy up half your stock."

"Don't be silly. How can a trader afford a 20% loss? Moreover, if you buy only a half, to whom shall I dump the other half? It would mean delay all the same. That's why I say you don't look like buying." And he added with a sneer, "Ha! Ha! So many people are living outside this north gate, but there just isn't one rich enough to buy up these four hundred rolls! All right! All right! Let's row over to the east gate and try our luck there."

Liang Shang-ping felt slighted, and thinking the goods a bargain on which he could make a big profit, he was reluctant to let the chance slip, so he said, "Don't be so insolent. I'll buy up your whole lot. How about that?" "Really? Then I'll give you a twenty-tael discount."

Liang Shang-ping countered by demanding a reduction of forty taels, which the merchant refused. A haggles ensued and some onlookers intervened, saying to the merchant, "Aren't you anxious to dispose of your goods? If so, don't miss selling to Mr. Liang who loves things cheap. We'd suggest a compromise. Why not make a deal at one hundred and seventy taels?"

The merchant showed reluctance at first, but eventually yielded to their persuasion. "All right," he said, "I'll reduce ten more taels for the sake of these friends here. Well now, please pay, I've to hurry home tonight."

"I haven't got that amount in silver ingots," said Liang Shang-ping, "but I can make it up with some personal ornaments. Is that all right?"

"Yes, ornaments will do so long as they're fairly appraised."

At this Liang Shang-ping ushered the merchant into his parlour. There he produced ingots and



*She ventures out to meet her fiancé,
But, instead, gets into the clutches of a knave.*

two pairs of silver wine cups worth a total of one hundred taels; he further brought forward all the gold ornaments in his possession, from which a part was separated and evaluated by the parties and the onlookers as worth seventy taels. The silver and the cloth then changed hands, and the transaction was completed. After the departure of the merchant Liang Shang-ping thought he had made a good deal and was well satisfied with himself. But the truth is:

*Insatiable as a snake attempting to swallow
an elephant,
Unwary as a cicada threatened by a
mantis with danger imminent.*

V

AS IT turned out, the cloth merchant was none other than Censor Chen in disguise. Members of the audience, we have told earlier in our story that he had excused himself from transacting official business on the pretext of illness. What happened behind the scene is that he summoned to his presence Commander Nieh of the Kanchow garrison one thousand strong, and told him in private to make arrangements for a quantity of cloth to be loaded on a boat and for the boat to be moored outside the Stone Wall county. That done, he travelled thereto incognito, taking with him Commander Nieh in the guise of an attendant, and also detailing a gatekeeper to look after the boat. Subsequent events already proved that he pulled the plan off nicely.

Now Censor Chen stepped into the boat, put down the name of Liang Shang-ping in a blank on the otherwise completed warrant of arrest and told Commander Nieh to execute it. He also despatched a letter inviting Secretary Ku to the Censorate for a meeting. He then returned to Kanchow. Once back in his office he cancelled his sick leave and announced his resumption of duty. Soon afterwards Liang Shang-ping was brought in and Secretary Ku also arrived. The Censor then invited the Secretary to a homely dinner in his back parlour.

When they were seated, Secretary Ku inquired how matters stood with regard to Lu Hsueh-tseng's

case. The Censor said with a smile, "Thank you, Uncle Ku, for coming all the way to this Censorate. My purpose of inviting you here is just to show you the facts of the case." With this he told the gatekeeper to open an official letter-box and bare its contents. The servant did so, taking out two pairs of silver cups and a number of articles of head ornament and showing them to Secretary Ku. At the sight of those articles which he recognized as his wife's, Secretary Ku was taken aback and asked, "Where did you get these from?"

"The cause of your daughter's death," said the Censor calmly, "is closely connected with these articles. Please wait here, and excuse me for a while, Uncle Ku, as I have to hold court now, to interrogate the suspect and unravel the mystery of the case for you."

The court was then called into session. First Lu Hsueh-tseng was brought before the Censor but was ordered to kneel on one side. Next Liang Shang-ping was led in. The Censor shouted, "Liang Shang-ping, what a felony you have committed in Secretary Ku's house!"

Liang was thunder-struck and was on the point of saying something to defend himself when the Censor told the gatekeeper to show him the silver cups and gold ornaments in the letter box. This done, the Censor asked, "Where did you get these articles from?"

Liang looked up and, seeing that the Censor was none other than the cloth merchant, was frightened out of his wits; he gasped out, "Oh, I'm done for," and could say no more.

"Write down a statement of facts," the Censor told him, "and I will spare you the rack."

