THE PEARL-SEWN SHIRT

To amass wealth in office brings no honour,
Nor is there hope of living long past seventy.
When you are gone, who will preserve your fame?
The empty pageant of the world soon passes.

Do not despoil your youth by wild excesses,
Do not be deceived by wine and women.
Withdraw from puzzling over 'right' and 'wrong',
Accept your lot, content yourself with little.

THIS POEM; to the metre of 'The Moon on the West River', urges us to keep quietly to our station in life and to find joy in the acceptance of our lot. Do not let your spirit be destroyed and your conduct ruined by the four vices of drink, lust, riches and anger.1 If you strive after happiness here you will fail to find it; if you seek an easy gain you will lose. Think for a moment of these four vices: none is so harmful as the vice of lust. The eye is go-between for the passions, the heart is the seat of desire. At the beginning, your heart is in a turmoil ; at the end, you have lost your soul. You may gain pleasure from some chance encounter with a 'flower of the roadside', and it may be that no harm will come of it. But when you begin to plan and scheme against the code of society, you are seeking a moment's selfish gratification at the expense of the life-long love and respect of others. How would you feel, if your own charming wife or devoted concubine should become the object of someone else's machinations? It is well put in these words of a former poet :

Men's hearts may be blinded,
But the way of Heaven* is *unchanging.
Let me not defile the womenfolk of others,
And other men will not defile my wife.

I invite members of the audience to listen today while I narrate the story-with-verses entitled 'The Pearl-sewn Shirt' You will see that retribution does not fail to come, and it will

give you a useful example to set before your sons and younger brothers.

Of this story I will show you first one personage only, Chiang Te, known as Hsing-ko, of Tsao-yang in the prefecture of Hsiang-yang, in the province of Hu-kuang. His father, Chiang Shih-tse, from boyhood on had covered the length and breadth of Kwangtung province as a travelling merchant. Bereft of his wife, Madam Lo, he now had no family beyond this boy Hsing-ko, who was just eight years of age. Chiang Shih-tse could not bring himself to part with the child, but neither could he put an end to his livelihood in Kwangtung. He gave every thought to his dilemma, but could find no solution but to take the eight-year-old boy along with him as a partner in his business, first teaching him some of the tricks of the trade. Although the child was so young, he was grown:

Clear of brow, fine of eye,
White his teeth, red his lip,
Upright and dignified of step,
Sharp and quick-witted in speech.
Beyond the student in intelligence,
Equal of a grown man in subtlety.
People all called him 'pretty boy',
Everyone praised him as a pearl without price.

Chiang Shih-tse feared the envy of others, and so he never in all his travels revealed that this was his own son, but passed him off as his wife's nephew, giving his name as 'Little Master Lo'.

Now the fact was that the Lo family were also in the Kwangtung trade, and indeed whereas the Chiang had only travelled there for one generation the Lo had been there for three. They were friends of long standing of all the innkeepers and dealers, who treated them more as members of their own families. And in fact, when Chiang Shih-tse had first begun to trade there, he had gone in the company of his father-in-law, old Mr Lo. But of late the Lo family had been forced to go to court to answer a whole series of unjust accusations. Their prosperity had waned and for some years past they had made no visits to Kwangtung. Thus there was no innkeeper or dealer who failed, when Chiang Shih-tse appeared, to ask after the Lo family with the most sincere

concern. And this time, here was Chiang Shih-tse with a boy whom they discovered to be 'Little Master Lo '. Such a handsome child, too, and so smart to talk to. Everyone greeted him with delight, thinking back over the friendships of three generations, now to be continued into the fourth.

We will gossip no more, but tell how Chiang Hsing-ko made several trips in his father's company and proved such an apt and quick-witted pupil that soon he had mastered all the ins and outs of the business. His father was delighted with him. But who could have foreseen that when the boy was no more than sixteen years old his father was to die of a sudden illness? The one consolation was that he died during a brief stay at home, and thus escaped the misfortune of a wanderer's death.

Hsing-ko wept for a time, but had at last to dry his tears and attend to the funeral rites. It goes without saying that he prepared the body for burial and made the benefactions necessary to ensure the safe passage of the spirit into the next world. During the first forty-nine days of his bereavement, according to custom, he received the condolences of all members of both his father's and his mother's clans. Another who came to make offerings before the dead was a certain Mr Wang, a fellow-townsman, who was in fact the father of the girl to whom Hsing-ko was betrothed. Naturally he fell into conversation with the members of the Chiang clan, and the view was expressed that Hsing-ko was old beyond his years and had done very well in coping single-handed with his heavy task.

One thing followed another, until at length one of those present put a suggestion to Mr Wang: 'Since your daughter has reached womanhood now, why shouldn't you counter this sad occasion by completing the match, so that they can help each other, as husband and wife, through the days to come?'

Mr Wang was unwilling to assent, and before the day was out he took his leave. But the clansmen, after all the ceremonies of the interment were completed, came to urge their plan on Hsing-ko. He was at first unwilling, but after repeated exhortations he began to reflect on the loneliness of his position, and at last accepted their advice.' He commissioned the original go-between to speak for him before the Wang family. But Mr Wang continued to oppose the plan. 'We have something of a dowry to

prepare,' he said, 'and this cannot be done on the instant. Moreover, the mourning period has not yet passed: such a wedding would go against the correct observance of the rites. If we are to discuss this marriage, let us do so after the first anniversary of his father's death.'

The go-between took back this reply, and Hsing-ko saw the justice of it and did not try to force the issue.

Time sped by like an arrow, and before one could realize it the anniversary had arrived. After Hsing-ko had made the offerings before his father's spirit-tablet, he put aside his mourning garments of coarse linen, and dispatched the go-between again to speak for him before the Wang family. Then at last the consent was given, and before many days had passed the six preliminaries were completed 2 and Chiang Hsing-ko had taken his new bride into his house. This is shown by a 'Moon on the West River' :

Curtains of red replace the white of mourning,
Not linen is *worn, but brightly-coloured silks.*
The rooms are gay, festooned, ablaze with candles,
The nuptial cup is ready, the feast prepared.

Why fix your envy on an ample dowry?
A wife of charm and beauty is more precious.
The joys of 'cloud and rain' tonight will bring
Felicitations in the days to come.

Now, the new bride was the youngest daughter of Mr Wang. Her child-name was 'Third Eldest', and since she was born on the seventh of the seventh month, a day of festival,3 she was also called 'Fortune' Third. Her two elder sisters, whom Mr Wang had already given in marriage, were both exceptionally good-looking. They were the toast of Tsao-yang, and indeed there was a jingle which ran:

The world is *full of beauties,*
But the Wang girls have no&w.
Better to be husband to one of these
Than the Emperor's son-in-law.

It's often said that 'if you don't get on in your business, it's only for a time ; if you don't get on with your old woman, it's for life! ' In so many families of high or noble rank, a bride is

chosen simply on account of her pedigree or her ample dowry, and the betrothal is arranged without distinction of fair or foul. Later, when the bride turns out to be of outstanding ugliness, yet must be brought forward to meet the entire clan assembled, it means great embarrassment for her parents-in-law. The husband, moreover, his heart filled with dismay, will be forced into illicit amours and wild conduct. The trouble is that it is the ugliest women who are most adept at keeping their husbands in order. If he takes the same attitude as she, there will be quarrels; if, on the other hand, he gives way to her just once or twice for appearance's sake, she will begin to get above herself. Faced with all these unpleasant possibilities, Chiang Shih-tse, when he heard that Mr Wang had been blessed with a succession of fine daughters, had sent gifts while his son was yet an infant and secured the youngest daughter as his son's betrothed.

And now, as the bride entered her new home, she proved indeed to be full of grace and beauty-for that matter, she was twice as lovely as either of: her elder sisters. Indeed,

Hsi-shih, in *the palace at Wu, would not compare,'*
Nan-wei, the beauty of Ch'u, would have to retire,5
As worthy to be worshipped, with incense and bowing,
As the 'Moon and Water Kuan-yin' herself.6

Chiang Hsing-ko's own talents and ability were of a high order. Clearly, when he had married this beautiful wife, they made a pair like figures of jade, carved and polished by finest craftsmanship. A happy husband and a devoted wife, they excelled other married couples ten times over. After the 'third morning' of their marriage, they changed into clothes of lighter hue, and Chiang, paying no attention to outside affairs on the pretext of regulating his household, spent all his time upstairs alone with his wife. From dawn to dusk they devoted themselves to pleasure. In truth, walking or sitting they were never apart, in dreams at night their souls were together.

'Days of hardship are hard to get through, the happy times go quickly by '-that has always been so. Summer ended and winter began, and already the period of mourning for Chiang Hsing-ko's father was completed. We will not speak of how Hsing-ko set up his father's spirit-tablet and left off mourning ; but of how one

day he reflected that the trading in Kwangtung which his father had carried. on during his lifetime had been neglected now for more than three years. A large number of trading credits were there waiting to be collected. That night he talked things over with his wife, and told her he wanted to make the journey. At first his wife agreed that he should go. But then she talked of all the roads he would have to travel: husband and wife so much in love, how could they bear separation? Without her knowing it, tears streamed from her eyes. Hsing-ko was just as reluctant to leave her, and after both of them had grown very melancholy, he gave up the idea. This happened more than once.

'Night follows day, day follows night', and two more years passed by unnoticed. And now Hsing-ko was determined to go. Unknown to his wife he quietly collected his things together away from the house, and chose an auspicious date. He only told his wife about it five days beforehand. 'They often talk about "sitting and eating the mountain away"! The two of us, husband and wife, must set up the family business, or we'll find ourselves with nothing to eat or wear. It's the second month now, the weather neither too cold nor too hot. If I don't set out now, when shall I be able to? '

His wife, realizing that she could no longer hold him back, could only ask: 'When will you be coming back from this journey? '

Hsing-ko replied : 'I've no alternative but to go off now. But whatever happens I'll come back after a year, even if it means I have to spend longer away the next time.'

His wife pointed to a cedar in front of the house: 'When this tree comes into bud next year, I shall be watching for your return.'

When she finished speaking her tears fell like rain. Hsing-ko dried them with the sleeve of his gown, but without his noticing it his own cheeks grew moist. Both of them were filled with regret at parting, and no words can suffice for the affection they showed for each other. When the fifth day arrived,' husband and wife spent the whole night in talking and bitter weeping, and try as they might they could not sleep.

When daylight came Hsing-ko rose and made his preparations. He entrusted to his wife the safe-keeping of all the family jewels

and valuables. He was to take with him only the money which was his trading capital, his account-books?, and some bedding and spare clothing. These things, together with certain gifts which he had made ready, were neatly folded and packed. Of the two house servants he took only the younger one with him, leaving behind the older man to attend to the wishes of his wife and to look after the day-to-day running of the house. 'There were also two serving-women whose duties were confined to the kitchen, and two young girls, one named Light Cloud and the other named Warm Snow, who would be Fortune's personal maids and had instructions never to leave her side.

Having given all his orders, Hsing-ko said to his wife, 'You must wait for me with patience. The district is full of worthless young idlers, and you are a beautiful woman. Do not stir up trouble with them by standing gazing by the door.'

'You may set your mind at ease,' replied his wife. 'But go now quickly, and quickly return.'

And hiding their tears they took leave of each other. Indeed,

The thousand sorrows of this world
Arise from parting, in life or by death.

