

【倾城之恋】

LOVE IN A FALLEN CITY

Translated by Karen S. Kingsbury

SHANGHAI'S clocks were set an hour ahead so the city could "save daylight," but the Bai family said: "We go by the old clock." Ten o'clock to them was eleven to everyone else. Their singing was behind the beat; they couldn't keep up with the huqin of life.

When the huqin wails on a night of ten thousand lamps, the bow slides back and forth, drawing forth a tale too desolate for words—oh! why go into it? The tale of the huqin should be performed by a radiant entertainer, two long streaks of rouge pointing to her exquisite nose as she sings, as she smiles, cover-ing her mouth with her sleeve .. but here it was just Fourth Master Bai sunk in darkness, sitting alone on a ramshackle balcony and playing the huqin.

As he was playing, the doorbell rang downstairs. For the Bai household, this was most unusual; people didn't pay social calls after dark, not in the old etiquette. If a visitor came at night or a telegram arrived without warning, either it meant that some event of huge import had transpired or, most probably, some-one had died.

Fourth Master sat still and listened, but since Third Master, Third Mistress, and Fourth Mistress were shouting all at once as they came up the stairs, he couldn't understand what they were saying. Sitting in the room behind the balcony were Sixth Young Lady, Seventh Young Lady, and Eighth Young Lady, along with the Third and Fourth Masters' children, all growing increas-ingly anxious. From where Fourth Master sat on the darkened alcony, he could see everything in the well-lit 10om. So when the door opened, there was Third Master in his undershirt and shorts, standing on the raised doorsill with his legs stuck out wide, reaching behind his thighs to slap at the mosquitoes, and calling out to Fourth Master: "Hey, Old. Four, guess what? That fellow that Sixth Sister left, well, it seems he's caught pneumo-nia and died!"

Fourth Master put down the huqin and walked into the room. "Who brought the news?" he asked.

"Mrs. Xu," said. Third Master. Then he turned to shoo away his wife with his fan. "Don't tag along like this just to gawk at things! Isn't Mrs. Xu still downstairs? She's a big lady, doesn't like climbing stairs-why aren't you looking after her?"

Third Mistress left and Fourth Master mulled things over. "Isn't Mrs. Xu a relative of the deceased?"

"Indeed," said Third. Master. "It looks like their family has specially asked her to b
the news, and that means some-thing, of course."

"They don't want Sixth Sister to return and go into mourning, do they?"

Third Master scratched his scalp with the handle of the fan. "Well, according to the rules, it would only be right .. "

They both looked over at their Sixth Sister. Bai Liusu sat in the corner of the room calmly embroidering a slipper; her brothers, it seems, had been so intent on their conversation that they hadn't given her a chance to speak. Now she simply said, "Go and be his widow, after we've divorced? People will laugh till their teeth fall out!" She went on sewing her slipper, apparently unperturbed, but her palms were clammy and her needle stuck—she couldn't draw it through anymore.

"Sixth Sister, that's no way to talk," said Third Master. "He didn't do right by you back then, we all know that. But now he's dead—you're not going to hold a grudge, are you? Those two concubines that he left behind, they won't go into widowhood. If you go back now, all serious and proper, to lead the mourning for him, who's going to dare to laugh? It's true you didn't have any children, but he has lots of nephews, and you can pick one of them to continue the line. There isn't a lot of property left, but they're a big clan; even if they only make you the keeper of his shrine, they're not going to let a mother and child starve."

Bai Liusu laughed sarcastically. "Third Brother has certainly planned out everything," she said, "but unfortunately it's a bit late. The divorce went through some seven or eight years ago. Are you saying that those legal proceedings were empty non-sense? You can't fool around with the law!"

"Don't you try to scare us with the law," Third Master warned. "The law is one thing today and another tomorrow. What I'm talking about is the law of family relations, and that never changes! As long as you live you belong to his family, and after you die your ghost will belong to them too! The tree may be a thousand feet tall, but the leaves fall back to the roots."

Liusu stood up. "Why didn't you say all this back then?"

"I was afraid you'd be upset and think that we weren't willing to take you in."

"Oh? But now you're not afraid of upsetting me? Now that you've spent all my money, you're not afraid of upsetting me?"

"I spent your money?" Third Master demanded, pressing his face close to hers. "I spent your few paltry coins? You live in our house, and everything you eat and drink comes out of our pockets. Sure, in the past, it was no problem. One more person, two more chopsticks, that's all. But these days? Well, just go and find out for yourself—what does rice cost now? I didn't mention money, but you had to bring it up!"

Fourth Mistress, who was standing behind Third Master, laughed. "They say you shouldn't talk about money with your own flesh and blood. Once you start the mo-

talk, there's all too much to say! I've been telling Fourth Master, telling him for a long time now: 'Old Four, you'd better warn Third Master. When you two buy gold, or buy stocks, don't use Sixth Sister's money. It will bring you bad luck! As soon as she got married, her husband spent all his family's money. Then she came back here, and now her family, as everyone can see, is going bank-rupt. A real bad-luck comet, that one!'"

Third Master said, "Fourth Mistress is right. If we hadn't let her into those stock deals, we never would have lost all our property!"

Liusu shook with fury; her lower jaw quivered so hard that it seemed ready to drop off. She clamped the half-embroidered slipper to it.

Third Master continued: "I remember how you came home crying, making all that fuss about getting a divorce. Well, I'm a man with a heart, and when I saw that he'd beaten you up like that, I couldn't bear it, so I struck my chest and said, All right! I, the third son of the Bai family, may be poor, but my home shall not lack my sister's bowl of rice.' Still, my thinking was: 'Oh, you young married folk what hot tempers you've got! It's never so serious that, after a few years back with your parents, you won't up and change your mind one day, and be perfectly ready to go back.' If I'd known that you two really wanted to break it off, do you think. I would have helped you get a divorce? Breaking up other peoples' marriages means there won't be any sons or grandsons. I, the third son of the Bai family, am a man with sons, and I fully expect their support in my old age."

Liusu had now reached the height of fury, but she simply laughed. "Yes, yes, everything is my fault. You're poor? It's be-cause I've eaten you out of house and home. You've lost your capital? It must be that I've led you on. Your sons die? I've done it to you, I've ruined your fate."

At this, Fourth Mistress grabbed her son's collar and rammed his head into Liusu, shouting, "Cursing the children now! After what you've said, if my son dies, I'll come looking for you!"

Liusu quickly dodged out of the way, then clasped Fourth Master and said, "Fourth Brother, look, just look, and be fair about it!"

Fourth Master said, "Now don't get so excited. If you have something to say, then say it, and we'll take our time and con-sider the whole situation carefully. Third Brother is only trying to help you .. " Liusu angrily let go of him and headed straight for the inner bedroom.

No lamps were lit in there. Peering through the red gauze bed curtains in the darkness, Liusu could dimly see her mother lying on the big redwood bed, slowly waving a round white fan. Liusu walked over to the bed, then slipped down to her knees and fell fo against it. "Mother!" she sobbed.

Old Mrs. Bai's hearing was still good, so she hadn't missed anything that had been said in the outer room. She coughed, felt around next to her pillow for a small spittoon, spat into it, and only then began to speak. "Your Fourth Sister-in-law has a sharp tongue, but that doesn't mean you should follow suit. We all have our own problems, you know. Your Fourth Sister-in-law is naturally strong willed-she's always managed the household. But your Fourth Brother is not ambitious, and he threw himself into gambling and visits to prostitutes. It's bad enough that he made himself ill, but then he took money from the household accounts: your Fourth Sister-in-law lost face because of that, and now she has to let Third Sister-in-law manage things. She's boiling over with frustration, and that's a hard way to live. Your Third Sister-in-law doesn't have a lot of energy, and running this household is no easy matter! You should bear all this in mind. Try to make allowances."

When Liusu heard her mother's tone and the way she played things down, she felt that her point had been completely over-looked; she couldn't find any reply to make.

Old Mrs. Bai rolled over and faced the wall. "Lately we've had to hunt everywhere to scrape up any money at all. Time was, we could sell some land and live off the proceeds a few years. But that's no longer possible. I'm old, and when it's time for me to go, I'll go, and I won't be able to look after any of you. Every party ends sometime. Staying on with me is not a feasible long-term plan. Going back is the decent thing to do. Take a child to live with you, get through the next fifteen years or so, and you'll prevail in the end."

As she was speaking, the doorway curtain moved. "Who's there?" Old Mrs. Bai said.

Poking her head through the curtain, Fourth Mistress came in. "Mother," she said, "Mrs. Xu is still downstairs waiting to talk with you about Seventh Sister's marriage."

"I'm just getting up," Old Mrs. Bai said. "Let's have some light."

When the lamp had been lit, Fourth Mistress helped the old lady to sit up, then waited on her as she got dressed and out of bed.

"Has Mrs. Xu found a suitable match?" the old lady asked. An excellent one, from what she says, though he is a bit older."

Old Mrs. Bai coughed. "This child Baolu is twenty-four now, and she's a knot in my heart. All this worry for her sake, and yet people say I'm neglecting her because she's not my own daughter!"

Fourth Mistress helped the old lady toward the outer room. "Take out my new tea leaves from over there and brew a bowl for Mrs. Xu," said the old lady. "The Dragon Well tea that Great Aunt brought back last year is in the green tin can-ister, the Green Spring is in the tall canister. Be sure to get it right."

Fourth Mistress nodded, then called out: "We're coming! Turn up the lamps!" Foot pounded as a small throng of sturdy young servants hurried over to help an older man carry the old lady down the stairs.

Fourth Mistress was alone in the outer room, rifling through cabinets and trunks in search of the old lady's private stock of tea leaves. Suddenly she cried out, "Seventh Sister! What hole did you climb out of? Scared me half to death! Where did you disappear to just now?"

"I was sitting in the cool air out on the balcony," Baolu murmured.