Finding the evidence against him overwhelming, Liang Shang-ping could not but admit his crime. Members of the audience, how do you think his statement was written? Well, here is a verse composed to the tune of "Nipping Southerly Branches"⁵ in witness thereof:

⁵"Southerly branches" are those branches of the winter plum (*chimonanthus fragrans*) facing south. They usually bud and flower earlier than the northerly branches which enjoy less warmth from the sun. Now even the southerly branches are nipped and prevented from budding and flowering. This connotes tragedy, and the tune "Nipping Southerly Branches" is generally used to sing of tragic situations.

*Making this deposition is Liang Shang-ping.
The destitute Lu Hsueh-tseng is my cousin.
His would-be mother-in-law invited him
to call,
And to help complete his match, promised
him gifts and all.
For that reason he wanted to borrow a
gown from me,
The main chance come my way at once
I did see.
By tricks and pretences his departure I
delayed,
While a pseudo-Lu Hsueh-tseng I myself
made.
The private chambers the gardener led me
into,
There in an awkward manner I met Ma-
dam Ku.
She loaded me with valuables in silver and
gold,
But I abused her hospitality
By committing an adultery,
That of course nobody should be told.
The real Lu Hsueh-tseng turned up three
days late,
Crushed and ashamed, Miss Ku hanged
herself as if by fate.*

Following the submission of this statement the Censor called the gardener Lao Ou and questioned him, "Look at this prisoner closely, and say if he was the man whom you had seen come to your garden, posing as Master Lu one evening?"

Lao Ou fixed his eyes on the prisoner for a few moments and then said, "Yes, he was, your Honour."

Thereupon the Censor gave orders for Liang Shang-ping to be given eighty strokes of the heavy staff and for the cangue and handcuffs and shackles to be removed from Lu Hsueh-tseng and placed on him. This done, the Censor passed judgment on the case to this effect: Liang Shang-ping having been found guilty of rape, to die, namely to be returned to his native county for execution; the four hundred rolls of cloth to be returned to the merchants concerned who should pay back the purchase price into the public coffers; the silver and articles of gold ornament to be received back by Lao Ou for the Ku family; and Lu Hsueh-tseng

to be given the gold hairpins and flowers, and discharged. Lu made obeisances to the Censor and thanked him for saving his life. Indeed,

*Open-minded as a shining mirror the
judge is,
Grateful is Lu for redressing his grievances.
Now there are no more regrets, among
living or dead,
Percipacious as God is the censorate.*

IN THE MEANTIME, while waiting in the back parlour, Secretary Ku overheard the proceedings; he was amazed at the extent of human wickedness and sighed continuously. When the Censor returned after adjournment, he thanked him again and again, and said, "But for your perspicacity and discernment my daughter's death would never be avenged. But I am curious to know how your Honour has managed to recover those silver and gold ornaments?"

"I did this . . . and that . . .," the Censor whispered in his ear.

"Marvelous! Marvelous!" cried the Secretary. "However, it occurs to me that Liang's wife must be in the know and in possession of some ornaments of my family. I hope your Honour will have her arrested and questioned."

"Yes, that's easy."

He then sent a despatch to the magistrate of Stone Wall county, directing him to interrogate Liang's wife with a view to recovering the remaining loot believed to be still in her possession and to report back. As the case had all but concluded, Secretary Ku took his leave and went home.

When the magistrate of Stone Wall county received the despatch, he brought Liang Shang-ping out of the gaol and questioned him, "What is your wife's family name? Does she know about the case?"

Liang, still harbouring hatred for her, replied, "My wife came from the Tien family. She is greedy; indeed, she conspired with me." So, the magistrate signed a warrant and sent runners for her arrest.

Let us now tell of Miss Tien who was living with her brother and sister-in-law after the death of her parents, doing needlework to help pay for her keep. It so happened that her brother was just outside the magistracy at the time the runners

came out, and as soon as he had learned that it was his sister the policemen were after, he hurried home and told her about it. "Don't worry, brother," said she. "I know what to do."

With this she set out for Secretary Ku's house in a sedan-chair, carrying the bill of divorcement with her. On arrival she asked to see Madam Ku. When Madam Ku came out her vision was momentarily blurred and she saw her own daughter Ah Hsiu advancing towards her, but on nearer approach she was surprised to find that the visitor was a beautiful young lady, though a stranger. So she asked, "Who is this lady please?"