As Hsing-ko began his journey all his thoughts were of his wife, and he travelled on paying no attention to the passing scene until, after many days, he reached the province of Kwang-tung, where he found himself an inn. Here he was visited by all his old acquaintances. He distributed the gifts he had brought with him, and feasts were held in honour of his return. In this way two or three weeks passed before he had a moment to him-self. Now Hsing-ko, even at home, had never been of very strong physique, and the rigours of his journey were now followed by a period of irregular eating and drinking. He contracted a recurrent fever which lasted all the summer. In the autumn it turned to dysentery. Every day he had doctors take his pulse and give him medicine to regulate his condition, but it was the end of autumn before he was fully recovered. All this time he had been obliged to neglect his business, and it became plain that to return home within the year was out of the question. Indeed,

All for a useless fly's-head of profit
He cast aside his happy marriage and his bed of love

Homesick though he was, as the time went by he forced himself to put such thoughts out of his head.

We will say no more of Hsing-ko on his travels, but go on now to tell how his wife Fortune, back at home, had indeed for months on end obeyed her husband's injunctions, neither looking out of the window nor venturing down the stairs. Time sped by like an arrow, and before one could realize it the year was approaching its close. In every home there were noisy celebrations as braziers were lit, fire-crackers exploded, family feasts held and all kinds of games played. The time was a sad one for Fortune, thinking of her absent husband. On this particular night she was feeling very lonely, exactly as described by a poet of former times :

Winter ends, but not her sorrow,
Spring returns, but not her husband.
Daybreak finds her pining, lonely,
No wish to try on her new dress.

The next day was the first of the first month, New Year's Day. The two little maids, Light Cloud and Warm Snow, made every effort to persuade their mistress to watch the scene in the streets outside from the front portion of the house. The point was that the Chiang residence consisted of two wings, front and rear, which were interconnected. The front wing gave on to the street; the sleeping quarters were in the rear wing, and it was there that Fortune normally spent all her time. But this day she could not resist the promptings of her maids. In the end she made her way through a side chamber to the front portion of the house. She ordered that a shutter be taken down and a curtain substituted, and she took up her position behind the curtain and looked out.

What a commotion on the streets that day! 'So many people everywhere,' said Fortune, 'yet I can't see any sign of a fortune-teller among them. If we saw one, we could have him in and ask him for news of my husband.'

'It is New Year's Day,' replied Light Cloud. 'People just want to enjoy themselves, no one is bothered about hearing fortunes.'

'Leave it to us!' exclaimed Warm Snow. 'Give us five days, and we will guarantee to produce a fortune-teller for you,'

On the morning of the fourth day of the month, after breakfast, Warm Snow had gone downstairs to relieve herself. Suddenly

she heard outside a knocking sound, clop-clop, made by the thing known as the 'announcer', which is part of the stock-in-trade of the blind fortune-teller. Warm Snow couldn't even wait to finish what she was doing, but gathering in the waist of her trousers rushed out on to the street and halted the blind man. Then without pausing for breath she whirled round and flew upstairs again to inform her mistress. Fortune ordered that he be given a seat in the visitor's room downstairs, and when she had been informed of his fee she went down to hear his pronouncements.

The blind man selected a diagram, and she asked what was its use. By this time the kitchen women had heard that something was afoot and had come hurrying in, and they explained to their mistress, 'This is the diagram for questions about those absent on journeys.'

'Is it a lady asking about her husband?' asked the blind man.

'That's right,' said the women.

'When the green dragon Jupiter rules the world, the sign of wealth becomes active,' said the fortune-teller. 'If the lady is asking about her husband, he is on his way home. Gold and rich stuffs fill his chests, nor wind nor wave disturbs him. The green dragon belongs to the element wood, and wood flourishes in the spring. His homeward journey began about the time of 'spring beginning', and he will not fail to be here by the end of this month or the beginning of the next. Moreover, he will bring with him wealth in abundance.'

Fortune instructed her servant to give the man three silver cents and see him off the premises; then, filled with joy, she returned to her upper room. This sort of thing is exactly what is meant by 'gazing at plum-blossom to slake your thirst' or 'drawing a cake to satisfy hunger'. People generally find that if they don't entertain expectations, things don't bother them; once start expecting, and all kin& of silly idle dreams come crowding in and make the time pass with painful slowness. Just because she put faith in what the soothsayer had said, Fortune now found her every thought directed towards her husband's return and from this time onwards she spent much of her time in the front portion of the house, gazing out from behind the curtain.

This went on until the beginning of the second month, when the cedar began to come into bud. Still there was no sign of her husband's return. Remembering his parting vow, Fortune grew more and more uneasy, and now went down several times a day to look out for him.

Obviously, trouble was in store for her, she was fated to meet her elegant young man. Indeed,

If ***the affinity is there, they will overcome a thousand-mile separation;***
If the ***affinity is absent, they will not meet though face to face.***

And who was this elegant young man? He was not as it happened a man of that region, but was from Hsin-an near Hweichow. His name was Ch'en Shang ; but his child-name having been Ta-hsi-ko, 'Big Happy Boy', this was altered later to Ta-lang, 'Big Fellow'. He was twenty-three, and a very handsome specimen. Though he might not have surpassed Sung Yu and P'an An,7 he would certainly not have fallen short of them. This 'Big Fellow' was another orphan. He had got together a capital of two or three thousand ounces of gold and made annual visits to Hsiang-yang, trading in rice and beans and such. His lodgings were outside the city-wall, and this particular day he had chanced to come into the city with the intention of picking up any letter from home that might be waiting for him at Manager Wang's pawnshop on Market Street. This pawnshop was directly opposite the Chiang home, and this was why he happened to be passing.

And how was he dressed, you ask? On his head was a many-tufted 'mane-hat' in the Soochow style, and he wore an undress robe of Huchou silk gauze of a fish-belly white shade. It was precisely the way in which Chiang Hsing-ko had been in the habit of dressing, and when Fortune saw him in the distance she told herself that her husband had returned. She raised the curtain and fixed her gaze upon him.

Ch'en Ta-lang looked up to find a beautiful young -creature staring fixedly at him from an upper room. Imagining that she must have taken a fancy to him, he responded with a wink.

But-who could have dreamt it-both were in error. Fortune, realizing that this was not her husband, blushed scarlet for

shame, hurriedly banged the shutter to and flew to the rear of the house. There she rested herself on the edge of the bed, her heart palpitating violently.

As for Ch'en Ta-lang, the truth was that the lustre of the woman's gaze had lifted the soul from his body. Returning to his lodgings, he could not for a second dismiss her from his thoughts. 'My wife, at home,' he said to himself, 'is a pretty woman, but how could one begin to compare her with this beauty? If only I could get some. love-token to her-but I have no means of entry. If I could spend one night with her, I should have justified my existence in this world even though it cost me the whole of my capital.'

He sat and sighed. But then suddenly he thought of the jewel-vendor, Dame Hsueh, in the alley off the east side of Market Street. He had done business with her in the past. This old woman was skilled in the arts of persuasion. Moreover she spent every day tramping the streets and alleys and knew every household. He must talk things over with her, she'd be sure to have some suggestion.

All that night he tossed and turned, and got through the time somehow. The next day he rose at dawn, announced that he had business to attend to, and called for cold water and washed and combed his hair. He took out a hundred ounces of silver and two large. bars of gold, and rushed off into the city. They say of this kind of thing,

To secure a life of ease
You must work yourself to death.

On entering the city Ch'en Ta-lang made straight for the East Alley off Market Street and pounded on Dame Hsueh's door. Dame Hsueh was' in her little yard, her hair dishevelled, grading her pearls. When she heard the knocking on the door she wrapped up the pearls and asked, 'Who is it? ' But as soon as she heard the words ' Ch'en of Hweichow ' she hastened to open the door and invite him in. 'I'm not yet washed and so I won't presume to receive you formally,' she said. 'What noble errand is it, sir, that brings you out at this time of the morning?'

'I have come specially to see you,' replied Ch'en, 'and was afraid of missing you by coming later.'

'Perhaps you have some jewels or trinkets you want me to dispose of? ' asked Dame Hsueh.

'I want to buy some jewels,' said Ch'en Ta-lang. 'But there is also a bigger deal I want you to undertake for me.'

'I'm afraid I'm not familiar with any trade other than this one,' said Dame Hsueh.

'Can we talk here?' asked Ch'en, whereupon Dame Hsueh bolted the front door and invited him to take a seat in a little private room.

'What are your instructions, sir?' she inquired.

Satisfied that there was no one else about, Ta-lang drew the silver from his sleeve, unwrapped it and placed it on the table. 'I can mention it, godmother, only when you have agreed to accept these hundred taels of silver,' he said.

Not knowing what was behind this, Dame Hsueh was reluctant to accept it. 'You must not despise it as too little,' said Ch'en, and he hurriedly brought out two gold bars as well, shining yellow, and placed these also on the table. 'Please accept these ten taels of gold in addition,' he said. 'If you will not accept them, god-mother, I shah take it as a deliberate refusal to help me. Today it is I who seek your help, not you who seek mine. This big deal I mentioned is not something beyond your capabilities. That is why I have come to you. And even if you are unable to bring it off, this money is still yours to keep. There is no question of my' coming back to retrieve it and then never having anything further to do with you. There is no meanness of that kind about Ch'en Ta-lang.'

Tell me, members of the audience, when was there an old procuress who didn't covet money? How was Dame Hsueh to remain unmoved at the sight of all this silver and gold? At this point her whole face creased into smiles, and she said, 'Please do not misunderstand me, sir. Never in my life have I taken a single cash from anyone unless all was clear and above-board. I shah accept your instructions now, and so for the time being I will take charge of this money ; but if I fail to do what you wish, I shah return it to you.'

With these words she placed the gold with the silver in its packet and wrapped the whole lot up together; then calling out, 'This is very bold of me,' she took it off to secrete it in her bed-

room. Hurrying out again, she said, 'I shall not presume to thank you yet, sir; but tell me now, what kind of business is this that I may be able to help you with?'

'There is a certain gem, a talisman,' replied Ch'en Ta-lang, 'which I am most anxious to procure. You have nothing like it here. It is only to be found in a particular household on Market Street. I beg of you, godmother, to go and borrow it for me.'

The old woman began to laugh. 'You're making fun of me again. I've lived in this alley for more than twenty years, but never have I heard of any talisman on Market Street. Tell me, sir, whose family does it belong to, this gem? '

'Who lives in the big double-storeyed house across the street from the pawnshop kept by my fellow-townsman, Manager Wang Three?' asked Ta-lang.

The old woman thought for a moment, then said, 'That house belongs to Chiang Hsing-ko, a man of this town. He himself' has been away, travelling, for more than a year now. Only his wife is at home.'

'That is precisely the person from whom I wish to borrow this talisman I speak of,' said Ta-lang, and he drew his chair up close to the old woman and revealed to her his heart's desire, thus and thus.

But when he had finished speaking the old woman shook her head impatiently. 'This is a matter of the gravest difficulty,' she said. 'It is not yet four years since Chiang Hsing-ko married this wife of his. The two of them were like fish and water, never apart by a foot or an inch. Now that he has had to go away, the lady never descends her staircase, so great is her chastity. And since Hsing-ko has this peculiarity of being easily roused to anger, I have never yet crossed his threshold. I don't even know what the lady looks like, so how am I to undertake this business for you? As for what you have just given me-1 have not the good fortune to be able to make use of it.'

At this Ch'en Ta-lang flung himself down on his knees, and when the old woman tried to get him to rise he clutched with both hands at her sleeves and pinned her to her chair so that she could not move. 'God-mother,' he began to mumble, ' Ch'en Ta-lang's life is in your hands. You must not fail to think out some cunning stratagem which will enable me to possess her and

thus save my poor life. When the thing is done there will be another hundred taels of gold for your reward ; but if you turn me down, there is nothing for me but to die this minute.'

The old woman was too terrified to think, and could only consent. 'All right, all right,' she said again and again, 'don't tear me to pieces. Please rise, sir, and I will tell you what I think.'