"Bashful, eh?" Fourth Mistress snickered. "I say, Seventh Sister, when you go to live with your in-laws, try to be a little careful. Don't feel you can make trouble whenever you like. Is divorce an easy thing? Can you just leave when you like, let everything fall apart? If it really was that easy, why haven't I divorced your Fourth Brother, since he's never amounted to much! I too have my own family, it's not as if I don't have a place to run to. But in times like these I have to think of their needs too. I've got a conscience, and I have to think of them—can't weigh them down and drive them into poverty. I still have some sense of shame!"

Bai Liusu was kneeling forlornly by her mother's bed. When she heard these words, she crushed the embroidered slipper against her chest. The needle that was stuck in the slipper pierced her hand, but she didn't feel any pain. "I can't live in this house any longer," she whispered. "I just can't!" Her voice was faint and floating, like a trailing tendril of dust. She felt as if she were dreaming, tendrils streaming from her face and head. Falling forward in a daze, she thought she was clasping her mother's knees, and she started sobbing aloud. "Mother, Mother, please help me!" Her mother's face remained blank as she smiled on without saying a word. Wrapping her arms around her mother's legs, Liusu shook her violently and cried, "Mother! Mother!"

In her daze, it was many years before: she was about ten years old, coming out of a theater, and in the middle of a tor-rential downpour she was separated from her family. She stood alone on the sidewalk staring at people, the people staring back at her, and beyond the dripping bus windows, on the other side of those blank glass shields, were strangers, an endless number of them, all locked inside their own little worlds, against which she could slam her head till it split and still she'd never man-age to break through. It seemed that she was trapped in a nightmare.

Suddenly she heard the sound of footsteps behind her, and guessed that her mother had returned. With a fierce effort she steadied herself, not saying anything. The mother she was pray-ing to and the mother she really had were two different people.

Someone walked over to the bed and sat down, but when she spoke, it was in Mrs. Xu's voice. Mrs. Xu chided her, "Sixth Young Lady, don't be upset. Get up, get up, the weather is so hot . . ."

Bracing herself against the bed, Liusu struggled to her feet. "Auntie," she said, "I can't stay here in this house any longer. I've known for ages how much they resent me, even bite their tongues. But now that they've beat the drums, banged the gongs, and said straight out, I've lost too much face to go on living here!"

Mrs. Xu made Liusu sit down with her on the edge of the bed. "You're too good, no wonder people bully you," she said tenderly. "Your older brothers played the market with your money until they'd spent it all! Even if they supported you for the rest of your life, it would only be right."

Liusu rarely heard such a decent remark. Without pausing to weigh its sincerity, she let her heart well up and her tears rain down. "Why was I such a fool? All because of that fuss over money, little bits of money, now I have no way out of here!"

Mrs. Xu said, "Someone so young can always find a way to make a life."

"If there were a way, I'd be long gone! I haven't studied much, and I can't do manual labor, so what kind of job can I do?"

"Looking for a job won't get you anywhere. But looking for a somebody, that's the way to go."

"No, I don't think so. My life is over already."

"That kind of talk is for the rich, for people who don't have to worry about food and clothing. People who don't have money can't just give up, even if they want to. Shave your head, become a nun, and when you beg for alms you'll still have to deal with people—you can't just leave the human race!"

Liusu bowed her head.

Mrs. Xu said, "If you'd come to me about this a few years ago it would have been better."

"Yes, that's right," said Liusu. "I'm already twenty-eight."

"For a person with your qualities, twenty-eight doesn't matter. I'll keep you in mind. But I really should scold you—you've been divorced for seven or eight years now. If only you'd made up your mind earlier, you could have set yourself free and saved yourself a lot of grief!"

"Auntie, of course you know the situation. Would a family like mine ever let us go out and meet people? And I can't depend on them to find me a match. First of all, they don't approve, and even if they did, I have two younger sisters who are still unmarried, and then there are Third and Fourth Brothers' daughters, all growing up fast. They can't even manage for the younger ones. Why would they do anything for me?"

"Speaking of your sister," Mrs. Xu said, "I'm still waiting for their reply."

"Do things look good for Seventh Sister?" asked Liusu.

"I think we're getting close," said Mrs. Xu. "I wanted to let the ladies talk it over among themselves, so I said I'd come up here to look in on you. I'd better be getting back now. Would you go down with me?"

Liusu had to help Mrs. Xu down the stairs. The stairs were old and Mrs. Xu was large: they creaked and squeaked down the stairs together. They entered the drawing room, and Liusu wanted to light the lamps, but Mrs. Xu said, "Don't bother, we can see well enough. The others are in the east wing. You come with me, and we'll all have a nice chat, and that way everything will be smoothed over. Otherwise, tomorrow when it's time to eat, and you can't avoid seeing them, it will be awkward and unpleasant."

Liusu couldn't bear hearing that phrase "time to eat." Her heart ached and her throat went dry. Forcing a smile, she de-murred. "Thank you very much, Auntie, but I'm not feeling very well right now-I really can't see anyone. I'm afraid I'd be so nervous that I'd say something disastrous, and that would be a terrible way to repay all your kindness."

Seeing that Liusu refused to budge, Mrs. Xu decided to leave things where they stood. She went in by herself.

As soon as the door closed behind her, the drawing room fell into shadow. Two squares of yellow light streamed in through the glass panes in the upper part of the door, landing on the green tile floor. In spite of the gloom, one could see, on the bookshelves that lined the walls, long rows of slipcases made of purplish sandalwood into which formal-script characters had been carved, then painted green. On a plain wooden table in the middle of the room, there was a cloisonné chiming clock with a glass dome over it. The clock was broken; it hadn't worked in years. There were two hanging scrolls with paired verses; the crimson paper of the scrolls was embossed with gold "longevity" characters, over which the verses had been in-scribed in big, black strokes. In the dim light, each word seemed to float in emptiness, far from the paper's surface. Liusu felt like one of those words, drifting and unconnected. The Bai household was a fairyland where a single day, creeping slowly by, was a thousand years in the outside world. But if you spent a thousand years here, all the days would be the same, each one as flat and dull as the last one.

She crossed her arms and clasped her neck with her hands. Seven, eight years-they'd gone by in the blink of an eye. Are you still young? Don't worry, in another few years you'll be old, and anyway youth isn't worth much here. They've got youth everywhere-children born one after another, with their bright new eyes, their tender new mouths, their quick new wits. Time grinds on, year after year, and the eyes grow dull, the minds grow dull, and then another round of children is born. The older ones are sucked into that obscure haze of crimson and gold, and the tiny flecks of glinting gold are the frightened eyes of their predecessors.

Liusu cried out, covered her eyes, and fled; her feet beat a rapid retreat up the stairs to her own room. She turned on the lamp, moved it to her dressing table, and studied her reflection in the mirror. Good enough: she wasn't too old yet. She had the kind of slender figure that doesn't show age-her waist eternally thin, her breasts girlishly budding, her face had always been as white as porcelain, but now it had changed from porcelain to jade-semitranslucent jade with a tinge of pale green. Once, her cheeks had been plump

now they were drawn, so that her small face seemed smaller yet, and even more attractive. Her face was fairly narrow, but her eyes were set well apart. They were clear, lively, and slightly coquettish.

Out on the balcony, Fourth Master had once again taken up his huqin. The tune rose and fell, and Liusu's head tilted to one side as her eyes and hands started moving through dance poses. As she performed in the mirror, the huqin no longer sounded like a huqin, but like strings and flutes playing a solemn court dance. She took a few paces to the right, then a few to the left. Her steps seemed to trace the lost rhythms of an ancient melody.

Suddenly, she smiled—a private, malevolent smile; the music came to a discordant halt. The huqin went on playing outside, but it was telling tales of fealty and filial piety, chastity and righteousness: distant tales that had nothing to do with her.

Fourth Master had retreated to the balcony because he knew he lacked standing in the family council downstairs. Once Mrs. Xu had left, the Bai family had to thoroughly assess every aspect of her proposal. Mrs. Xu planned to help Baolu make a match with a Mr. Fan, who had recently been working quite closely with Mr. Xu in the mining business. Mrs. Xu had always kept track of his family and their situation, and she believed him to be entirely reliable. Mr. Fan's father was a well-known overseas Chinese with properties scattered throughout Ceylon, Malaya, and other such places. Fan Liuyuan was now thirty-two years old, and both of his parents had passed away.

Everyone in the Bai family kept asking Mrs. Xu how such a perfect son-in-law could still be single, and she told them that when Fan Liuyuan returned from England, a whole passel of mothers had forcefully, insistently, pushed their daughters at him. They had schemed and squabbled, pulling every trick in the book and making a huge fuss over him. This had completely spoiled Mr. Fan; from then on he took women to be so much mud under his feet. He'd always been a bit odd anyway, due to his unusual childhood—his parents weren't officially married. His father met his mother in London, when he was touring Europe. She was an overseas Chinese, a girl often seen at parties, and the marriage had been kept secret. Then Fan's first wife got wind of it. Fearing that the first wife would take revenge, the couple never dared to go back to China, and Fan Liuyuan grew up in England. After his father's death, Liuyuan sought legal recognition of his rights; even though the first wife had only daughters, two of them, there was still quite a bit of nastiness. He was all alone in England, and went through some hard times, but at last he got the right to inherit his father's estate. The Fan family was still very hostile toward him, so he lived in Shanghai most of the time, returning to the family home in Guangzhou only when absolutely necessary. The unstable emotional environment of his early years had left its mark on him, and gradually he became a playboy—he gambled, he gourmandized, he visited prostitutes. The only pleasure he denied himself was married bliss.

"A man like this is probably very picky," said Fourth Mistress. "I'm afraid he might down on Seventh Sister because she's the daughter of a concubine. It would be a sl

lose so good a connection!"

"But he too is the child of a secondary wife," said Third Master.

"He's a very clever man, though," said Fourth Mistress. "Can our Number Seven, who is such a dolt, ever hope to catch him? My eldest daughter, on the other hand, is very quick. Don't be fooled by looks she is still young but she is smart! She knows how to behave."

"But there's such a difference in their ages," said Third Mistress.

Fourth Mistress snorted. "You don't know! This kind of man likes them young. If my eldest won't do, there's always her younger sister."