At this Miss Tien went down on her knees and said, "Madam, I was Liang Shang-ping's wife née Tien. I am divorced from my husband because I hated his wickedness and wanted to keep clear of his villainy. But Secretary Ku was apparently ignorant of this, and action is being taken against me. So I must beseech you, Madam, to save me." She then submitted the bill of divorcement to her.

While Madam Ku was reading the bill Miss Tien suddenly plucked at her sleeve and cried, "Oh, dear mother, what a calamity father's brought on me!"

It was Ah Hsiu's voice, strange but Madam Ku recognized it unmistakably and, overwhelmed by an upsurge of grief, she also cried, "Oh, my child, what have you yet to say?"

Miss Tien seemed to have fallen into a trance with her eyes closed tight, but presently she said in a woeful voice, "I lost my virginity to that blackguard. I was ashamed to face Master Lu, so I chose death before disgrace. But who could have expected father would take those rash actions which nearly sent him to the gallows! Now, fortunately, the crime is exposed and the criminal, condemned. However, he is still lone, lorn and wifeless, for which we cannot be absolved of all blame. Mother, if you care for me at all, please urge father to do something for him and avoid breaking off our long-standing relations. Then I would have no regrets living as I do in Hades."

With this she fell to the ground. And Madam Ku, already heart-broken and crying bitterly before she had finished, now fainted.

Confusion followed. The housekeeper, waiting maids and women servants rushed forward to render help, but it was not long before both of them came to. Miss Tien remained sitting on the

ground and looked dazed; when asked, she showed complete ignorance of what had transpired. The sight of Miss Tien reminded Madam Ku of her daughter, and she burst out crying anew. The maids supported her and begged her not to grieve so. She then asked between her tears, "Miss Tien, have you any parents?"

"No, Madam,"

"I'm bereft of children. Now when I see you I feel as if you were my daughter. What do you say to my adopting you?"

"Oh, if only I could be allowed to wait on you," said Miss Tien with a bow, "I would be most grateful."

And Madam Ku's tears melted into a smile, so Miss Tien became her daughter and close companion.

On his return home Secretary Ku learned that, having been divorced from her husband, Miss Tien was not implicated in the case, therefore he sent to the magistrate a letter with the bill of divorcement enclosed as evidence, in which he requested him to withdraw the warrant of arrest and refer the case, together with the evidence available, back to the Censorate. The request was granted.

Now living as a member of the Ku family, Miss Tien soon won Secretary Ku's regard by her modesty and wisdom, and her adoption was heartily approved. Madam Ku also told her husband that Ah Hsiu had incarnated herself in Miss Tien for a brief moment during which she made strong appeals against severance of relations between the Lu family and theirs; she went on to suggest, "Now, we've adopted Miss Tien. She's young and pretty, so why not make up for our lost match by marrying her to Master Lu?"

Secretary Ku had felt deeply sorry for Lu Hsueh-tseng who had done nothing wrong but suffered a great deal. So he hastened to embrace the good suggestion his wife had made. Indeed, to obviate any suspicions that might be lingering in Master Lu's mind, he personally called on him and apologized for past misunderstandings. He then proposed to marry another daughter to him to make up for the unfulfilled match, and he insisted despite Master Lu's repeated attempts to decline his offer. Finally, Master Lu agreed; he sent the gold hairpins and flowers as presents, and on an auspicious day the long-promised marriage finally took place and was consummated.

Now let me point out at this juncture that at the time Secretary Ku proposed the marriage to Master Lu, he only referred to a distant niece whom he had adopted as the girl he had in mind; likewise to her adopted daughter Madam Ku did not mention the name of the groom-to-be but merely said he was a Bachelor of Arts⁶ and would be admitted into the family. So not until after their marriage did the couple know each other's identity.

From then on Lu Hsueh-tseng lived happily and amiably with his wife, and both proved to be dutiful to their seniors. As Secretary Ku was without male issue, Lu was made heir to his property

⁶秀才, a graduate of the first degree in the examination system of old China.

and began applying himself diligently to the study of the Classics in preparation for the civil service examinations. After successfully passing them he was admitted to the Imperial Academy, from which he graduated with honours. His wife bore him two sons: one was surnamed Lu and the other Ku so that they could carry on ancestral worship for the two families without end, while Liang Shang-ping died without issue and his family line broke for good and all. A poem reads:

*A night of sensual pleasure ruined his
vicious life.*

*To another man he lost his good wife.
The world is full of men bent on slyly
injuring*

*Others, let them learn a lesson from the
fate of Liang Shang-ping.*

(For Chinese Text see page 151)