At last Ch'en rose to his feet, and said, hands folded respectfully before him, 'Please inform me at once, what is your cunning plan?'

'This affair must be allowed to run its natural course,' said Dame Hsueh. 'As long as it succeeds in the end, there must be no counting of months and years. If you are to set me a time limit, I can hardly undertake it for you.'

'Provided it really does succeed,' said Ch'en, 'what does it matter if I have to wait a day or two. But where is our stratagem to start?'

'Tomorrow, after breakfast,' began the old woman, 'not too early and not too late, I will meet you in Manager Wang's pawnshop. You, sir, must bring along a good quantity of silver, giving out that you have some business with me. There is of course some point to all this. If I can get these two feet of mine through the Chiangs' doorway, then, sir, you are in luck. But you must hurry straight back to your lodgings. Don't loiter about in front of her doorway or people will see through our game and the whole plan will be ruined. If I can devise an opening of some kind I shall of course report to you.'

'I shall follow your instructions to the letter,' said Ch'en Ta-lang ; and with a great shout of assent he joyously opened the door and left. Truly,

Before Hsiang Yu is destroyed or Liu Pang enthroned 8
Already they build their altars and salute their generals.

Nothing further is to be said of that day. When the next day came Ch'en Ta-lang dressed himself in a fine suit and took out three or four hundred taels of silver, which he placed in a large leather case. This he had a boy take up on his back and bring along to Wang's pawnshop on Market Street. Ta-lang noticed that the windows of the house opposite were all shuttered tight, and assumed that the young lady was not there, but at the rear.

He greeted the shopkeeper with folded hands, and requesting a wooden stool seated himself before the doorway. He looked down the street to the east, and before very long there was Dame Hsueh approaching, in her arms a wicker basket.

Ch'en Ta-lang called to her to stop. 'What have you got in that basket?' he asked.

'Jewels and head-ornaments,' replied Dame Hsueh. 'Do you want any, sir? '

'Just what I'm looking for,' said Ch'en.

Dame Hsueh entered the shop and greeted its owner; then, with a cry of 'Ho la! ', she threw open her basket. Inside it were a dozen or so packets of pearls together with a number of little boxes. The boxes contained ornaments for the hair, each one embellished with artificial flowers and kingfisher feathers, skilfully wrought and dazzling to the eye. Ch'en Ta-lang selected some strings of pearls, those of the greatest size and whiteness, and added to the pile an assortment of hairpins and earrings. 'I'll take all these,' he said.

The old woman eyed him for a moment, then said, 'If you want them, have them. The only question is whether you're prepared to pay the price for them.'

Ch'en realized what she was up to, and opening his purse he drew out bar after bar of gleaming white silver which he stacked high. 'Look at all this silver! ' he shouted. 'Don't tell me it won't buy this stuff of yours?'

Already seven or eight of the loafers of the neighbourhood had strolled across and were in position before the shop watching the proceedings.

'It was only my little joke,' countered the old woman. 'How should I presume to doubt a gentleman like yourself? But you must be careful with all this silver. Please put it back. All I ask is that you pay me the fair price.'

And so they started, one asking a high price and the other offering a low one, with all the distance of heaven from earth between them. The old woman wouldn't budge a fraction from the price she asked ; whilst Ch'en Ta-lang, for his part, had the things in his hand and wouldn't let go, nor would he raise his offer. With deliberate intent, he went out of the shop and stood there letting the jewels sparkle in the sunlight as he picked them

over one by one, pronouncing this one genuine and that one false, and estimating their weight and value. Before long he had attracted the whole town, and the air was filled with cries of admiration.

'If you want to buy them, buy them,' Dame Hsueh was yelling, 'and if you don't want them put them down. What's the idea, just wasting people's time like this?'

'Of course I want to buy them,' said Ch'en ; and the two of them fell back into their wrangling over the price. Truly,

A simple squabble over paying the price
Startles the flower-like, jade-like one.

The hubbub across the way drew Fortune Wang unthinking towards the front part of the house, where she opened a window and peeped out. There were the jewels gleaming and flashing, a beautiful sight. And there also were the old woman and her customer, still unable to agree on the price. And so Fortune ordered her maid to call the old woman across and let her have a look at her things. Light Cloud accordingly crossed the street and tugged at Dame Hsueh's sleeve. 'My mistress would like a word with you,' she said.

The old woman deliberately feigned ignorance. 'Whose family are you?' she asked.

'The Chiang family, across the way,' replied Light Cloud.

The old woman thrust out her hand towards Ch'en Ta-lang and snatched back her goods, which she hurriedly wrapped up again. 'I haven't the time to bother with you any longer,' she said.

'All right then, I'll give you a little more,' said Ch'en.

'No, I'm not selling,' said the old woman. 'How long do you think I could stay in business with the sort of price you are offering? '

As she was saying this she was putting the jewels back in her basket, which she then locked up as before and took up in her arms ready to leave.

'I'll carry it for you, old lady,' said Light Cloud.

'No need,' replied Dame Hsueh ; and without once looking back she went straight to the house across the way. Ch'en Ta-lang, secretly delighted, gathered up his silver and took his leave

of the shopkeeper, and made his way back to his lodging. Indeed,

His eyes behold the flag of victory,
His ears hear the tidings of joy.

Light Cloud led Dame Hsueh upstairs, where she greeted Fortune. At the sight of the girl, the old woman said to herself, 'She really has the looks of an angel. No wonder Ch'en Ta-lang has fallen for her. I'd be bowled over too, if I were a man.' Aloud, she said, 'I have long been aware of your virtuous reputation, lady, and have lived in regret that I was not destined to make your acquaintance.'

'What is your name, old lady?' asked Fortune.

'My name is Hsueh,' replied the old woman. 'I live just round in East Alley, so I am your neighbour.'

'Why wouldn't you sell those things of yours just now?' Fortune went on.

'If I never sold them,' replied the old woman with a smile, 'why should. I bother to bring them out? But what a fool, that stranger down in the road there-a fine-looking man, but no idea what things are worth.'

And with this she opened her basket and took out hair-ornaments and earrings, which she offered for the lady's inspection. 'Lady,' she cried, 'just look at these ornaments. Think how much it costs for theworkmanship alone! If I were to take such a ridiculous price as he was offering, how should I be able to go back and report such a loss to my employer? ' Holding up some strings of pearls, she went on, 'Top-grade goods like these! He must have been dreaming! '

Fortune asked her the prices asked and offered, and said, 'Indeed, the truth of the matter is that you were asking too little! '

'Ah,' replied the old woman, 'but' you are a lady of good family, and widely-versed in these things. You have ten times the understanding of a man.'

Fortune ordered her maid to serve tea, but the old woman protested, 'I will not trouble you so. I have an important matter of business which will take me to West Street, and I have already spent so long squabbling with this stranger-truly, "a deal that

doesn't come off interferes with your work". May I trouble you to keep this basket here for me for the time being, if I lock it? I shah leave you for the moment but be back shortly'.'

Thereupon the old woman took her leave. Fortune ordered Light Cloud to accompany her downstairs, and then she went off towards the west.

Fortune had fallen in love with the things she had been shown, and was impatient for the woman to return so that she could buy them from her. For five whole days she made no appearance. On the afternoon of the sixth day there was a sudden heavy shower, and before the sound of the rain had ceased they heard a heavy banging on the door. Fortune ordered her maid to open it, and there was Dame Hsueh, half-drenched, in her hand a tattered old umbrella. As she entered the house she chanted,

'" When it's fine you don't care to go-
You wait till it pours with rain!" '

She left her umbrella at the foot of the stairs and went up. After offering her best wishes, she said, 'I'm afraid I failed to keep my promise the other day, lady.'

'Where have you been these last few days? ' asked Fortune when she had promptly returned her greeting.

'My youngest daughter has been blessed with the birth of a little boy,' replied the old woman. ' I went over to have a look at him, and stayed for a few days. I only left this morning, and on the way back I was caught in the rain. I managed to borrow an umbrella from some friends, but it was a tattered one-haven't I been 'unlucky? '

'How many children have you; old lady?' asked Fortune.

'Only one son, and he already married,' she replied, 'but I have four daughters. This one is my fourth. She is the concubine of Manager Chu Eight of Hweichow, who has the salt shop outside the North Gate.'

'So many more daughters than sons,' said Fortune, 'you really ought to look after them! There's no shortage of husbands in this town-why did you let her go to an outsider as a concubine?'

'Ah, lady, you don't understand,' the old woman replied. 'This particular outsider is a most generous man. Although she

is only a concubine, the point is that his first wife stays in his private apartments whilst my daughter lives at the shop, surrounded just the same with servants and everything she wants. Every time I go there he treats me with all the respect due to an elder, and is never remiss in any way ; and now that my daughter has given him a son things are even better.'

'Then it's a blessing for you that you have married her so well,' remarked Fortune.

At this point Light Cloud brought in tea, and as they drank the old woman went on, 'With this rain today I can do no business. If it is not too impudent of me, I wonder if I might have a look at your hair-ornaments? It would be a great thing for me to make a note of some really clever designs.'

'They're only very ordinary, I must ask you not to laugh at them,' said Fortune. She took a key and unlocked a chest, and brought out a large collection of jewelled hairpins and necklaces and so on, one piece after another.

Dame Hsueh praised them beyond measure : 'With rare pieces like these, lady, I'm afraid you won't have any time for these things of mine.'

'You're just being polite,' said Fortune. 'I was on the point of asking your prices.'

'You are a connoisseur, lady,' said the old woman, 'there is no call for me to waste my breath.'

Fortune cleared away her things and brought out Dame Hsueh's basket, which she placed on the table. Offering the key to the old woman, she said, 'Please open it up, old lady, and let me have a good look at them.'

'I'm afraid you will see through them,' said the old woman. She opened the basket and brought out piece after piece. Fortune assessed the value of each, and was never far out. The old woman didn't argue at all, but cried delightedly, 'Now this is really fair to one. Even if I get a few cash less than I could have done, I don't mind at all.'

'There's only one thing,' said Fortune, 'I can't lay hands on all the money just now. The only thing I can do is offer you half now, and pay off the rest in full when my husband comes home, which will be within the next few days.'

'There's no harm in letting it wait for a few days,' said Dame

Hsueh. ‘But I have given way a good deal on the prices, and I should like you to pay me in finest sterling.’

‘There’s no difficulty about that,’ said Fortune. And she took the hair ornaments and jewels which most delighted her, and ordered Light Cloud to bring in a bowl of ready-heated wine for her to entertain the old woman.

‘Please don’t go to such trouble--this is only a hasty visit,’ said the old woman.

But Fortune replied, ‘I have very little to do with my time, and it is a great treat to have you here to sit and chat with me, old lady. If you will excuse my presumption, I should be very grateful if you would come here often.’

‘It is very good of you to show affection for one who is not worthy of it,’ said the old woman. ‘In fact, my house is an unbearably noisy place, and it is delightful to be in such tranquil surroundings as these.’

‘What trade does your son follow?’ asked Fortune.

‘Oh, he just looks after the jewel merchants, who are round every day cadging wine and soup and eating us out of house and home. It’s I who have to scurry about making calls all over the neighbourhood. I’m not at home very much ; but that’s perhaps as well, for I should die of boredom if I were confined to a piece of land the size of a grave.’

‘My home is close to yours,’ said Fortune. ‘You must come over for a chat if ever you feel bored.’

‘But I should be a nuisance to you, just dropping in like that, protested the old woman.

‘Not in the least,’ replied Fortune.