Third Mistress laughed. "Your second daughter is twenty years younger than Mr. Fan!"

Fourth Mistress quietly tugged at her sister-in-law's arm, a serious look on her face. "Third Sister, don't be so foolish! You're protecting Number Seven, but what is she to the Bai family? Having another mother really makes a big difference. No one here should hope for any benefit after she gets married! What I'm saying is for the good of the family."

But Old Mrs. Bai's chief concern was her fear that relatives would say she'd wronged a motherless girl. She decided to pursue the plan that had been first proposed. Mrs. Xu would set up a meeting, and Baolu would be introduced to Fan Liuyuan.

Mrs. Xu, in a two-pronged attack, also scouted for Liusu. She found a Mr. Jiang, who worked in the customs office. His wife had recently died, leaving five children behind, and now he was very anxious to remarry. Mrs. Xu thought it best to take care of Baolu first, and then make a match for Liusu, because Fan Liuyuan would soon be leaving for Singapore. The Bai household looked at Liusu's remarriage as some kind of joke, but since they wanted to get her out of the house they ignored the whole business, letting Mrs. Xu manage it. For Baolu, however, they fell all over themselves, bustling about with great fanfare, turning the house upside down. Two daughters in the same house, but one got lots of attention and the other got cold silence. The contrast was painfully obvious.

Old Mrs. Bai was not satisfied until she had dressed Baolu in every last stitch of the family's best finery. Third Mistress's daughter had received a length of silk as a birthday present from her godmother. Old Mrs. Bai forced Third Mistress to hand it over, and then she had it made into a cheongsam for Baolu. The old lady's private cache of fine goods consisted mostly of furs, and since furs couldn't be worn in the summertime, she had to pawn a sable jacket, then use the money to have several old pieces of jewelry reset. Of course Baolu was also given pearl earrings, jade bracelets, and emerald rings to wear. Everyone wanted to make sure she was fully adorned, a glittering beauty.

On the appointed day, Old Mrs. Bai, Third Master, Third Mistress, Fourth Master, a Fourth Mistress all wanted to go along. Baolu had learned, in a roundabout way, of Fourth

Mistress's plot against her. She fumed in secret, determined not to let Fourth Mistress's daughters anywhere near her when she made her entrance. But since she couldn't very well say that she didn't want the girls there, she insisted instead that Liusu go with her. After seven people had been crammed into the taxi-cab, there really wasn't room for any more, so the two girls, Jinzhi and Jinzhan, forlornly stayed behind. They left at five o'clock in the afternoon, and didn't return until eleven that evening. How could Jinzhi and Jinzhan relax and go to sleep? They were wide-eyed with anticipation when everyone came home, but no one had anything to say. Baolu walked into Old Mrs. Bai's room with a long face, stripped off all her jewels and ornaments, gave them back to the old lady and, without a word, went to her room. Jinzhi and Jinzhan dragged their mother out to the balcony and begged her to tell them what had happened.

"I've never seen anything like you girls," Fourth Mistress snapped. "You're not the ones whose match is being made-and here you are all hot and bothered!"

Third Mistress followed them onto the balcony. "Don't say things she might take the wrong way," she said softly.

Fourth Mistress turned to face Liusu's room and shouted, "I may be pointing at the mulberry but I'm cursing the locust tree. And why shouldn't I curse her? It's not as if she hadn't seen a man for a thousand years! So why does she act crazy, all worked up and woozy the minute she catches a whiff of one?"

Jinzhi and Jinzhan were bewildered by their mother's out-burst. Third Sister managed to calm her down, then told the girls, "First we went to see a movie."

"See a movie?" Jinzhi was quite surprised.

"Yes—quite quite strange, isn't it?" Third Mistress said. "The whole point of the meeting was for them to see each other, but there in the dark you can't see anything. Later, Mrs. Xu said this was all Mr. Fan's idea—that it was a ploy of his. He wanted her to sit around for a couple hours, till the sweat made her makeup run and he could get a better look. That's what Mrs. Xu thinks. I think Mr. Fan never was sincere about this. He wanted to see a movie because he didn't want to talk with us. Didn't he try to slip away as soon as the movie ended?"

Fourth Mistress couldn't hold back. "What do you mean? Everything was going very well. If it hadn't been for that troublemaker we took with us, we'd be halfway there by now!"

"Then what? Then what?" Jinzhi and Jinzhan frantically implored their aunt.

"Well, then Mrs. Xu stopped Mr. Fan and said we should all go and get something to eat. Mr. Fan said it would be his treat."

Fourth Mistress clapped her hands together. "If we were going to get a bite to eat, that's what we should have done. It's obvious that Seventh Sister doesn't know how to dance, so why'd we go to a dance hall and then just sit around? You won't hear me

it, but, really, this was Third Master's fault. He goes out. He knows the town. He should have said something when Mr. Fan told the cabdriver to go to a dance hall."

"So many restaurants in Shanghai," Third Mistress rose in defense. "How could he know which ones have dancing, and which ones don't? He hasn't got the leisure to go around find-ing out things like that—the way Fourth Master does!"

Jinzhi and Jinzhan still wanted to hear the rest of the story, but Third Mistress had been challenged by Fourth Mistress so many times that now she lost interest. "So we went to get a bite to eat, and then we came home."

"What kind of person is this Mr. Fan?" Jinzhan asked. "How should I know?" said Third Mistress. "I don't think we got three whole sentences out of him." She thought for a moment. "He dances pretty well, though."

Jinzhi let out a small gasp. "Who did he dance with?"

Fourth Mistress cut in. "Who else? Your Sixth Aunt of course! People who are properly brought up, people like us, aren't taught to dance. But your Sixth Aunt learned it all from that no-good husband of hers. Utterly shameless! Someone asks you to dance, can't you say you don't know how, and let it go at that? There's no shame in not knowing how to dance. Look at your Third Aunt—look at me—we're all from good families, we've been around long enough to see something of the world. We don't dance!"

Third Mistress sighed. "One dance, well, you could say it was just to be polite. But two, three dances!"

Jinzhi and Jinzhan were flabbergasted.

Fourth Mistress turned again toward a certain doorway and vented her ire. "You've got a heart smeared with pig fat! If you think that by ruining your sister's chances you are going to get lucky, you'd better forget it! He's turned down so many ladies, do you think he'd want a soiled flower like you?"

Liusu and Baolu shared a room, and Baolu had already gone to bed. Liusu crouched down in the dark and lit a stick of mosquito-repellant incense. She'd heard everything that had been said out on the balcony, but this time she was perfectly calm. She struck the match and watched it burn, the little three-cornered pennant of flaming red flickering in its own draft, coming closer and closer toward her fingers. With a puff of her lips, she blew it out, leaving only the glowing red flag-pole. The pole twisted and shrank into a curly gray fiendish shape. She tossed the dead match into the incense pan.

She hadn't planned the evening's events, but in any case she'd shown them a thing or two. So they thought she was finished, that her life was already over? The game was just begin-ning! She smiled. Baolu must be cursing her silently, far more fiercely even than Fourth Mistress. But she knew that as much as Baolu hated her, the younger woman's heart was also full of respect and admiration. No matter how amazing a woman is,

won't be respected by her own sex unless she's loved by a member of the opposite one. Women are petty this way.

Was it really true that Fan Liuyuan liked her? Not certain in the least. All those things he'd said—she didn't believe a word of it. She could tell that he was used to lying to women, she'd have to be very careful. Family, family everywhere, and no one to turn to—she was on her own. Her moon-white silk gauze cheongsam hung from the bed frame. Twisting around, she sat on the floor and hid her face in the long skirt. Puff after steady puff, the green smoke of the mosquito-repellent incense floated up, seeping into her brain. Her eyes gleamed with tears.

A few days later, Mrs. Xu returned to the Bai residence. Fourth Mistress had already predicted: "After the scene Sixth Sister made, Seventh Sister's chances are ruined. How could Mrs. Xu fail to be angry? And if Mrs. Xu was angry with Sixth Sister, would she still be willing to help her by making useful introductions? This was a case of 'trying to steal a chicken with a handful of grain, and losing both bird and bait.'"

And it was true: Mrs. Xu was not as enthusiastic as she had been. She started out by beating around the bush, explaining why she hadn't come by in a while. Her husband had some business to take care of in Hong Kong, and, if all went well, they would be going there, renting a house, and staying for about a year. That was why she'd been so busy the last few days, packing up and getting ready to go. As for the Baolu project, Mr. Fan had already left Shanghai, so they'd have to let it rest for the time being. And Mrs. Xu had just found out that Mr. Jiang, Liusu's potential match, had another woman in his life. Trying to drive a wedge between them would be no easy matter. Anyway, this kind of person really wasn't reliable; it might be better to give it up. When Third and Fourth Mistress heard this, they exchanged glances and smirked.

Mrs. Xu furrowed her brow and continued: "My husband has a lot of friends in Hong Kong, but the problem is that 'distant water can't put out a nearby fire' . . . If Sixth Young Lady could go to Hong Kong for a bit, probably she'd find a lot of opportunities. Over the past few years, so many Shanghainese men have gone to Hong Kong that the place is teeming with talented types. Naturally, Shanghai men prefer to be with other Shanghainese, and people are saying that young ladies from back home are very popular. If Sixth Young Lady went, there's no doubt she'd find a good match. She could grab a handful and take her pick."

Everyone felt that Mrs. Xu really had a way with words. A few days ago her grand plans had come to naught, leaving her high and dry, and yet here she was putting up a good front, etc. Old Mrs. Bai sighed. "Going to Hong Kong," she said. "Easier said than done! After all—"

To everyone's surprise, Mrs. Xu cheerfully interrupted. "If Sixth Young Lady wants she can go as my guest. I agreed to help her, so I should see it through."