The two maids, meanwhile, had been making a long succession of journeys, and had set before each of them a bowl and chopsticks, two plates of dried and salted slices of meat-chicken on one and pork on the other; a plate of fresh fish, and some half a dozen more vegetable dishes and bowls of fruit.

‘What a feast! ’ exclaimed the old woman.

‘It was just what I had in,’ responded Fortune. ‘Please don’t blame me for lack of preparation.’

Then she poured out a cup of wine, which she handed to the old woman. The latter took it and drank her health, and then they sat down facing each other and began to drink in earnest. Now

in fact Fortune was not at all a poor drinker; as for the old woman herself, she was a veritable wine-jug, a wine-jar. So, drinking, very soon they were on excellent terms, and only lamented that they had not made each other’s acquaintance at an earlier date.

They went on drinking until evening, by which time the rain had at last stopped. As Dame Hsueh was expressing her thanks and preparing to leave, Fortune had a great silver goblet brought out, and urged her to empty it, more than once. She insisted on their having supper together, and afterwards she said, ‘Stay on at your ease for a while, old lady, and I will let you have the half of the money that I promised you.’

‘It’s getting late,’ said the old woman. ‘Please don’t worry about that tonight, lady. I’ll call for it tomorrow if I may. There’s this wicker basket of mine, too-1 won’t take it now, because the roads will be muddy and bad underfoot.’

‘I shall expect you tomorrow, then,’ said Fortune.

The old woman took her leave and went downstairs, picked up her tattered umbrella and left the house. Truly,

Nothing in the world has deceived more people
Than the tongues of these old witches.

Let us now tell rather of Ch’en Ta-lang, idling in his lodgings day after day without any news whatever. When this day of rain came along he imagined that the old woman must be at home, and so he made his way into the city to try to discover what was happening. He arrived soaked to the skin and covered with mud only to learn that she was not at home. He found a wine-shop and had a cup or two of wine and a few delicacies before presenting himself again at Dame Hsueh’s ‘front door, but still she had not returned.

It was getting late, and he was just on the point of leaving for home when he caught sight of the old woman, her face wreathed in vinous smiles, rounding the corner of the alley and reeling her way towards him.

Ch’en Ta-lang greeted her, then asked, ‘How is our little affair progressing? ’

‘It’s early days yet,’ said the old woman with a gesture of disapproval. ‘We've only just sown the seed, the shoots aren’t up

yet. It will be another five or six years before the blossom opens and the fruit is ready for you to taste. And it's no use your coming rooting about here. I've no time to stand about gossiping.'

And indeed she was too drunk for Ch'en to do anything but take his leave.

On the next day the old woman bought a quantity of the fruits just then in season, together with some fresh chicken and fish. She had a cook prepare these things for the table and pack them in two round boxes. Then she bought a jar of a fine and potent wine and asked the lad from the wine-shop to carry this and the boxes as far as the Chiangs' gateway.

Now Fortune, impatient of Dame Hsueh's arrival that day, had ordered Light Cloud to go into the street and look out for her, and she was just in time to meet the old woman coming along. Dame Hsueh had the lad put the things down at the foot of the stairs and then sent him back. Meanwhile, Light Cloud announced her arrival to her mistress, who accorded the old woman the welcome due to an honoured guest by coming out to the head of the stairs to greet her.

The old woman thanked her most effusively for her kindness, then said, 'I happened to have in a drop of watery wine, so I've brought it along for your pleasure.'

'I really shouldn't allow you to go to such expense,' protested Fortune.

The old woman asked the two maids to bring the things up and set them out on a table.

'It's really too extravagant of you to make such a spread,' said Fortune.

'People of no account like myself can't offer anything worth having,' said the old woman with a deprecating smile. 'It's really nothing more than a bowl of tea.'

Light Cloud fetched bowls and chopsticks. Warm Snow blew on the charcoal in the wine-heater, and in no time at all the wine was hot.

'I am the one who wished to entertain today,' said the old woman, 'I must ask you to take the guest's seat, lady.'

'Although it is you who have gone to all this trouble,' responded Fortune, 'this is my house and I really can't allow myself to take

the guest's seat.' And for several minutes they vied in politeness, until at last Dame Hsueh' was obliged to sit in the position reserved for the guest.

This was their third meeting, and they were rapidly becoming close friends. As they drank, the old woman asked, 'What can be keeping your husband so long away? I feel he is to be blamed for deserting you like this.'

'Indeed he is,' agreed Fortune. 'He said he would come back at the end of a year. I do not know what can have detained him.'

'What I want to know,' said the old woman, 'is this : what's so precious even about a fortune in gold and jade, if to acquire it means neglecting such a lovely lady as yourself? ' And she continued, 'It's the same with all these merchants who roam up and down the country. They treat their lodgings as their home and their home as their lodgings. Take my fourth daughter's husband, for instance, Manager Chu Eight-now he's found himself this concubine he's happy from dawn to dusk. Never thinks about his home-goes back once every three or four years, and before he's been there more than a month or two, off he starts again. His first wife lives like a widow bringing up her orphan children, what does she know about his affairs when he's away?'

'But my husband isn't that sort of man at all,' protested Fortune.

'It was only my idle gossip,' said the old woman, 'I should never presume to make such a comparison.'

They guessed riddles and played dice-games, and separated in a fine state of intoxication. On the third day Dame Hsueh brought along the wine-shop boy to collect her dishes. Fortune gave her the money for the jewels, half of the purchase price, and made her stay for a meal. From this time onwards the old woman was always calling, her pretext being to hear news of Chiang Hsing-ko in view of the half of the purchase money still owing to her. She was such a witty and plausible talker, and she always made such a point of acting the fool with a dubious joke or two for the maidservants, that soon she was a favourite with mistress and maid alike. If one day she chanced not to call, Fortune would feel lonely. She had her old serving-women find out Dame Hsueh's dwelling, and sent them morning and night to invite her round. And so they grew more and more intimate.

There are four kinds of person in this world who are best left alone. Once allow them near you and you will never be rid of them. Who are the four? Wandering priests, beggars, idlers and go-betweens. The first three are not too bad, but the go-betweens make their way right into your home, and if your womenfolk are finding things a little dull you can be certain it's the go-between they'll turn to for amusement. And in this particular case, Dame Hsueh was at bottom an evil person, but full of soft and honeyed phrases. Fortune gave her her closest friendship, and could not be without her for a minute. Truly,

A** tiger's **skin may be drawn, but it's hard to draw the bones;
A man's face may be known, but how can you know his heart?

Time and again did Ch'en Ta-lang ask for news of progress, but Dame Hsueh's only reply was 'Too early yet.' By the middle of the fifth lunar month the heat was steadily increasing. Dame Hsueh once happened to mention to Fortune the discomfort of her own home, cramped as a snail's shell, facing. west and quite unsuitable for the hot weather. What a contrast with the cool spaciousness of Fortune's upper rooms!

'Wouldn't it be better for you to give up your home and spend your nights here?' suggested Fortune.

'That would be splendid,' said the old woman, 'but what if your husband returns? '

'If he does return, it won't be in the middle of the night!'

'Well, lady,' said the old woman, 'if you're sure you won't find me a nuisance, forcing my society on you like this-how would it be if I bring my bedding across and keep you company this very night?'

'We've plenty of bedding,' said Fortune, 'you've no need to bring yours. All you have to do is tell the members of your household that you've made up your mind to spend the summer here before going back home to live.'

And the old woman did in fact inform her son and daughter-in-law of this, before reappearing with just her toilet-case.

'What trouble you give yourself,' said Fortune. 'Do you think we are without combs here? Why have you brought your own?'

'I have always been reluctant to share a comb and wash-basin,' replied the old woman. 'I'm sure you must have the most exquisite toilet-things, which I wouldn't dream of borrowing ; nor should I like to use your maids' things. That is why I thought it better to bring my own. But please tell me which room I should sleep in.'

Pointing to a small rattan couch at the foot of her bed, Fortune said, 'I have already prepared a place for you where we can be nearer to each other, so that we can chat if we can't get to sleep at night.'

She then took out a green gauze bed-curtain which she asked the old woman to arrange for herself, and after drinking together for a while they retired. It had originally been the two maids who spread their bedding at the foot of Fortune's bed to keep her company, but now that she had the old woman, these two were sent to the next room for the night.

From this time on the old woman spent her days outside on business, but returned each night to sleep at the Chiang home. Often she would bring home a jar of wine and create a great deal of merriment.

The couch and the bed were arranged in the form of a letter T, so that even with the bed-curtains it was almost like sleeping together. During the night they would talk on and on until they had exhausted the salacious gossip of the entire neighbourhood. Sometimes the old woman would pretend that drinking had loosened her tongue, and then she would go into all the details of the illicit amours of her own girlhood. She would work up her friend into a fine state of excitement, until those delicately-nurtured cheeks flushed and paled, paled and flushed again. The old woman knew very well that the girl's thoughts were stirring, but that she was too embarrassed to say anything herself.

Time sped by, and there came the seventh of the seventh month, Fortune's birthday. Early in the morning the old woman made up two boxes of presents for her, and Fortune thanked her for them and wanted her to stay for a bowl of noodles. But the old woman declined: 'I shall be busy all day. But I shall come back to keep you company this evening, and we must watch the Herd-boy paying his visit to the Weaving-girl.'

With this she left. But before she was far from the house she met Ch'en Ta-lang. Not wishing to talk on the street, she followed him into a quiet alley, where Ch'en, wrinkling his brows, began to reproach her: 'What an old ditherer you are,

mother! Spring went and summer came, and now here we are at the beginning of autumn. You'll tell me today it's "too early yet ", and tomorrow you'll still be telling me it's "too early yet ". You don't realize that for me every day is like a year. Dilly-dally a few days longer and her husband will have returned, and then the whole thing flies out of the window. Don't you see that it's a living death for me? But when I reach the Court of Hades I shall lay my death at your door! '

'Don't go on so,' said the old woman. 'I'm delighted to see you, for I was just going to invite you to a party. The success or failure of our venture will be settled this very night. You must do exactly as I am going to tell you, like this . . . and this . . . and this. . . . And mind, the whole thing must be kept absolutely secret, or you'll have me in trouble.'

'An excellent scheme,' said Ch'en, nodding his head. 'And when it has succeeded, I guarantee that you shall have a rich reward.'

He walked away in high spirits; truly,

Marshalling his troops to seize his prize,
He centres every thought on love's fulfilment.

Let us now tell how, the old woman having made her arrangements with Ch'en Ta-lang to bring the affair to a head that evening, in the afternoon a drizzle set in which blotted out the sky, and at night neither moon nor stars were to be seen. The old woman led Ch'en through the darkness and concealed him close by the house while she knocked at the door. Light Cloud opened it, a lighted paper lantern in her hand. The old woman was at pains to take her by the arm, with the words, 'I have lost a handkerchief of Shantung silk. Please help me to look for it.'

In this way she tricked Light Cloud into taking her lantern out into the street to search, while she herself seized her opening and, beckoning Ch'en Ta-lang to follow her, slipped silently into the house. She told Ch'en to hide in the empty space under the staircase. Then she called out, 'I've got it! No need to look any farther!'

'And now the lamp has gone out,' said Light Cloud. 'I'll go and light another one for you.'

'I know the way,' said the old woman, 'there's no need for a lantern.'

In the blackness the two of them bolted the front door and groped their way up the stairs.

'What was it you lost?' asked Fortune.

The old woman drew out a small handkerchief from her sleeve. 'It was this little sinner. It's of no value, but it was a present from a traveller from Peking, and like they say, "it isn't the value of the gift, it's the thought behind it".

'I know-it's a keepsake from an old lover of your,' Fortune joked.

'That's about it,' replied the old woman with a smirk.