At this, they all turned to one another, blinking with amazement. Even Liusu was taken aback. Mrs. Xu's volunteering to make a match for her—that had been impulsive and good-hearted, born of a real sympathy for her situation. Running around fixing things up, arranging a dinner party, inviting that Mr. Jiang—such generosity was not unheard of. But paying Liusu's fare and expenses and taking her to Hong Kong—Mrs. Xu would be shelling out a lot of money, and for what? There may be lots of virtuous people in this world, but they aren't so stupid as to throw good money away for virtue's sake. Mrs. Xu must have a backer. Could it be a plot hatched by that Fan Liuyuan? Mrs. Xu had said that her husband had close business ties with Fan Liuyuan, and she and her husband were probably eager to help him out. Sacrificing some poor and lonely little relative to score points with him—that was a distinct possibility.

While Liusu's mind was racing, Old Mrs. Bai said, "Oh, this won't do. We can't let you—"

Mrs. Xu laughed this off. "It's no problem. A little thing like this—of course I can manage it! Anyway, I want Sixth Young Lady to help me. I've got two children, and high blood pressure, and I shouldn't let myself get too tired. If she travels with us, there will be someone to take care of things. I won't pamper her, I'll want her to help out quite a lot!"

Old Mrs. Bai came up with a stream of polite replies on Liusu's behalf. Mrs. Xu turned, and opened a direct attack. "Well, Sixth Young Lady, you really should agree to go with us. Just think of it as sightseeing, and it will be worth it!"

Liusu bowed her head, and said with a smile, "You're really too good to me."

She made a rapid calculation. There was no hope of getting that Mr. Jiang, and even if someone made another match for her, it wouldn't be much different from Jiang, maybe not even that good. Liusu's father had been a famous gambler. He'd gambled away the family's fortune and started its descent into the ranks of poor, declining households. Liusu had never touched cards or dice, but she too liked to gamble. She decided to wager her future. If she lost, her reputation would be ruined, and even the role of stepmother to five children would be far above her. If she won, she'd get the prize the whole crowd was eyeing like so many greedy tigers—Fan Liuyuan—and all her stifled rancor would be swept clean away.

She agreed to Mrs. Xu's plan, which called for leaving within the week. Liusu rushed to get ready. Even though she didn't have much, and there really wasn't anything to pack, she was intensely busy for several days. She raised some cash by selling a few trinkets, then had some outfits made. Mrs. Xu, though she too was very busy, found time to give Liusu the benefit of her advice. When the Bai family saw Mrs. Xu being so kind to Liusu, they became freshly interested in her. They were still very distrustful, but now they were more cautious, holding long whispered consultations behind Liusu's back instead of spitefully scolding her to her face. Once in a while they even addressed her quite respectfully, thinking that if she really married a rich man in Hong Kong and returned home in glory, they'd better be on speaking terms with her. It wouldn't do to offend

The Xu family took Liusu with them, in a car, to the dock. They had a first-class cabin on a Dutch ship. But the ship was small and pitched violently, and as soon as they had boarded, Mr. and Mrs. Xu collapsed into their berths. What with the adults retching and the children crying, Liusu really did wait on them for several days.

Not until the ship had finally reached the shore did she have a chance to go up on deck and gaze out at the sea. It was a fiery afternoon, and the most striking part of the view was the parade of giant billboards along the dock, their reds, oranges, and pinks mirrored in the lush green water. Below the surface of the water, bars and blots of clashing color plunged in murderous confusion. Liusu found herself thinking that in a city of such hyperboles, even a sprained ankle would hurt more than it did in other places. Her heart began to pound.

Suddenly someone rushed up from behind, grabbing her legs and almost knocking her down. Liusu gasped, then realized that it was one of the Xu children. She quickly steadied herself, and went back to help Mrs. Xu. The dozen suitcases and two children refused to match up; no sooner were the bags in order than a child went missing again. Worn out by her labors, Liusu stopped gazing at the scenery.

After disembarking, they took two taxis to the Repulse Bay Hotel. They left the teeming city behind, the taxis rising and dipping across the hilly terrain. Soon cliffs of yellow-and-red soil flanked the road, while ravines opened up on either side to reveal dense green forest or aquamarine sea. As they approached Repulse Bay, the cliffs and trees grew gentler and more inviting. Returning picnickers swept past them in cars filled with flowers, the sound of scattered laughter fading in the wind.

When they arrived at the hotel entrance, they couldn't actually see the hotel. They got out of the car and climbed up a broad flight of stone steps. Not until they had reached the top, where an ornamental garden was laid out, could they see two yellow buildings farther up. Mr. Xu had already reserved their rooms, so the hotel staff led them along a small gravel path, through the amber dimness of the lobby and hallway, then up to the second floor. They turned a corner, and there, through a doorway, was a small balcony, with vines flowering on a trellis and sunlight slanting across one section of the wall.

Two people were standing on the balcony and talking. One was a woman. She stood with her back toward them, her long black hair hanging down to her ankles. She wore anklets of twisted gold over her bare feet; it wasn't clear whether she was wearing slippers or not, but above the anklets one could just make out the slim, Indian-style trousers. The man called out, "Ah, Mrs. Xu!" and then walked toward them; he greeted the couple and nodded, with a suppressed smile, at Liusu.

Liusu saw that it was Fan Liuyuan and her heart raced again, even though she'd already guessed that he'd be here. The woman who'd been standing on the balcony went off somewhere. Liuyuan accompanied them up the stairs. As they walked, everyone kept saying how surprised and happy they were, just as if they'd run into an old friend, unexpectedly, while traveling far from home.

Fan Liuyuan couldn't really be called handsome, but he was attractive in a rugged sort of way. Mr. and Mrs. Xu supervised the porters with their luggage, and Liuyuan and Liusu walked ahead. "Mr. Fan," inquired Liusu with a glint of a smile, "it seems you haven't gone to Singapore."

"No, I've been waiting here for you," Liuyuan said lightly.

It had never occurred to Liusu that he would be so direct. She didn't inquire further, afraid that if he went on to say that it was he, not Mrs. Xu, who had invited her to Hong Kong, she wouldn't know how to respond. She treated it as a joke, and replied with a smile.

Having learned that she was in room 130, Liuyuan stopped in front of a door and said, "Here it is." The porter unlocked the door. Liusu walked in and was immediately drawn to the window. The whole room seemed to be a dark picture frame around the big ocean painting there. Roaring breakers spilled onto the curtains, staining their edges blue.

"Put the trunk in front of the wardrobe," Liuyuan said to the porter.

His voice sounded next to Liusu's ear, startling her. She turned and saw that the porter had gone, though the door had not been closed. Liuyuan leaned against the window with one hand stretched along the frame, blocking her line of vision and smiling as he gazed at her. Liusu bowed her head.

Liuyuan laughed. "Did you realize? Your specialty is bowing the head."

Liusu raised her head. "What? I don't understand."

"Some people are good at talking, or at laughing, or at keep-ing house, but you're good at bowing your head."

"I'm no good at anything," said Liusu. "I'm utterly useless." "It's the useless women who are the most formidable." Liusu walked away laughing. "I'm not going to discuss this with you anymore. I'm going next door to have a look around." "Next door? My room or Mrs. Xu's room?"

Liusu was startled again. "You're staying in the next room?" Liuyuan had already swung the door open for her. "Sorry. . my room's a mess, no visitors allowed."

He knocked at room 131, and Mrs. Xu opened the door to let them in. "Come and some have tea with us. We have a sit-ting room." Then she rang the bell to call for refreshments.

Mr. Xu came out of the bedroom and said, "I telephoned my friend Mr. Zhu, and he insists on throwing a party tonight to welcome us. He's invited us to the Hong Kong Hotel turned to Liuyuan. "Of course you're included."

"My, you've got a lot of energy," said Mrs. Xu. "After all those days seasick on the b

shouldn't we go to bed early? Let's not go out tonight."

"The Hong Kong Hotel has the most old-fashioned ballroom I've ever seen," said Liuyuan. "Everything about the place—building, lights, decor, orchestra—is very English and, forty or fifty years ago, was very up-to-date. But nowadays it's not much of a draw. There's nothing to see there, except maybe the funny little waiters. Even on a very hot day, they wear those northern-style trousers, gathered tight at the ankles."

"Why?" asked Liusu.

"Chinese flavor!"

Mr. Xu laughed. "Well, since we're here we might as well go and have a look. Sorry, but you'll just have to keep us company!"

"I'm not sure I'm going, so don't wait for me."

Liuyuan seemed quite uninterested in going, while Mr. Xu, who was not in the habit of frequenting ballrooms, was unusually excited, as if he truly wanted to introduce her to his friends. Liusu felt quite unsure about what was going on.

But when they got to the Hong Kong Hotel that night, the group that had gathered to welcome them was largely composed of old married couples. The few single men were all youths in their early twenties. While Liusu was dancing, Fan Liuyuan suddenly appeared and cut in on her partner. In the lychee-red light of the ballroom, she couldn't see his dark-ened face clearly, but she could tell that he was unusually with-drawn.

"Why so quiet?" she teased.

"Everything that can be said to a person's face, I've already said."

Liusu chuckled. "And just what is it that you sneak around and say behind a person's back?"

"There are some kinds of foolishness that you don't want other people to hear, don't even want yourself to hear. Even hearing yourself say it makes you feel embarrassed. For instance, I love you, I will love you for the rest of my life."

Liusu turned away and chided him softly. "Such nonsense!"

"If I don't say anything, you complain because I'm too quiet, but if I talk, you complain that I talk too much."

"Tell me," said Liusu, "why is it that you don't want me out on the dance floor?"

"Most men like to lead a woman astray, then make appeals to the bad woman's bad conscience, and reform her till she's good. I don't go around making so much work myself. I think the important thing, for a good woman, is steady hon-esty."

Liusu gave him a sideways glance. "You think you're different from them? It seems to me you're just as selfish."

"Selfish? How?"

To herself, she thought: "Your idea of the perfect woman is someone who is pure and high-minded but still ready to flirt. The pure high-mindedness is for others, but the flirting is for you. If I were an entirely good woman, you would never have noticed me in the first place!"

She leaned her head to one side and said, "You want me to be good in front of others, but bad when I'm with you." Liuyuan thought for a moment. "I don't understand." Liusu explained again. "You want me to be bad to others, but good only to you."

"Now you've turned it around again! You're just making me more confused."

He was silent for a while, then said, "What you're saying isn't so."

Liusu laughed. "Ah, so now you understand."

"I don't care if you're good or bad. I don't want you to change. It's not easy to find a real Chinese girl like you."

Liusu sighed softly. "I'm old-fashioned, that's all."

"Real Chinese women are the world's most beautiful women. They're never out of fashion."

"But for a modern man like you--"

"You say 'modern,' but what you probably mean is Western. It's true I am not a real Chinese. It's just that in the past few years I've become a little more like a Chinese. But you know, a foreigner who's become Chinese also becomes reactionary, more reactionary even than an old-fashioned scholar from the dynastic era."

Liusu laughed. "You're old-fashioned, and I'm old-fashioned. And you've already said that the Hong Kong Hotel is the most old-fashioned ballroom ever..."

They both laughed, and just then the music ended. Liuyuan led her back to her seat. He told the others that Miss Bai had a headache, and that he would see her home.

This was entirely unexpected. Liusu had no time to think, though she knew that she didn't want to cross him. They didn't know each other well enough to argue openly. So she let him help her with her coat, made her apologies all around, and went out with him.

Directly in their path a group of Western gentlemen stood clustered around a woman's long black hair; it had been

up in two long braids and then coiled on top of her head. She was Indian, and even in Western apparel, her aura was intensely Oriental. She was wearing a dark, sheer cape over a long, close-fitting gown, goldfish-red, that covered even her hands, leaving only her pearly fingernails exposed. The plunging neckline of her dress formed a narrow "V" all the way to her waist; it was the latest fashion from Paris, called *ligne du ciel*. Her complexion was rich and tawny, like a gold-plated Buddha, but a devil lurked in her dark eyes. Her nose was classically straight, though a bit too sharp and thin. Her mouth was small, with lips so pink and full they looked swollen.

Liuyuan stopped and made a slight bow in her direction. Liusu looked at the woman, and the hauteur with which the woman returned her gaze put a thousand miles between them.

Liuyuan introduced them. "This is Miss Bai. This is Princess Saheiyini."

Liusu couldn't help but be impressed. Saheiyini reached out and touched Liusu's hand with her fingertips. "Is Miss Bai from Shanghai?" she asked Liuyuan, who nodded. "She doesn't seem like someone from Shanghai," she said, with a smile.

"Then what does she seem like?" Liuyuan asked.

Saheiyini placed a finger on one cheek and thought for a moment. Then she brought her hands together, fingers point-ing upward, as if she had something to say but words simply failed her. She laughed, shrugging her shoulders, and walked into the ballroom. Liuyuan headed toward the door again, tak-ing Liusu with him. Liusu couldn't understand much English, but she had followed their expressions. Now she said, with a smile, "I am a country bumpkin."

"As I said, you are a real Chinese. That of course is different from her notion of a Shanghainese."

They got in a taxi, and Liuyuan said, "Don't be bothered by the airs she puts on. She struts around saying that she's the daughter of Prince Krishna Karumpa, but that her mother lost the prince's favor and was told to commit suicide, and she too had to flee. Now she wanders in exile, unable to return. And in fact, it is true that she can't go back to her native land-but nothing else in her story has been proven."

"Has she been to Shanghai?"

"She's very well-known in Shanghai. She came to Hong Kong with an Englishman. Did you see that old man standing behind her? He's the one who's keeping her these days."

"You men are always like this. When you're talking to her, you can't think of enough polite things to say, but behind her back you say she's worthless. I can just imagine what you say to others about me, the daughter of a poor old Qing official, even lower rar than she is!"

Liuyuan laughed. "Who would dare speak of you two in the same breath?"

Pursing her lips, Liusu said, "Maybe that's because her name is too long. Can't get it all out in one breath."

"You needn't worry. I promise to treat you the way you should be treated."

Liusu smoothed her face and murmured a half-persuaded "Really?" to herself, as she leaned against the car window. His tone did not seem sarcastic, and she had noticed that when the two of them were alone together, he was a perfect gentleman. For reasons that she failed to fathom, he was a model of self-restraint when no one else was around to see, but when people were watching, he liked to take liberties. Was this just a peculiarity of his? Or was he up to something? She couldn't quite figure it out.

When they reached Repulse Bay, he helped her out of the taxi, then pointed to the dense copse alongside the road. "Do you see that tree? It's a southern variety. The English call it 'flame of the forest.'"

"Is it red?" asked Liusu.

"Red, red, red!"

In the darkness, Liusu couldn't see the red, but she knew instinctively that it was the reddest red, red beyond belief. Great masses of little red flowers, nestled in a huge tree that reached up to the sky, a riotous welter burning all the way up, staining the indigo sky with red. Leaning her head back, she gazed upward.

"The Cantonese call it the 'shadow tree,'" said Liuyuan. "Look at this leaf."

The leaf was as light as a fern; when a slight breeze made the delicate silhouette flutter, they seemed to hear a faint, almost melodic sound, like the tinkling of wind chimes in the eaves.

"Let's walk over there a bit," said Liuyuan.

Liusu didn't say anything. But as he walked, she slowly followed. After all, it was still early, and lots of people go out for walks on a road—it would be all right. A short distance past the Repulse Bay Hotel, an overhead bridge arched through the air. On the far side of the bridge there was a mountain slope; on the near side, a gray brick retaining wall. Liuyuan leaned against the wall, and Liusu leaned too, looking upward at its great height, the wall so high that the upper edge faded out of sight. The wall was cool and rough, the color of death. Pressed against that wall, her face bloomed with the opposite hues: red lips, shining eyes—a face of flesh and blood, alive with thought and feeling.

"I don't know why," said Liuyuan, looking at her, "but this wall makes me think of things about the end of the world. Someday, when human civilization has been

completely destroyed, when everything is burned, burst, utterly collapsed and ruined, maybe this wall will still be here. If, at that time, we can meet at this wall, then maybe, Liusu, you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you."

"So you admit you like to play games," Liusu sniffed coyly. "That doesn't mean you can drag me along too! When have you caught me lying?"

"Fair enough," Liuyuan said with a snicker. "There's no one more openhearted than you."

"That's enough . . . stop patronizing me."

Liuyuan was silent for a long time. Then he sighed. "Something you're unhappy about?" Liusu asked.

"Lots."

"If someone as free as you are thinks life is unfair, then someone like me ought to just go and hang herself."

"I know you're not happy," said Liuyuan. "You've certainly seen more than enough of all these awful people, and awful things that are everywhere around us. But if you were seeing them for the first time, it would be even harder to bear, even harder to get used to. That's what it's been like for me. When I arrived in China I was already twenty-four. I had such dreams of my homeland. You can imagine how disappointed I was. I couldn't bear the shock, and I started slipping downward. If . . . if you had known me before, then maybe you could for-give me for the way I am now."

Liusu tried to imagine what it would be like to see her Fourth Sister-in-law for the first time. Then she burst out: "That would still be better. When you see them for the first time, then no matter how awful, no matter how dirty they are, they—or it—is still outside of you. But if you live in it for a long time, how can you tell how much of it is them, and how much of it is you?"

Liuyuan fell silent. After a long pause he said, "Maybe you are right. Maybe what I'm saying is just an excuse, and I'm only fooling myself." Then he laughed suddenly.

"Actually, I don't need any excuses! I like to have a good time and I have plenty of money, plenty of time—do I need any other reason?"

He thought it over, and again grew frustrated. He said to her, "I don't understand myself—but I want you to understand me! I want you to understand me!" He spoke like this, and yet in his heart he'd already given up hope. Still, stubbornly, plaintively he went on: "I want you to understand me!"

Liusu was willing to try. She was willing to try anything, within limits. She leaned her head in his direction, and answered softly, "I do understand. I do." But while comforting him, she suddenly thought of her moonlit face. That delicate profile, the eyes, the beautiful beyond reason; misty, ethereal. Slowly she bowed her head.

Liuyuan began chuckling. "That's right, don't forget," he said, in a new tone of voice. "Your specialty is bowing the head. But there are those who say that only teenage girls can bow the head well. If you're good at it, then it becomes a habit. And when you've bowed the head for many years, you might end up with a wrinkled neck."

Liusu turned away, but not without raising her hand to her neck. "Don't worry," laughed Liuyuan, "of course you don't have any wrinkles. When you get back to your room, when no one else is around, you can unbutton your collar and check."

Liusu didn't reply. She just turned and started walking. Liuyuan caught up to her. "I'll tell you why you'll keep your good looks. Saheiyini once said she didn't dare get married because Indian women, once they start relaxing at home, sitting around all day, just get fat. I told her that Chinese women, when they sit around, aren't even good at fattening up - since even that takes some kind of effort. So it turns out that laziness has its advantages!"

Liusu utterly ignored him, and from then on he held him-self in check, making conversation and small jokes all the way back. She did not soften until they'd arrived at the hotel. Quietly they returned to their respective rooms.

Liusu assessed the situation. It turned out that what Liuyuan cared about was spiritual love. She approved entirely, because spiritual love always leads to marriage, while physical love tends to reach a certain level and then stop, leaving little hope of marriage. There was just one small problem with spiritual love: while courting, the man always says things that the woman doesn't understand. Not that it matters all that much. In the end the marriage goes through anyway, and then you buy a house, arrange the furniture, hire some servants-and in such matters the woman is much more expert than the man. Given all that, Liusu felt that the little misunderstanding of that evening was not anything to worry about.

The next morning there was not a peep from Mrs. Xu's room, which meant she must be sleeping in. Liusu remembered that Mrs. Xu had told her that in this hotel there was an extra charge for room delivery, not to mention the tip, so she decided to go to the dining room and save a bit of expense. She washed and dressed, and walked out the door. There was a porter waiting outside. Seeing her, he immediately knocked at Liuyuan's door. Liuyuan appeared at once. "Let's have breakfast together," he smiled.