The two of them spent the evening in drinking and amusing themselves, until the old woman said, 'We have a lot of wine and dainties left-why not send some down to the kitchen and let the servants enjoy themselves, to make it a real festival?'

And Fortune accordingly set aside four dishes and two jugs of wine and told the maids to take them downstairs. There, the two old serving-women and the manservant ate and drank and then retired, and we will say no more about them.

But let us go on to tell how the old woman asked, as she and Fortune drank, 'How is it that your husband has still not returned ? '

'Just think-a year and a half now!' said Fortune.

'Even the Herd-boy and the Weaving-girl come together once a year,' said the old woman. 'You have been alone now six months longer than they. It's a common saying, "if you can't be an official, a merchant's the next best thing". A travelling merchant can find romance anywhere he goes-the one who suffers is the wife he leaves behind.'

Fortune sighed and lowered her head, but did not speak.

'I've said too much,' said the old woman. 'Tonight is, the wedding-night of the Herd-boy and the Weaver-we should be drinking and making merry, not wounding our feelings like this.'

She poured out another cup of wine for the lady, who by now was in the middle stages of intoxication. Then she poured more wine, this time for the maids, to whom she said, 'This is to drink the health of the Herd-boy and the Weaver, so you must drink a lot of it and then one day you will both marry devoted husbands who will never leave your side.'

So she wheedled them into forcing it down. Soon, overcome

by the wine, they reeled about the room. Fortune ordered them to fasten up the door to the staircase and then go to bed and leave Dame Hsueh and herself to drink in peace. As the old woman drank she went chattering on : ' Lady, at what age did you marry? '

'Sixteen,' replied Fortune.

'What a shame for you, to be so old before you had a man. I was twelve when I started.'

'What an early age to be married,' exclaimed Fortune.

'Well now, married,' said the old woman, 'that was when I was seventeen. I'll tell you what happened: I used to go next-door to learn needlework, and the young master of the house started flirting with me. I found him so handsome that I agreed to try it out with him. The first time it was very painful, but after the second or third time I began to enjoy it. Was it the same with you, lady? '

But Fortune only giggled.

The old woman went on : ' It's all right as long as you don't know what it's like, but once you've tasted it you can't do without it. You're always getting the itch. It isn't too bad in the daytime, but at night it's terrible.'

'You must have had a lot of experience before you left home,' said Fortune. 'How did you manage to pass yourself off as a virgin when you were married? '

'My mother had an inkling of what had gone on, and she was terrified of the disgrace, so she gave me a recipe for restoring virginity. It involved a decoction made from pomegranate-skin and alum. Then I managed to avert suspicion by just making a lot of fuss about it hurting.'

' Still, you must have slept by yourself at night, when you were a girl?' said Fortune.

'I remember how when I was still at home my elder brother went away, and I slept with my sister-in-law. That was very nice.'

'What is there "nice" about two girls sleeping together?' asked Fortune.

The old woman crossed over and sat close beside Fortune, and said, 'You don't realize, lady. As long as you both know the ropes, it's just as enjoyable, and you can get really excited.'

'You're telling lies, it isn't true,' said Fortune, giving the old woman a playful push. Dame Hsueh could see that her desires

were stirring, and with the idea of really rousing her, she went on : 'I am fifty-one this year, but I still feel amorous many a night, and sometimes I can't put up with it. What a lucky thing that you are experienced beyond your years.'

'But if you say you can't put up with it,' said Fortune, 'why don't you find yourself another man? '

'And who would want a withered old blossom like me?' countered Dame Hsueh. 'To tell you the truth, though, lady, I have an "emergency relief measure ", a way of finding my own enjoyment.'

'You're making it up,' said Fortune. 'What sort of way could that be?'

'Just wait till we go to bed and I'll tell you all about it,' replied the old woman.

Just then a moth began to flutter round the lamp. The old woman picked up a fan and made a swipe at it, deliberately knocking the lamp over in the process. 'Aiia!' she cried, 'I'll go and get another one.'

And she opened the door to the staircase, where she found Ch'en Ta-lang. He had come upstairs on his own, in strict accordance with the old woman's previous instructions, and had been hiding by the door for what seemed ages. 'I've forgotten to get something to light your lamp with,' called out the old woman to Fortune ; but turning back, she led Ch'en into the room and concealed him on her own couch. Then she went 'down-stairs, returning after a while with the words : 'It's a pitch-black night, and all the fires are out in the kitchen. What are we to do?'

'I always go to sleep with the lamp burning,' said Fortune. 'I get frightened when it's inky black like this.'

'How would it be if I came into bed with you?' suggested the old woman.

Fortune was just wanting to ask about her 'emergency relief measure', and replied, 'That would be splendid.'

'Then get into bed, lady,' said the old woman. 'I'll join you when I have bolted the door.'

Fortune undressed and got into bed. 'Hurry up and come to bed, old lady,' she called.

'Just coming,' said Dame Hsiien : but at this point she dragged

Ch'en Ta-lang to his feet and pushed him stark naked into Fortune's bed.

Fortune touched his body with her fingers and said, 'What smooth skin you have for your age.' But the person she was addressing, in place of a reply, wriggled his way down under the bedclothes.

Now for one thing the young lady had had a cup or two of wine too many, so that her thoughts were rather hazy ; and for another, her desires had been skilfully roused by Dame Hsueh. The upshot, without going into too great detail,9 was that she tolerated his impudence :

She a young wife, in her seclusion longing to be loved,
He, lady-killer, on his travels eager for romance;
She, after lonely nights,
A Wen-chun to his Hsiang-ju,
He, after months of waiting,
Like Pi-cheng finding Ch'en Nu.10
Clearly, a long drought ended by a fall of welcome rain,
A greater joy than the meeting of old friends far from home.

Ch'en Ta-lang had learnt much from his wanderings in the courts of romance. He used all the subtleties of a mating phoenix and sent the girl's soul winging from her body. It was not until after the clouds had opened and the rain scattered that she asked, 'Who are you?"

Ch'en Ta-lang gave her all the details of his glimpse of her from the street, his longing for her and his plea to Dame Hsueh to devise a plan. ' Now that I have fulfilled the ambition of my life,' he vowed, 'I should die without regrets.'

Then Dame Hsueh came up to the bed and said, 'It was not mere bold presumption on my part. It was rather my pity for you, lady, spending each night alone in this springtime of your youth ; moreover, I was concerned to save this gentleman's life. Your union with him was predestined from a previous incarnation: it had nothing to do with me at all.'

'But now that this has happened,' said Fortune, 'what am I to do if my husband should find out?'

'Only we three know of this,' said Dame Hsueh. 'If in addition we purchase the silence of Light Cloud and Warm Snow, who

else is there to let it leak out? You may leave it to me to ensure that your nights are filled with joy without any unpleasant consequences whatever. Only, in the days to come, I trust you will not forget my services.'

Having come thus far, Fortune dismissed all further worries from her mind, and the two returned to their frenzy. The drum-beats announcing the fifth watch died away and the sky was brightening, and still they were loath to let each other go. At last the old woman urged Ch'en Ta-lang to leave the lady's bed, and saw him out of the house.

From now on they met every night, the young man coming sometimes with Dame Hsueh, sometimes alone. The old woman coaxed the maids with sweet words and frightened them with sour, and, had their mistress make them presents of clothing. Often on his visits young Ch'en also would give them a few scraps of silver to buy fruit for themselves. So successful were these efforts that they happily joined in the game. Night and morning, coming and going, it was the two maids who let him in and saw him off. Not a single obstacle presented itself. Ch'en and the lady doted on each other. They were as close. as glue and lacquer, closer in fact than husband and wife. Wishing to bind her more securely to him, from time to time Ch'en bought Fortune fine clothes and costly hair-ornaments, and even paid off the remainder of her debt to Dame Hsueh for the jewels she had purchased. Nor did he omit to reward Dame Hsueh with one hundred ounces of silver ; so that the cost to the young man of the six months and more of this transaction was near on a thousand gold pieces. Fortune, on her part, made gifts to the old woman worth over thirty ounces of silver. It was nothing but her greed for ill-gotten wealth of this kind that had made the old woman willing to direct their affair.

But let us leave all this. The ancients used to say, 'there never was a feast but the guests had to depart'.

Hardly have we passed the First Full Moon,
Already it's the third month, Feast of the Tombs.

Ch'en Ta-lang began to reflect on the trade which he had allowed to drift for so long, and on the need to return home. One night he spoke of this to Fortune. So deep had their affection

become that neither could bear the thought of separation. The young lady wanted to pack a few things of value and run away with him, to be his wife for ever. But Ch'en said, 'It is impossible. Every detail of our affair is known to Dame Hsueh. Even my landlord, Mr Lu, must have his suspicions when he sees me leaving for the city every night. And then, the boats we should travel on would be crowded with passengers, none of whom we should deceive. Nor can we take your maids with us. When your husband returned he would work to discover what had happened, and he certainly wouldn't let matters rest. Try to be patient for a while, my darling. Next year at this time I will come back. I will seek out some quiet place and let you know of it by a secret message. There we can be together, unknown to the spirits themselves. Isn't that the safest plan?'

'But supposing you do not return next year-what then?' asked Fortune.

Ch'en Ta-lang thereupon made a solemn vow, and Fortune said, 'Since you vow to be true to me, I for my part will never reject you. When you reach your home, send a brief message to Dame Hsueh by anyone coming this way. Then I may set my mind at ease.'

'You had no need to ask,' replied Ch'en, 'I had already determined on that.'

Some days later Ch'en Ta-lang hired a boat, and when it was provisioned and made ready he came back to take his leave of the lady. This night their devotion was redoubled. Now they talked, now they wept, now again they disported themselves on the bed, but never the whole night through did they close their eyes. When they rose at the fifth watch, Fortune went to a chest from which she took a precious object which went by the name of 'pearl-sewn shirt'. This she gave into the hands of Ch'en Ta-lang with the following words : 'This shirt is an heirloom of the Chiang family. He who wears it in the hot weather feels a pleasant coolness going down into his bones. Your journey will be made in growing heat, it is just the time for this. I give it to you for a keepsake: when you wear it, it will be as though I myself were close to you.'

Ch'en Ta-lang felt his heart melt inside him and was choked with tears. With her own hands Fortune put the shirt on him. Then she told the maids to open the door of the house, and herself

accompanied him as far as the street. There, after repeated injunctions to him to take care of himself, she said farewell to him. A verse reads :

Tears, long ago, as her husband said farewell,
Today she weeps as she sees her lover go.
So with many a woman, fickle as water,
Ready to exchange her drake for a wild bird passing.

Our story forks at this point. Let me now tell how Ch'en Ta-lang, presented with the pearl-sewn shirt, wore it daily next to his body. Even at night when he took it off he would sleep with it under the bedclothes, so that never by a foot or an inch was it away from him. His journey was blessed with following winds, and within a couple of months he reached the Maple Bridge in the prefecture of Soochow. The district was a great gathering-place for brokers in rice and fuel, and he was sure of finding a buyer there for his cargo. We need say no more of this. But one day Ch'en chanced to attend a party given by a man from his own native-place. Also among the guests was a merchant from Hsiang-yang. This man was handsome, well-dressed-and in fact none other than Chiang Hsing-ko himself!

What had happened was that Hsing-ko had done some trading in Kwangtung in jewels, tortoise-shell and sapan and aloes-wood, and then had started out in the company of others on the long journey home. But in the course of discussion his fellow merchants had expressed their intention to do some selling in Soochow. Hsing-ko had often heard the saying, 'Above there is paradise, here below there are Soochow and Hangchow'. Such a city, with its great crowded wharves-he decided to go along with them and trade there before finally returning to Hsiang-yang.

He had arrived in Soochow in the tenth month of the previous year. He was still trading under an assumed name and was known to all and sundry as 'Young Master Lo'. This being so, Ch'en Ta-lang had no inkling of his true identity. The two men, so like in age and appearance, brought together in such random fashion, developed as they conversed a great regard for each other. At that same party each asked where the other was staying. Subsequently, each in turn calling on the other, they became firm friends and spent much time together.

When Hsing-ko had completed all his dealings and was ready to leave he went to say goodbye to Ch'en Ta-lang at his lodgings. Ta-lang brought out wine in his honour, and they sat facing each other and conversing in perfect amity. It was now the end of the fifth month, the hot weather, and each man loosened his clothing as he drank.

Suddenly Hsing-ko caught sight of the pearl-sewn shirt beneath Ch'en's robe. His heart gave a bound. Yet, feeling loath to claim it as his own, he contented himself with praising its beauty. Ch'en Ta-lang by this time felt sufficiently intimate with Chiang to trust him with his secret. 'Brother Lo,' he began, 'there is a man of your home town called Chiang Hsing-ko. I don't know whether you are acquainted with him? His home is on Market Street.'

Hsing-ko made his reply with great caution and cunning. 'I have been away for so long. I know there is such a man, but I don't know him personally. Why do you ask?'

'I'll let you into a secret,' went on Ch'en. 'I've got myself rather involved with his family.' And he told him of the love between himself and Fortune. Finally he stripped off the pearl-sewn shirt and showed it to Chiang, and said, his eyes brimming with tears, 'This shirt was given to me by her. Now that you are returning to Hsiang-yang, would you do me the great kindness of taking a message for me? I will bring it to your lodgings the first thing in the morning.'

'Yes, I will do that,' replied Chiang ; but in the depths of his heart he was saying, 'That such a thing could happen! Yet this is no idle boasting-the pearl-sewn shirt is the proof!' It was as though needles were thrust into his belly. Making some excuse to drink no more he hurriedly took his leave and returned to his lodging. There, he gave himself up to his thoughts. His distress grew until he longed for some magic means to abolish distance, so that he could be instantly at home.

He spent the night packing his belongings, and the next morning he boarded a boat and prepared to sail. But as the boat was on the point of leaving a man came running breathless along the bank. It was Ch'en Ta-lang. He thrust a large package into Hsing-ko's hands, and repeated several times that he must be sure to deliver it.

Hsing-ko's face turned the colour of clay with anger. He was beyond words, beyond speech, beyond living or dying. But he waited until Ch'en Ta-lang had gone and then looked at the package. On the outside was written, 'For favour of delivery to Dame Hsueh, East Alley, off Market Street'. Hsing-ko, his gorge rising, ripped the package open. Inside was a sash some three yards in length, of crepe silk the colour of peach-blossom. There was also a long casket, paper-wrapped. Inside this was a phoenix hairpin of finest white 'mutton-fat' jade, and a note which read as follows : 'Dame Hsueh : be so kind as to deliver these two small gifts to my darling Fortune, as a token of my love for her. Tell her that she must take good care of herself, and that we shall meet again without fail in the spring of next year.'

Hsing-ko, beside himself with rage, tore the note into fragments which he threw into the river. The jade hairpin he hurled to the deck, where it broke in two. But then a thought struck him : 'This is stupid of me. The thing to do is to keep these things as evidence.' And so he picked up the pieces of the hairpin, wrapped them up in the sash and put them away. Then he urged on the boatmen, and fumed and fretted all through the journey home.

But when at last he came in sight of his own house, despite himself he wept to recall the love they had known in the early days. 'This terrible thing has all resulted from my pursuit of a fly's-head of profit, for the sake of which I condemned her to an early widowhood. But to repent now-how can that alter what has happened?' He had made the journey home in a fever of impatience ; but now that he was here, his heart filled with grief and regret.

Haltingly he walked up to the house and entered. He forced himself to restrain his anger while he went to greet his wife. He on his part remained silent; whilst Fortune herself, full of her guilt and fearful of its discovery, felt her cheeks flood with shame and was not brazen enough to make a show of loving solicitude.

When Hsing-ko had, seen to his luggage he gave out that he was going to' visit Fortune's parents, and went back to his boat to spend the night. In the morning he returned, and said to Fortune, 'Your parents have fallen ill, both at the same time. Their condition is so serious that I was obliged to stay yesterday

to see them through the night. Their thoughts are only of you, they long to see you. I have hired a sedan-chair which is waiting below. You must go back at once-1 will follow later.'

Fortune had been greatly puzzled by her husband's absence for the night. Hearing this report of her parents' illness she took it to be true, and naturally was filled with alarm. She hurriedly locked up some cases, which she handed to her husband. Then, calling to one of the serving-women to follow her, she hurried out to the sedan-chair. Hsing-ko stopped the serving-woman, and drawing out a document from his sleeve instructed her to deliver it to Mr Wang. 'When you have given it him, you may come back with the chair-bearers.'

Let us now tell how Fortune arrived at her parents' home and was startled to find the two of them in perfect health. Wang was surprised in his turn to find his daughter returning home unexpected and unannounced. He took the letter from the serving-woman, tore it open and read it. It was a bill of divorcement, and read as follows :

> Bill of divorcement instituted by Chiang Te (Hsing-ko), native of Tsao-yang in the prefecture of Hsiang-yang, betrothed in youth and married after observance of all proper preliminaries to the woman Wang. Against all expectations, this woman after entering her husband's home has been guilty of most serious misdemeanours, as defined in the recognized seven grounds for divorce. 11 Out of regard for the past affection between husband and wife, no statement is made of these misdeeds. I hereby declare my desire that she return to her own family, to marry again at her discretion. I confirm this to be a genuine bill of divorcement, and independent of any misunderstanding whatsoever. Witness my hand this - d a y of the - month, second year of the reign-period Ch'eng-hua (A.D. 1466).

With the document were enclosed a sash of peach-blossom colour and a broken phoenix hairpin of mutton-fat jade. Wang read the document in amazement, and called his daughter to give an explanation. Fortune, informed that her husband had divorced her, said not a word but began to weep. In high indignation Wang strode straight to the house of his son-in-law.

Chiang Hsing-ko hastened forward to bow him in. Wang returned his greeting, then said, 'Son-in-law : my daughter entered your home in proper /manner and in all good faith. What are these misdemeanours of hers that have led you to divorce her? I demand an explanation.'

'It is not for me to say,' replied Hsing-ko. 'It is your daughter, sir, who can best explain.'

'She does nothing but weep and will not open her mouth,' said Wang. 'It breaks my heart to see her. My daughter has always been a most intelligent girl, and I cannot believe that she should have been guilty of wantonness. If it is a question of some small failing, I beg you for my sake to forgive her. You and she were betrothed at the age of six or seven, and after your marriage there was never a harsh word between you, but all was harmony. And now you have hardly been back a day from your journeyings -what is this flaw in her that has suddenly come to your notice? If you persist in this vindictiveness, your name will become a byword for cruelty and injustice.'

'Out of respect for you, sir,' Hsing-ko replied, 'I would not presume to say too much. But there is a shirt sewn with pearls, an heirloom in my family, which was in your daughter's keeping. Ask her whether it is still in her possession. If it is, then there is no further difficulty. But if it is not, then please do not blame me for what has happened.'

Mr Wang returned home and questioned his daughter : 'Your husband only wants from you something called a pearl-sewn shirt. Tell me the truth : to whom have you given it?'

At this reference to the crux of the whole affair, the girl's face flushed red for shame. She said not a word, but burst out into a loud wailing. Mr Wang was too alarmed to think what to do, but his wife began to exhort the girl: 'Don't just go on crying so, but let your mother and father know the whole truth, and then we can see if it can't all be cleared up.'

Still the girl would not speak, but went on sobbing her heart out. Mr Wang saw nothing for it but to hand over the bill of divorcement together with the sash and the hairpin to his wife, with instructions to coax the truth out of the girl ; then, sorely perplexed, he went out to pass the time of day with the neighbours. Mrs Wang saw that the girl's eyes were swollen and red

with weeping, and feared for her health. With a few comforting words she went off to the kitchen to heat some wine in the attempt to make her daughter feel better.

Left alone in the room, Fortune began to wonder how the secret of the pearl-sewn shirt could possibly have come to light. And where did the sash and the hairpin come from? At last, after long deliberation, she said to herself, 'I understand! The broken hairpin means "the mirror is in pieces, the pair of ornaments sundered"- i t is a symbol of our broken marriage. As for the sash, it is obvious that he intends me to hang myself. Remembering the love which was ours he is unwilling to make the truth public. His whole thought is to preserve my fair name. Alas, that four years of love should be destroyed in an instant. And it is all my doing, it was I who turned my back on my husband's love! To live on in society, never knowing a day of tranquillity-no, better to hang myself and have done!'

Whereupon she wept again. Then she piled stools one on top of another, tied the sash round a beam and prepared to hang herself. But her span of years was not yet full, for she had not bolted the door of the room and her mother chose just this moment to bring in the jug of best wine that she had been heating. The sight of what her daughter was doing threw her into a panic. Without pausing to put down the wine-pot she rushed forward and dragged at the girl. In her haste she kicked over the pile of stools. Mother and daughter fell in a heap on the floor, and the wine from the jar splashed over them.

'Hanging yourself is no way out!' cried Mrs Wang as she scrambled to her feet and helped her daughter to rise also. 'A girl like you in her twenties, a blossom not yet full! What can bring you to such an act of despair? Who knows but that the day may come when your husband will change his mind? And even supposing that he has finally rejected you-with beauty such as yours, how can you think that no one else will want you? You're bound to find another good match, and then you'll be provided for in the years to come. For the moment you must try to set your mind at ease and not grieve so.'

When Mr Wang came home and discovered that his daughter had tried to kill herself he also spent some time consoling her, and ordered his wife to guard against a recurrence of the attempt.

As the days passed Fortune saw that it was impossible and gradually gave up her design. Truly,

Man and wife, like two birds* in *the wood;
Death, the Great Limit, sends each flying away.

I go on to tell how Chiang Hsing-ko took two lengths of rope and had Light Cloud and Warm Snow bound and questioned under torture. At first the two maids proved obstinate. But they could not put up with the beating, and in the end confessed every detail of what had happened from beginning to end. It was clearly not they who had done the mischief so much as Dame Hsueh who had lured them into it. The next morning, Hsing-ko got together a band of men and hurried round to Dame Hsueh's dwelling. Blows fell like snow-flakes as they tore through the place ; all they left standing was the walls of her house. Dame Hsueh was fully conscious of her own misdeeds and kept out of the way ; nor did anyone dare to raise a word of protest on her behalf. Seeing how matters lay, and having vented his spleen, Hsing-ko went back home. He sought out a procuress and sold her the two maids. Then he went upstairs and collected together the valuables, sixteen trunks in all. He wrote out thirty-two strips of red paper for seals and stuck two, one across the other, on each box, leaving the boxes where they stood. What was his reason for this? Why, he and his wife had loved each other deeply. Although now they were parted, his heart was full of pain. 'Seeing an object, one thinks of its owner'-how could he bear to open the trunks and look inside?