"Mr. and Mrs. Xu haven't raised the bed curtain yet?" he asked, as they walked together.

"They must be tuckered out from their good time last night!" returned Liusu. "I didn't hear them come in. It must have been close to dawn."

They took a table on the veranda outside the dining room. Beyond the stone railing stood an enormous palm tree, its feathery fronds trembling slightly in the sun, like a fountain of light. Under the tree was a pool with its own fountain, much less magnificent.

"What are Mr. and Mrs. Xu going to do today?" asked Liuyuan.

"I think they're going to look at houses."

"Let them look at houses—we'll go have our own fun. Would you rather go to the beach or go have a look at the city?"

Liusu had, on the previous afternoon, surveyed the beach scene through binoculars. Strapping youths and lovely girls. Very exciting but a little too rowdy. Preferring to err on the side of caution, she suggested that they go into town. So they caught one of the buses provided by the hotel and went into the city center.

Liuyuan took her to the Great China to eat. Liusu heard the waiters speaking Shanghainese, filling the air with her native tongue. "Is this a Shanghai restaurant?" she asked with some surprise.

"Don't you feel homesick?" Liuyuan laughed.

"But .. coming to Hong Kong so that we can eat Shanghai cuisine seems a bit silly."

"I do a lot of silly things when I'm with you. For instance, take a tram around in circles, go to a movie I've seen two times already—"

"Because you've caught silliness from me, right?"

"Take it to mean whatever you please."

When they had finished eating, Liuyuan raised his glass and drained the remaining tea, then lifted the glass high and stared at it.

"If there's something worth seeing, let me look too," Liusu said.

"Hold it up to the light," said Liuyuan. "The scene inside reminds me of the forests of Malaya."

When the glass was tilted, a hatching of green tea leaves stuck to one side; held up to the light, they became a waving plantain tree, while the tangled swirl of tea leaves clumped at the bottom looked like knee-high grass and undergrowth. Liusu peered up at the glass, and Liuyuan leaned over, pointing all this out. Through the dusky green glass, Liusu suddenly saw him watching her with eyes that seemed to laugh, yet didn't. She put the glass down and smiled.

"I'll take you to Malaya," Liuyuan said.

"What for?"

"To go back to nature." He thought for a moment. "But there's just one problem—I can't imagine you running through the forest in a cheongsam. But neither can I imagine you not wearing a cheongsam."

Liusu's face stiffened. "Stop talking nonsense."

"But I'm serious. The first time I saw you, you were wearing one of those trendy tunics, and I thought you shouldn't bare your arms like that. But Western-style clothes aren't right for you either. A Manchu-style cheongsam might suit you better, if its lines weren't so severe."

"In the end, if a person is ugly, then no matter how she dresses it still won't look right!"

Liuyuan laughed. "You keep twisting my words! What I mean is that you're like someone from another world. You have all these little gestures, and a romantic aura, very much like a Peking opera singer."

Liusu raised her eyebrows. An opera singer—indeed!" she said sarcastically. "But of course it takes more than one to put on a show, and I've been forced into it. A person acts clever with me, and if I don't do the same, he takes me for a fool and insults me!"

When Liuyuan heard this, he was rather crestfallen. He raised the empty glass, tried to drink from it, then put it down again and sighed. "Right," he said. "My fault. I'm used to throwing out lines because everyone throws lines at me. But to you I have said a few sincere things, and you can't tell the difference."

"I'm not the worm in your innards—I can't read your mind."

"Right. My fault. But I really have thought up a great many schemes because of you. When I first met you in Shanghai, I thought that if you could get away from your family, maybe you could be more natural. So I waited and waited till you came to Hong Kong . . . and now, I want to take you to Malaya, to the forest with its primitive peoples . . ." He laughed at him-self, his voice hoarse and dry, and called for the check. By the time they had paid, he had already recovered his good spirits; he resumed his excessively courteous, unflappably chivalrous manner.

Every day he took her out, and they did everything there was to do . . . movies, Cantonese opera, casinos, the Gloucester Hotel, the Cecil Hotel, the Bluebird Coffee Bar, Indian fabric shops, Szechuan food in Kowloon . . . and they often went for walks, even very late at night. She could hardly believe it, but he rarely so much as touched her hand. She was continually on edge, fearing that he would suddenly drop the pretense and launch a surprise attack. But day after day he remained a gentleman; it was like facing a great enemy who stood perfectly still. At first this threw her entirely off balance, like missing a step when going down a flight of stairs; her heart pulsated, throbbing irregularly. After a while, though, she got used to it.

Then something happened out on the beach. By this time Liusu knew Liuyuan a little better; she didn't think a beach outing would be a problem. So they whiled away a whole morning there. They even sat together on the sand, though facing opposite directions. Suddenly Liusu squealed: mosquito bite, she said.

"It's not a mosquito," said Liuyuan. "It's a little insect called a sand fly. Its bite leaves a red mark, just like a mole on your skin."

"There's too much sun," Liusu complained again.

"Let's sit out a bit longer, and then we can go into one of those cabanas. I've already got one rented."

The thirsty sun sucked in the seawater, gargling and spitting in steady rhythm. It lapped up all the moisture in their bodies, so that they grew light and empty, like dry, golden leaves. Liusu started to feel that strange, light-headed happiness, but then she had to cry, "Ouch! Mosquito!" She twisted around and slapped her own bare back.

"That's the hard way," said Liuyuan. "Here, I'll slap for you, and you slap for me."

And Liusu did watch over his back, slapping at the sand flies whenever she saw one. "Aiiya, he got away!" And Liuyuan watched her back for her. They hit and slapped at each other, then broke into laughter. Suddenly Liusu took offense, stood up, and walked back toward the hotel. This time Liuyuan didn't follow her. When she had reached the trees and the stone path that ran between two rush-mat cabanas, Liusu stopped, shook the sand out of her little skirt, and looked back. Liuyuan was still there, stretched out with his arms folded under his head, a man daydreaming in the sun, turning into a golden leaf again. Liusu went into the hotel, got some binoculars, and looked from her window. Now a woman reclined next to him, a big braid coiled on top of her head. Saheiyini could be burned to ashes, and Liusu would still know her.

From that day on, Liuyuan spent all his time with Saheiyini; apparently he had decided to let Liusu cool her heels for a while. Liusu had been going out every day; now, with nothing to do and no good explanation to make to Mrs. Xu, she thought it best to come down with a cold and keep to her room for a few days. Fortunately, the gods were very considerate; they sent a nice, kind rain. That was one more excuse, leaving her free not to go out.

One afternoon, Liusu came back to the hotel with her um-brella, having gone for a walk in the hotel garden. It was get-ting dark, and she guessed that Mr. and Mrs. Xu would soon return from house hunting, so she sat on the veranda waiting for them. She opened her shiny oil-paper umbrella and set it out on the railing, blocking her face from view. The umbrella was pink and painted with malachite-green lotus leaves, and the raindrops slipped along its ribs. It was raining hard. Car tires scuffed by in the rain, and then a laughing group of men and women scrambled up to the hotel, led by Fan Liuyuan. Saheiyini was leaning on his arm, but she was a mess, her bare legs flecked with mud. She took off her big straw hat, splashing water on the ground. Catching sight of Liusu's umbrella, Liuyuan said a few words to Saheiyini at the foot of the stairs, and Saheiyini went on up by herself. Liuyuan came over, and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe t from his face and clothes. Liusu was forced to offer a brief greeting. Liuyuan sat do heard you haven't been feeling well."

"Just a summer cold."

"This weather is so muggy. We've just gone out on that Englishman's yacht to have a picnic, sailed out to Tsing Yi Island."

So Liusu asked him about the scenery on Tsing Yi Island. Just then, Saheiyini returned in an Indian outfit, with a gosling-yellow wrap that hung down to the ground and was embossed all over with two-inch-wide silver flowers. She too sat down by the railing, at a table far away, one arm draped casually over the back of her chair, silver polish glinting on her fingernails.

"Why don't you go over?" Liusu said to Liuyuan with a smile.

"There's someone with a controlling interest."

"How can that Englishman tell her what to do?"

"He can't control her, but you can control me."

Liusu puckered her lips. "Oooh! I could be the governor of Hong Kong or the local city god, with everyone here under me, and still you wouldn't be under my control!"

Liuyuan shook his head. "A woman who doesn't get jealous is not quite right in the head."

Liusu let out a laugh. There was a short silence. "Why are you watching me?" she asked.

"I'm trying to see if you'll be nice to me from now on." "Whether I'm nice to you or not, what difference could it make to you?"

Liuyuan clapped his hands together. "Ah! That's more like it! Now there's just a bit of venom in her voice!"

Liusu had to laugh. "I've never seen anyone like you, so intent on making people jealous!"

After that, they became friendly again and went to dinner together. On the surface Liusu seemed to have warmed to him again, but deep down she was depressed. Stirring up her jealousy was his way of taunting her so that she'd run into his arms of her own accord. But she'd kept him at a distance for so long now; if she softened toward him at this point, she'd be sacrificing herself for nothing. He wouldn't really feel obligated; he'd just think that she'd fallen for a trick. She was dreaming if she thought he'd marry her after that. . . Clearly, he wanted her, but he didn't want to marry her. Since her family, poor as they were, was a respectable family, and since he and they all moved in the same circle, he was worried about getting a reputation as a seducer. That was why he put on that open and aboveboard manner. Now she knew that his innocence was fake. He didn't want to be held responsible. If he abandoned her, no one would listen to her side of things.

When Liusu had thought all this through, she couldn't help grinding her teeth in ar

Outwardly, she went along with Liuyuan as usual. Mrs. Xu had already rented a house in Happy Valley and planned to move in soon. Liusu would have liked to go with them, but since she had troubled them for more than a month, the idea of being their long-term guest was quite embarrassing. Staying at the hotel was also out of the question. She suffered the agony of indecision, not knowing whether to advance or retreat.

Then one night, after tossing and turning in bed for hours before finally drifting off, the telephone suddenly rang. It was Liuyuan's voice. "I love you," he said. And hung up. Liusu held the receiver in her hand and stared into space, her heart pound-ing. Softly she put it back in the cradle. No sooner had she hung up than it rang again. Again she raised the receiver. Liuyuan said, "I forgot to ask-do you love me?"

Liusu coughed. When at last she spoke her throat was still dry and raspy. "You must have known long ago," she said in a low voice. "Why else did I come to Hong Kong?"

Liuyuan sighed. "I knew, but even with the truth staring me in the face, I still don't want to believe it. Liusu, you don't love me."

"Why do you say that?"

Liuyuan didn't say anything. Then, after a long while, he said "In The Book of Songs there's a verse—"

"I don't understand that sort of thing," Liusu cut in.

"I know you don't understand," Liuyuan said impatiently. "If you understood, I wouldn't need to explain! So listen:

"Facing life, death, distance Here is my promise to thee—I take thy hand in mine:

We will grow old together.

"My Chinese isn't very good, and I don't know if I've got it right, but I think this is a very mournful poem which says that life and death and parting are enormous things, well beyond human control. Compared to the great forces in the world, we people are so very, very small. But still we say 'I will stay with you forever, we will never, in this lifetime, leave each other'-as if we really could decide these things!"

Liusu was silent for a while, but finally she burst out: "Why not go ahead and just say, flat out, that you don't want to marry me, and leave it at that! Why beat around the bush, with all this talk of not being able to decide things? Even a conservative person like me can say 'First marriage for the family, second marriage for oneself.' If someone as free and unburdened as you are can't decide for himself, then who can decide for you?"

"You don't love me-is that something you can simply decide for yourself?" Liuyuan said coldly.

"If you really love me, why worry if I do?"

"I'm not such a fool that I'll pay to marry someone who has no feelings for me, just so that she can tell me what to do! That's simply too unfair. And it's unfair to you, too. Well, maybe you don't care. Basically, you think that marriage is long-term prostitution—"

Liusu didn't wait for him to finish. She slammed the receiver down, her whole face crimson with rage. How dare he talk to her like this? How dare he! She sat on the bed, the feverish darkness wrapped around her like a purple wool rug. Her body was covered with sweat and she itched all over; her hair, stuck to her neck and back, irritated her terribly. She pressed her hands against her cheeks: her palms were ice-cold.

The phone rang again. She didn't answer, just let it ring. "Brring... Brring . ." The sound was especially ear-piercing in that quiet 10om, in the quiet hotel, on quiet Repulse Bay. Liusu suddenly realized that she couldn't wake up the entire Repulse Bay Hotel. Starting, of course, with Mrs. Xu next door. . Trembling with fear, she picked up the receiver and laid it on the bedsheet. But the night was so still that even from a dis-tance she could hear Liuyuan's perfectly calm voice saying "Liusu, from your window, can you see the moon?"

She didn't know why, but suddenly she was sobbing. The moon shone bright and blurry through her tears, silver, with a slightly greenish tint. "In my window," said. Liuyuan, "there is a flowering vine that blocks half the view. Maybe it's a rose. Or maybe not." He didn't say anything more, but the phone stayed off the hook. After a very long while, Liusu began to wonder if he had dozed off, but finally there was a gentle little click. Her hand still shaking, Liusu took the receiver from where it lay on the bed and put it back in the cradle. She feared he would call a fourth time, but he didn't. It was all a dream—the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a dream.

The next day, she didn't dare ask him about it because he would be sure to tease her—"Dreams are just your heart's desire." Was she really so infatuated with him, that even in her sleep she dreamed of him calling her to say, "I love you"? There was no change in his attitude. They went out for the day, just as usual. Liusu suddenly noticed that there were lots of people who took them for husband and wife—the porters, the wives and old ladies that she chatted with in the hotel—and they could hardly be blamed for this. She and Liuyuan had rooms right next to each other, they came in and went out side by side, they took late-night walks on the beach, totally unconcerned about what other people might think. A nanny wheeled a baby carriage by, nodded to Liusu, and greeted her as "Mrs. Fan." Liusu froze, unable to either smile or not smile.

She could only look at Liuyuan from under her brows and say, in a low voice, "I wonder what they think!"

"Don't worry about those who call you 'Mrs. Fan.' But those who call you 'Miss Bai'—what must they think?"

The color drained from Liusu's face. Liuyuan stroked his chin and laughed. "Why c yourself with appearances only?"

Liusu stared at him in shock, suddenly seeing how wicked this man was. Whenever they were in public, he made sure to give the impression of affectionate intimacy, so that now she had no way to prove that they had not slept together. She was riding the tiger now, no way to go home, no way to rejoin her family; she had no option except to become his mistress. But if she relented at this point, all her efforts would have been wasted, with no hope of recovery. She wouldn't do it! Even if she was trapped by appearances, he'd taken advantage of her in name only. The real truth was that he had not gotten her. And since he hadn't, he might come back someday, ready to make peace on better terms.

She made up her mind, and told Liuyuan that she wanted to go back to Shanghai. Liuyuan didn't try to keep her; instead he volunteered to see her home. "Oh, that's not necessary," said Liusu. "Aren't you going to Singapore?"

"I've already put it off this long, delaying a little longer won't matter. I've got things to do in Shanghai too."

Liusu knew that he was still playing the same hand, afraid that others wouldn't talk about them enough. The more that people had to talk about, the less she'd be able to defend her-self, and Shanghai would become a very uncomfortable place for her. But Liusu reasoned that even if he didn't go back with her, she wouldn't be able to keep things from her family. Having braved damnation thus far, she might as well let him see her home.

When Mrs. Xu saw that the pair that had seemed to be getting along so well suddenly wanted to break things off, she was surprised, to say the least. She asked each of them, and they both made excuses for the other, but of course Mrs. Xu didn't believe a word they said.

On the ship, they had many chances to be together, but if Liuyuan could resist the moon in Repulse Bay, he could resist the moon on shipboard. He didn't say a single concrete thing to her. He seemed nonchalant, but Liusu could tell that it was the nonchalance of a man who is pleased with himself—he was sure she couldn't escape him now, sure that he had her in the palm of his hand.

When they got to Shanghai, he took her to her house in a taxi, without getting out himself. The Bai household had heard the news long before, and were entirely aware that Young Sixth Lady and Fan Liuyuan had cohabited in Hong Kong. Going off with a man for a whole month, then waltzing back as if nothing were the matter clearly she meant to disgrace the entire family.

Liusu had taken up with Fan Liuyuan—for his money, of course. If she'd landed the money, she wouldn't have crept back so very quietly; it was clear that she hadn't gotten anything from him. Basically, a woman who was tricked by a man de-served to die a woman who tricked a man was a whore. If a woman tried to trick a man but failed then was tricked by him, that was whoredom twice over. Kill her and you'd only di

knife.

Ordinarily, when anyone in the Bai family made a mistake the size of a sesame seed it got blown all out of proportion. Now that they had uncovered an enormous, truly sensational crime, they stammered with overexcitement, unable for a moment to get a word out. Their first move, since they agreed that "dirty laundry shouldn't be aired in public," was to go around to all their friends and relatives and make them swear to keep their mouths shut. Then they went back around to the same friends and relatives, and sounded them out, one by one. Did they know? If so, how much? In the end they decided it couldn't be kept quiet, so they announced it cheerfully and openly, slap-ping their thighs, moaning and sighing about the whole thing. Orchestrating all this took up the entire autumn, and left them no time to do anything definite about Liusu herself.

Liusu knew very well that returning like this would make things even worse than they'd been before. The ties of affection and loyalty between her and this family had been severed long ago. Of course she considered looking for a job, anything to earn a bowl of rice. No matter how rough it was, it would still be better than living with a hostile family. But if she took some menial job, she would lose her social status. Even though status wasn't something you could eat, losing it would be a pity. And she had not yet given up all hope concerning Fan Liuyuan. She couldn't sell herself cheaply now, or else he'd have a perfect excuse for refusing to marry her. So she just had to hang on a little while longer.

Finally, at the end of November, Fan Liuyuan sent a telegram from Hong Kong. Everyone in the family had eyeballed the telegram before. Old Mrs. Bai called Liusu, and put it in her hand. The message was terse: "PLS COME HK. PASSAGE BOOKED VIA THOMAS COOK." Old Mrs. Bai gave a long sigh. "Since he's sent for you, you should go!"

Was she worth so little? Tears dropped from her eyes. Crying made her lose all her self-control; she found she could not bear it anymore. Already she'd aged two years in one autumn—she couldn't afford to grow old! So for the second time she left home and went to Hong Kong. This time, she felt none of her earlier eagerness for adventure. She had lost. Of course, everyone likes to be vanquished, but only within bounds. To have been vanquished solely by Fan Liuyuan's charms, that was one thing. But mixed with that was the pressure from her family—the most painful factor in her defeat.

Fan Liuyuan was waiting for her at the dock in a light, drizzling rain. He said that her green rain slicker looked like a bottle. "A medicine bottle," he explained. She thought he was teasing her because she'd grown so frail, but then he whispered into her ear, "You're just the medicine I need." She blushed, averting her eyes.

He had reserved her old room for her. By the time they got to the hotel, it was already two in the morning. In the bath-room, getting ready for bed, she turned off the light. Then she remembered that the bedroom light switch was by the bed. Blundering around in the dark, she stepped on a shoe and almost fell. She cursed herself for being so careless: leaving her shoes lying around. There was a laugh from the bed: "Don't be frightened by my shoe!"

Liusu stopped. "What are you doing here?"

"I always wanted to see the moon from your window. You can see it much better from this room than from the room next door."

So he had phoned her that night—it wasn't a dream! He did love her. What a cruel and spiteful man! He loved her, and still he treated her like this! Her heart went cold. Turning away, she walked over to the dressing table. The late-November crescent moon was a mere hook of white; its pale light made the window look like a pane of ice. But moonbeams reached the sea and were reflected from the water through the window and then into the mirror, so that even though the beams were faint, they made the mirror glow. Liusu slowly stripped off her hair-net, mussing her hair; the hairpins came loose and fell clattering to the floor. She pulled the hairnet on again, holding the ties in her mouth between tightly pinched lips. She frowned, crouched down, and, one by one, picked up the hairpins.