Our story forks at this point, and I now tell of a Doctor of Letters of Nanking whose name was Wu Chieh. He had been appointed district magistrate of Ch'ao-yang, in Kwangtung province, and in the course of his journey there by river and canal had just reached Hsiang-yang. He had not brought his family with him, and was contemplating the acquisition of a good-looking concubine. None of the women he had yet seen on his journey had appealed to him. But now he discovered that the daughter of Mr Wang of Tsao-yang was celebrated throughout the whole district for her beauty. Wu Chieh brought out fifty ounces of gold as a present and engaged a go-between to negotiate the union. Fortune's father accepted with joy, but feared only

an objection from his former son-in-law. He went in person to discuss the matter with Hsing-ko. Hsing-ko raised no demur; and the night before the wedding, he hired men to take the sixteen trunks, seals intact and keys attached, over to Wu Chieh's boat. They were to be given to Fortune as a wedding present. His kindness overwhelmed the girl with embarrassment. Of those who learned of this act, some praised Hsing-ko as a generous man. Others scorned him as a fool ; others still despised him as a weakling-so different are the minds of men.

No more of this idle talk, but let us go on to tell how Ch'en Ta-lang returned to Hsin-an when he had sold up in Soochow. All his thoughts were of Fortune, and morning and night he gazed on the pearl-sewn shirt and sighed. His wife Madam P'ing knew very well that there was something behind all this. One night, when her husband had gone to sleep, she silently abstracted the shirt and concealed it up above the ceiling. When Ch'en awoke and was ready to put it on he failed to find it and demanded it from his wife. But she would admit to no knowledge of it, and Ch'en flew into a rage and turned every case and trunk inside out in the search for it. Nowhere could he find it, and he called his wife every name he could think of. She burst into tears and began a quarrel with him that went on for three days on end. Finally, exasperated, Ch'en threw together a pile of silver and set off with a boy on the journey back to Hsiang-yang again. But as he was approaching Tsao-yang he was surprised by a gang of robbers. They made off with every scrap of his capital and murdered his boy. Ch'en himself had the presence of mind to hide at the stern of the boat behind the rudder-post, and so managed to come through with his life. He reflected on the impossibility of returning home, and decided to go on to his old lodging and wait for a chance of meeting Fortune. From her he could borrow something to set himself up again.

Ch'en sighed, left the boat and walked on to the house of his old landlord, Lu, on the outskirts of Tsao-yang. He told him of what had happened, and continued, ' I shall now have to look up Dame Hsueh, the jewel-vendor, and get her to borrow some capital from an acquaintance to enable me to trade.'

' Why, haven't you heard? ' cried Lu. 'It seems the old woman had tricked the wife of Chiang Hsing-ko into misbehaving herself.

When Chiang came home he asked his wife for something or other called a "pearl-sewn shirt". But the trouble was that she had given it to her lover and he had gone off with it, and she had nothing to say for herself. Chiang packed her off at once, and now she has married again, to be the concubine of a Doctor Wu of Nanking. Chiang took his men round to the old woman's place and left hardly a brick standing. The old woman felt it wasn't safe for her here, so she's gone off to another district.'

When Ch'en Ta-lang heard this he felt as though a bucket of cold water had been poured over him. He was filled with alarm. That night a fever started, and he began to suffer from an illness compounded of melancholia and love-sickness, with complications brought on by shock. He lay on his bed for two months and more, tossing and turning and never at ease. He was a burden to the landlord and the servants, who grew impatient of waiting on him. Ch'en Ta-lang worried about this, and at length summoned up the strength to write a letter home. Then he discussed his position with the landlord. His idea was to find a messenger who would take the letter to his house and bring back both money for his use and a member of his family to look after him on the journey home.

This was exactly what the landlord had been waiting to hear. By a lucky chance he happened to know a government courier who was on his way to Hweichow and Ningchow with documents from his superior. He would be travelling very quickly, by land and water from one posting-house to the next. The landlord took over Ch'en's letter and gave it to this man to take with him, offering him five silver cash of his own on Ch'en's behalf.

It is a true fact that when a man travels alone he goes as fast as he likes. The government courier sped like fire and reached Hsin-an in a matter of days. He asked his way to the house of the merchant Ch'en, delivered the letter and was off again on his winged steed. And truly,

All because of this precious letter
Another marriage, pre-ordained, comes to fulfilment.

The story tells how Madam P'ing opened the letter, to find that it was in her husband's handwriting. It read:

Greetings **from** Ch'en Ta-lang to his esteemed wife Madam

Ping. After my departure from you I met with robbers near Hsiang-yang who stole my capital and murdered my assistant. The shock brought on an illness and I have now been bedridden for two months in my old lodging with Mr Lu. I have not yet recovered. When you receive this, find some responsible relative to come at once to see me, bringing a plentiful amount to cover my needs. Please excuse this hurried note.

Madam P'ing was not certain whether to accept the truth of this. 'The last time he came home,' she said to herself, 'he had lost his capital of a thousand gold pieces. Judging from this pearl-sewn shirt it is evident that something underhand had been going on. And here he comes again with a tale of a robbery, and wants a lot of money to cover his needs. I'm afraid it's all lies.'

But then she argued with herself, 'He wants some responsible relative to hurry to see him at once. He must be seriously ill. Perhaps it is true- how can I be sure? Well, who is the best person to send." She went on thinking and worrying about it, and discussed it with her father, old Manager P'ing.

In the end she packed up her valuables and belongings, hired a boat and set out in person for Hsiang-yang to find her husband. She took with her a retainer, Ch'en Wang, and his wife, and asked her father to accompany them as well. But no sooner had they reached the Grand Canal than old Manager P'ing contracted a disease of the throat and had to be sent home. Madam P'ing led her party forward on their journey, and after many days they reached the outskirts of Tsao-yang. By making enquiries they found their way to the house of Mr Lu.

There they discovered that ten days previously Ch'en Ta-lang had passed away. Mr Lu had pulled out enough money to have him placed in a rough-and-ready coffin. Madam P'ing cried out and fell to the floor in a faint, and it was a long time before she could be brought round. Then she hastened to don the garb of mourning. Time and again she pleaded with Lu to allow her to have the coffin opened, so that she could take her last sight of her husband, and then transfer his body to a better coffin. Lu persistently refused this request. In the end Madam P'ing had to content herself with buying the wood for an outer coffin to encase the first. She engaged Buddhist priests to perform the ceremonies for the departing spirit, and burnt a great deal of

paper money for its use in the next world. Lu had already demanded twenty ounces of silver as a return for his services to Ch'en. In the face of his wrangling Madam P'ing said not a word.

When a month and more had passed Madam P'ing began to seek an auspicious date on which to set out on the journey back with the coffin. Lu felt sure that the lady was too young and attractive to remain a widow -for the rest of her life. Moreover she was comfortably off. He began to think of his son, Second Lu, whose marriage was not yet arranged. Why not detain the lady for a while? Then a match could be concluded which would benefit both parties, Lu bought wine for the entertainment of Ch'en Wang, whose wife, he suggested, should be richly rewarded for putting the matter before Madam P'ing with suitable tact. But unfortunately Ch'en Wang's wife was a complete bumpkin who had never heard of the word 'tact '. With not the slightest respect for persons she came right out with it before her mistress. Madam P'ing was furious. She scolded the woman and boxed her ears, and delivered a few well-chosen words to Mr Lu and his family as well. Lu was in disgrace, but he could only fume inwardly. The truth is,

There aren't any mutton dumplings for you,
It's no use getting all worked up about them,

Thereupon Lu began to incite Ch'en Wang to run away. Ch'en had already come to feel that there was nothing for him in the situation. He laid plans with his wife that she should spy out the lie of the land for him. In the end the traitor within Madam P'ing's camp and the enemy outside, between them, managed to make a clean sweep of every bit of silver and jewellery that she possessed, and made off in the night with their booty. Lu of course knew very well what had happened, and yet he went grumbling to Madam P'ing : 'You should never have brought such a pair of scoundrels with you. Fortunately they've only stolen their own mistress's belongings-what a bother if they had taken anyone else's! '

He complained that the presence of the coffin was robbing him of custom and told' her to make haste to remove it from his premises. Then he went on, 'It isn't right for you as a young widow to be staying here'- and he pressed her to leave. Madam

P'ing was not proof against his insistence. She was obliged to rent a house for herself and have the coffin moved there and installed within.

Her sad plight here may easily be imagined. But next door there lived a woman called Seventh Aunt Chang. She was a person of quick sympathy, who often would hear Madam P'ing crying to herself and would come round to comfort her. Madam P'ing in turn would often seek her aid in pawning articles of clothing to get money for food; and she was most grateful for Seventh Aunt's help. But before many months were out, every spare garment had been pawned. From being a girl Madam P'ing had always had great skill with the needle, and now she had the idea of entering some wealthy family to earn her keep by teaching needlework to the daughters of the house, until such time as she could make other provision. But when she discussed this scheme with Seventh Aunt Chang, the older woman said, 'It isn't for me to criticize, but a wealthy family is no place for a young woman like yourself. When it comes to dying, well, if your sands run out die you must ; but if you're going to live, you've got to keep your self-respect. You have a long life before you. It wouldn't do to end your days as a sewing-mistress. Such a person has a bad name and you would be looked down on. And apart from that--what arrangements would you be able to make for your husband's burial? This is a heavy burden you must bear. And yet,, to go on and on paying rent--that is no solution.'

'All these things have been worrying me,' said Madam P'ing, ' but I can see no way out.'

'I have a plan for you,' said Seventh Aunt Chang, 'but you must not be offended if I speak plainly. Here you are, a solitary widow a thousand miles from home and without a copper in your purse. You have not the slightest prospect of taking your husband's corpse back for burial. Leaving aside the difficulty of preserving independence when you lack both food and clothing-even if you do manage to hang on for a while, what good will that do? If you will take my poor advice, the best thing is to seize your chance while you are still young and pretty and find a new mate for yourself. Become his wife. But first let him give you something for a betrothal present, and use it to buy a piece of land for your deceased husband's grave. You would find

support for the remainder of your days, and, I believe, "in life or in death, no regrets ".'

This seemed to Madam P'ing to be very sensible, and after musing for a while she sighed and said, 'So be it, then. There is nothing deserving of ridicule in selling myself to bury my late husband.'

'If you have made up your mind to do this, lady,' said Seventh Aunt; 'I have a proposal all ready and waiting for you. It is from a very presentable gentleman of an age similar to your own, and in very comfortable circumstances.'

'If he is so well-off,' said Madam P'ing, 'I can't imagine he will want a woman who has been married before.'

But seventh Aunt replied, 'He also is marrying again, and he did in fact tell me that what he wanted was a lady of distinction, no matter whether it was her first or second marriage. Such a charming and graceful lady as yourself is certain to meet his wishes.'

What in fact had happened was that Seventh Aunt Chang had been commissioned by Chiang Hsing-ko to find him a wife. His former wife, Fortune, had been so exquisite that all he wanted now was to find someone of comparable beauty. Although Madam P'ing had not quite such a pretty face as his first wife, when it came to a quick mind and nimble fingers she was more than her match.

The next day Seventh Aunt entered the city and urged the match on Chiang Hsing-ko. He was more pleased than ever to learn that Madam P'ing was from a trading family. For her part, Madam P'ing asked not a penny in betrothal gifts, but merely stressed her need for a plot of land to provide a proper site for her deceased husband's grave. After a number of comings and goings by Seventh Aunt Chang both parties gave their assent.

We must not become long-winded, but rather tell how Madam P'ing interred her husband's corpse and wept bitterly after the ceremony had come to an end. But then in the natural course of events she set up the tablet to her husband's spirit and laid aside her widow's weeds. At the appointed rime clothes for her to wear arrived from the Chiang household, and all the garments which she had pawned were redeemed for her. The wedding-night was

marked by the customary blowing of pipes and banging of gongs, and by gay red candles in the bridal chamber. And in truth,

Though from past experience familiar with the rites,
Each has deeper feelings than the first marriage brought.

Chiang Hsing-ko was impressed by the dignity of Madam P'ing's demeanour, and reciprocated her deep respect for him. One day he came in from the street to find her tidying a trunk of clothes. Among the garments was a shirt sewn with pearls. Hsing-ko recognized it with a start, and asked, 'Where did you get this?'

'There is something queer about it,' replied Madam P'ing ; and she told him of the fuss her former husband had made over it, and of how they had wrangled and finally quarrelled bitterly and separated. 'When I was in such difficulties a little while ago, ' she continued, 'I more than once thought of pawning it. But then I reflected that I didn't know its history, and feared that trouble might result if it were exposed to the public gaze. Even now I can't tell you where this thing came from.'

'Your former husband, "Big Fellow" Ch'en,' said Hsing-ko, '--was his personal name Shang? And was he of a fair and clear complexion, beardless, and with long fingernails on his left hand? '

'You have described him exactly,' said Madam P'ing.

Hsing-ko stuck out his tongue in wonderment, and with palms pressed together addressed Heaven : 'From this I see how clearly manifest are the workings of providence! It is a thing to tremble at!'

Madam P'ing asked what he meant, and he replied, 'This pearl-sewn shirt was an heirloom in my family. Your husband seduced my wife and was given this shirt as a love-token. I met him in Soochow, and the sight of the shirt gave me my first inkling of the affair. On my return, I put aside my wife, Madam Wang. But who could have foreseen that your husband would die on his travels? Then, when I decided to marry again, I learned only that you were the widow of a trader named Ch'en of Hweichow-how was I to know that this was none other than Ch'en Shang? Surely this is retribution piled upon retribution!'

Madam P'ing felt her flesh creep at this recital. From this time on their affection for each other was redoubled. And now you

have heard the story proper of how Chiang Hsing-ko twice encountered the pearl-sewn shirt. A verse declares :

The ways of providence are clear and ineluctable:
Who reaped the advantage from the exchange of wives?
Clearly, a debt must be repaid with interest:
This love-match of three lifetimes was only withheldfor a time.

It remains to tell how Chiang Hsing-ko, one year after he had acquired this lady to look after his home, made another trading expedition into Kwangtung province. Again, what was fated to happen awaited him there. One day he visited the pearl-fisheries at Ho-p'u. His offer for some pearls had been accepted by the owner, an old man, when suddenly the fellow took back the biggest jewel of the lot and secreted it in his clothing, nor would he own up when charged. Out of patience, Hsing-ko tore at the man's sleeve, where he expected to find the pearl. But he had been rougher than he knew. He had knocked the old man to the ground, where he now lay stretched out without a sound. Hsing-ko hastened to help him up, but he had breathed his last.

The old man's family and neighbours came flocking round, some weeping, some shouting. They seized hold of Hsing-ko and without waiting for explanations gave him a sound beating. Then they locked him in an empty hut, and that very night made out a writ of accusation. At daybreak when the district magistrate opened his court they brought in both prisoner and plaint together. The magistrate allowed the plaint to be filed. Being fully occupied with public business on that day, however, he gave orders for the prisoner to be kept under guard until his trial on the morrow.

Now who do you think this magistrate was? His name was Wu Chieh and he was a Doctor of Letters of Nanking-and indeed, none other than Fortune's second husband! His first appointment had been to Ch'ao-yang. There he had impressed his superiors as incorruptible, and so they had promoted him to take charge of this pearl-fishing district of Ho-p'u. That night he sat with the accusations he had accepted, closely examining them beneath a lamp. Fortune chanced to be standing by his side, and was idly glancing through the pile of documents. Her eye happened to light on a 'plaint of homicide brought by Sung

Fu against one Lo Te, merchant, of Tsao-yang . . . ' ; who could this be but Chiang Hsing-ko?

Memories of the love of former days brought a sudden pain to her heart. Weeping she pleaded with her husband : 'This man Lo Te is my own elder brother who was adopted by my mother's family, the Lo. Somehow on his travels he has committed this grave misdeed. I beg you, for my sake, let him keep his life and return to his home! '

'We must see what happens at the trial,' replied the magistrate. 'If homicide is established, how am I to treat him with such leniency? '

Fortune knelt, her eyes brimming with tears, and pleaded before him piteously. 'Do not distress yourself so,' said the magistrate. 'I shall find a way.'

When court opened the following morning, Fortune again clutched at the magistrate's sleeve and wailed, 'If my brother must die, I too will end my life, and you and I shall not see each other again.'

That day the magistrate took his seat and ordered that this case be brought first. The two brothers, Sung Fu and Sung Shou, came in tears to avenge their father's death. They submitted that a quarrel had arisen over some pearls, in the course of which their father had been struck in anger. He had fallen to the ground and died. Let his honour issue judgment.

The magistrate heard the evidence of all the witnesses. Some said the old man had been knocked to the ground; others said that he had stumbled after receiving a push. Chiang Hsing-ko disputed the matter : 'Their father stole a pearl from me, and I was annoyed and quarrelled with him. He was an old man and not very steady on his feet. He fell and killed himself-it had nothing to do with me.'

' What was your father's age?' the magistrate asked of Sung Fu

'He was sixty-seven,' replied Sung Fu.

'Aged persons readily faint,' commented the magistrate. 'He may not necessarily have been struck.'

Sung Fu and Sung Shou insisted that he was knocked down and killed.

'The presence or absence of injury must be ascertained by examination,' said the magistrate. 'Since you maintain that he

was knocked down and killed, let the corpse be delivered to the public cemetery, and we shall hear the result of the examination at the evening session of this court.'

Now the fact was that the Sung were a family of standing : the old man himself had in the past been local headman. His two sons were utterly unwilling to submit their father's corpse to an official post-mortem. Side by side they kotowed and pleaded, 'Our father's death was seen by all. We entreat your honour to inspect his body where it lies in our own home. We are most reluctant to submit the corpse to an official post-mortem.'

'If there is no evidence of injury to the bone,' protested the magistrate, 'how do you expect the accused to be willing to confess? If there is no post-mortem report, how am I to present this case to higher authority? '

The two brothers only renewed their pleading, until the magistrate became annoyed and said, 'How can I try this case if you will not allow a post-mortem?'

This frightened the brothers into incessant kotowing, and they said, 'We await your honour's verdict.'

'When a man is nearing seventy,' declared the magistrate, 'he must expect to die. Let us aver that his death was not the result of a blow. If we were to wrong an innocent man, this would add to the guilt of the deceased. And for you, his sons : how could your hearts be at ease in the knowledge that you had allowed your father to reach such an age, only to ruin the ending of his life by branding him a criminal? Yet, though it be false to say that he died from a blow, it is at least true that he was pushed and fell. If condign punishment be not inflicted on Lo Te, what vent is to be given to your anger? I therefore rule that Lo Te put on the hemp garments of mourning and observe the rites in the manner prescribed for a son. In addition, all expenses of burial are to be borne by him. Do you submit to this?'

'When your honour commands,' said the brothers, 'who are we to disobey? '

Hsing-ko was overjoyed to see that the magistrate had settled the whole case without prescribing any punishment for him. When plaintiffs and defendant alike had kotowed and expressed their gratitude, the magistrate concluded, 'I shall not write a report of this case. The defendant will be accompanied by an

escort until such time as the ceremonies have been completed. He will then report back to me, whereupon I will cancel the writ of accusation.'

Truly,

In a court of law, retribution is easily accomplished,
Nor is it difficult there to accumulate hidden merit.
Observe, today, how his honour the magistrate Wu
Rights the wrong but releases the accused, so that both sides rejoice.

Let us now rather tell how Fortune from the moment her husband had entered court had felt as though she were sitting on a mat of needles. As soon as she heard he had retired she went to meet him to learn the news.

'I settled it like this and like this,' said the magistrate. 'Out of consideration for you I inflicted not a single stroke on him.'

Fortune expressed to the full her gratitude for this act of mercy. Then she said, 'I have been long parted from my brother and yearn to see him and to enquire after our parents. If you would do me this great kindness, please try to find a way for us to meet.'

'That is not difficult', said the magistrate.

Members of the audience: when Fortune was divorced by Chiang Hsing-ko their love was surely ended and their obligations ceased to exist? Why then do you imagine she should now show such concern for him? Well, they had loved each other at the beginning very much indeed. Hsing-ko had no alternative but to divorce Fortune because of her misconduct ; but it was almost too much for him to bear. That was why he had presented her with the sixteen cases, all complete, on the night of her remarriage. For this alone it was impossible for Fortune's heart not to be softened. And now, rich and honoured as she was, she found Hsing-ko in trouble--how could she do other than go to his assistance? This is what is known as 'conscious of kindness, repaying it with kindness'.

I go on to tell how Hsing-ko carried out faithfully the magistrate's injunctions by sparing neither money nor effort in observing the rites. The Sung brothers were able to make no complaint. When the funeral ceremonies were over he was escorted back to

the yamen to make his report. The magistrate had him called into his private apartments and allowed him to be seated. Then he said to him, 'I should have come near to wronging you in this suit, brother-in-law, had it not been for the reiterated pleas of your esteemed sister.'

Hsing-ko did not understand, and could make no reply. After a while, when they had taken tea, the magistrate invited him into the library in the inner apartments, and there he summoned his wife to meet the guest. Would you not agree that such an unexpected meeting was exactly like a dream? The two neither saluted nor spoke, but flew straight into a tight embrace. They wept aloud, and no more distressing sound was ever heard in the wailing for father or mother. The magistrate looking on was deeply moved, and said, 'Please do not distress yourselves so. You do not seem to me like brother and sister. Tell me the true facts at once-there may be some way I can help.'

The two dried their tears a while, but neither cared to speak. At last Fortune gave in to the magistrate's questioning, and knelt and said, 'Your wife deserves a thousand deaths for her sins. This is my former husband.'

Chiang Hsing-ko saw he could not hide the truth, and knelt in his turn. Item by item he told the magistrate of the former love between his wife and himself, of their divorce and of his remarriage. When he had finished, they clung to each other again in tears, and the magistrate Wu as well felt his tears flow unceasingly. 'How can I tear you apart,' he said, 'when you love each other so deeply? As it has happened we have been here three years and there has not yet been a child.'-And he ordered Hsing-ko to take Fortune at once in reunion.

The two of them bowed before him in gratitude as though he were a god. The magistrate hastened to order a sedan-chair and took his farewell of Fortune as she left his yamen. Next he collected some men to carry out the sixteen cases which had accompanied his bride, and which he now ordered Chiang Hsing-ko to accept. Finally, he sent one of his assistants to escort the pair to the limit of his district. Such was the goodness of the magistrate Wu. Truly,

This pearl regained at Ho-p'u gleams with added lustre,
A brighter light than that which led to the jewelled swords at Feng.12

Our admiration is called for the magistrate's generous conduct,
How different from those others, who lusted or coveted riches!

This man, for so long without a son, at length came to be President of the Board of Civil Office. In Peking he took a concubine who bore him three sons, each of whom successfully climbed the ladder of the examinations. All agreed that this was Wu's recompense for hidden acts of merit.

But this belongs to a later date. I go on to tell now how Chiang Hsing-ko led Fortune back to their home, where she met Madam P'ing. As the partner of Hsing-ko's first marriage it was Madam Wang who took precedence; on the other hand, she had been divorced, and he had married Madam P'ing in the prescribed manner with a proper go-between. Furthermore, Madam P'ing was the elder by one year ; and so, Madam P'ing took the position of first wife, and Madam Wang became his second wife. The two called each other 'sister', and from that time onwards Chiang Hsing-ko lived in the greatest happiness with his two wives. There is a verse in evidence :

Two wives to comfort him, all joined in mutual love,
Now one, discredited, has returned to share with another.
Good and ill and retribution, scrupulously apportioned:
Providence is near at hand, and need not be sought afar.