By then, Liuyuan had walked over behind her in his bare feet. He put one hand on her head, turned her face toward his, and kissed her mouth. The hairnet slipped off her head. This was the first time he had kissed her, but it didn't feel like the first time to either of them—they had both imagined it so many times. They'd had many opportunities—the right place, the right moment—he'd thought of it; she had worried it might happen. But they were both such clever people, always planning carefully, that they'd never dared to risk it. Suddenly it was reality, and they were both dazed. Liusu's head was spinning. She fell back against the mirror, her back tightly pressed to its icy surface. His mouth did not leave hers. He pushed her into the mirror and they seemed to fall into it, into another shadowy world—freezing cold, searing hot, flame of the forest flowers burning them all over.

The next day, he told her he was going to England in a week. She asked him to take her with him, but he said it wasn't possible. He offered to rent a house for her in Hong Kong so she could wait for his return, which would be in about a year. If she'd rather live with her family in Shanghai, that would be fine too.

Of course she wasn't willing to go back to Shanghai. The more distance she could put between those people and herself, the better. Living on her own in Hong Kong would be lonely, but she could bear that. The problem was whether anything would change after he'd returned—and that depended entirely on him. How could a week's love hold his heart? But, on the other hand, maybe it was to her advantage: Liuyuan was not a man of stable affections, and meeting and parting so quickly as this meant he had no time to grow tired of her. One short week.. always more memorable than a year. Then again, even if he did come back with a heart full of warm memories, wanting her again, she might have changed by then! A woman near thirty can be unusually attractive, but she can also grow haggard in a moment. In the end, trying to hold on to a man without surety of marriage is a difficult, painful, tiring business, well nigh impossible. But it did matter, anyway? She had to admit that Liuyuan was delightful, and he really :

the sparks fly, but what she wanted from him was, after all, financial security. And on that point, she knew she could rest assured.

They took a house on Babington Road, up on a mountain slope. When the rooms had been painted, they hired a Canton-ese maid called Ah Li. They only managed to set up the basic furnishings before Liuyuan had to leave. Liusu could take her time with the rest. There wasn't any food in the house, so on the winter evening when she saw him off at the pier, they grabbed some sandwiches in the ship's dining hall. Feeling dejected, Liusu had a few drinks and stood in the roar of the sea wind; by the time she got home, she was rather drunk.

When she came in, Ah Li was in the kitchen heating water so she could wash her child's feet. Liusu went through the whole house, turning on all the lights. The green paint on the sitting room door and window was still wet. She touched it with her index finger, then pressed her sticky finger against the wall, leaving a green mark each time. Why not? Was it against the law? This was her house! Laughing, she put a fresh green handprint on the dandelion white of the plaster wall.

Liusu stared at him in shock, suddenly seeing how wicked this man was. Whenever they were in public, he made sure to give the impression of affectionate intimacy, so that now she had no way to prove that they had not slept together. She was riding the tiger now, no way to go home, no way to rejoin her family; she had no option except to become his mistress. But if she relented at this point, all her efforts would have been wasted, with no hope of recovery. She wouldn't do it! Even if she was trapped by appearances, he'd taken advantage of her in name only. The real truth was that he had not gotten her. And since he hadn't, he might come back someday, ready to make peace on better terms.

She made up her mind, and told Liuyuan that she wanted to go back to Shanghai. Liuyuan didn't try to keep her; instead he volunteered to see her home. "Oh, that's not necessary," said Liusu. "Aren't you going to Singapore?"

"I've already put it off this long, delaying a little longer won't matter. I've got things to do in Shanghai too."

Liusu knew that he was still playing the same hand, afraid that others wouldn't talk about them enough. The more that people had to talk about, the less she'd be able to defend her-self, and Shanghai would become a very uncomfortable place for her. But Liusu reasoned that even if he didn't go back with her, she wouldn't be able to keep things from her family. Having braved damnation thus far, she might as well let him see her home.

When Mrs. Xu saw that the pair that had seemed to be getting along so well suddenly wanted to break things off, she was surprised, to say the least. She asked each of them and they both made excuses for the other, but of course Mrs. Xu didn't believe a word they said.

On the ship, they had many chances to be together, but if Liuyuan could resist the moon in Repulse Bay, he could resist the moon on shipboard. He didn't say a single concrete thing to her. He seemed nonchalant, but Liusu could tell that it was the nonchalance of a man who is pleased with himself—he was sure she couldn't escape him now, sure that he had her in the palm of his hand.

When they got to Shanghai, he took her to her house in a taxi, without getting out himself. The Bai household had heard the news long before, and were entirely aware that Young Sixth Lady and Fan Liuyuan had cohabited in Hong Kong. Going off with a man for a whole month, then waltzing back as if nothing were the matter clearly she meant to disgrace the entire family.

Liusu had taken up with Fan Liuyuan—for his money, of course. If she'd landed the money, she wouldn't have crept back so very quietly; it was clear that she hadn't gotten anything from him. Basically, a woman who was tricked by a man deserved to die, while a woman who tricked a man was a whore. If a woman tried to trick a man but failed and then was tricked by him, that was whoredom twice over. Kill her and you'd only dirty the knife.

Ordinarily, when anyone in the Bai family made a mistake the size of a sesame seed it got blown all out of proportion. Now that they had uncovered an enormous, truly sensational crime, they stammered with overexcitement, unable for a moment to get a word out. Their first move, since they agreed that "dirty laundry shouldn't be aired in public," was to go around to all their friends and relatives and make them swear to keep their mouths shut. Then they went back around to the same friends and relatives, and so undid them out, one by one. Did they know? If so, how much? In the end they decided it couldn't be kept quiet, so they announced it cheerfully and openly, slap-ping their thighs, moaning and sighing about the whole thing. Orchestrating all this took up the entire autumn, and left them no time to do anything definite about Liusu herself.

Liusu knew very well that returning like this would make things even worse than they'd been before. The ties of affection and loyalty between her and this family had been severed long ago. Of course she considered looking for a job, anything to earn a bowl of rice. No matter how rough it was, it would still be better than living with a hostile family. But if she took some menial job, she would lose her social status. Even though status wasn't something you could eat, losing it would be a pity. And she had not yet given up all hope concerning Fan Liuyuan. She couldn't sell herself cheaply now, or else he'd have a perfect excuse for refusing to marry her. So she just had to hang on a little while longer.

Finally, at the end of November, Fan Liuyuan sent a telegram from Hong Kong. Everyone in the family had eyeballed the telegram before Old Mrs. Bai called Liusu, and put it in her hand. The message was terse: "PLS COME HK. PASSAGE BOOKED VIA THOMAS COOK." Old Mrs. Bai gave a long sigh. "Since he's sent for you, you should go!"

Was she worth so little? Tears dropped from her eyes. Crying made her lose all her control; she found she could not bear it anymore. Already she'd aged two years in

autumn-she couldn't afford to grow old! So for the second time she left home and went to Hong Kong. This time, she felt none of her earlier eagerness for adventure. She had lost. Of course, every-one likes to be vanquished, but only within bounds. To have been vanquished solely by Fan Liuyuan's charms, that was one thing. But mixed with that was the pressure from her family—the most painful factor in her defeat.

Fan Liuyuan was waiting for her at the dock in a light, drizzling rain. He said that her green rain slicker looked like a bottle. "A medicine bottle," he explained. She thought he was teasing her because she'd grown so frail, but then he whispered into her ear, "You're just the medicine I need." She blushed, averting her eyes.

He had reserved her old room for her. By the time they got to the hotel, it was already two in the morning. In the bath-room, getting ready for bed, she turned off the light. Then she remembered that the bedroom light switch was by the bed. Blundering around in the dark, she stepped on a shoe and al-most fell. She cursed herself for being so careless, leaving her shoes lying around. There was a laugh from the bed: "Don't be frightened! It's my shoe!"

Liusu stopped. "What are you doing here?"

"I always wanted to see the moon from your window. You can see it much better from this room than from the room next door."

So he had phoned her that night—it wasn't a dream! He did love her. What a cruel and spiteful man! He loved her, and still he treated her like this! Her heart went cold. Turning away, she walked over to the dressing table. The late-November crescent moon was a mere hook of white; its pale light made the win-dow look like a pane of ice. But moonbeams reached the sea and were reflected from the water through the window and then into the mirror, so that even though the beams were faint, they made the mirror glow. Liusu slowly stripped off her hair-net, mussing her hair; the hairpins came loose and fell clatter-ing to the floor. She pulled the hairnet on again, holding the ties in her mouth between tightly pinched lips. She frowned, crouched down, and, one by one, picked up the hairpins.

By then, Liuyuan had walked over behind her in his bare feet. He put one hand on her head, turned her face toward his, and kissed her mouth. The hairnet slipped off her head. This was the first time he had kissed her, but it didn't feel like the first time to either of them—they had both imagined it so many times. They'd had many opportunities—the right place, the right moment—he'd thought of it; she had worried it might happen. But they were both such clever people, always planning carefully, that they'd never dared to risk it. Suddenly it was reality, and they were both dazed. Liusu's head was spin-ning. She fell back against the mirror, her back tightly pressed to its icy surface. His mouth did not leave hers. He pushed her into the mirror and they seemed to fall into it, into another shadowy world-freezing cold, searing hot, flame of the forest flowers burning then over.

The next day, he told her he was going to England in a week. She asked him to take her with him, but he said it wasn't possible. He offered to rent a house for her in Hong Kong so she could wait for his return, which would be in about a year. If she'd rather live with her family in Shanghai, that would be fine too.

Of course she wasn't willing to go back to Shanghai. The more distance she could put between those people and herself, the better. Living on her own in Hong Kong would be lonely, but she could bear that. The problem was whether anything would change after he'd returned—and that depended entirely on him. How could a week's love hold his heart? But, on the other hand, maybe it was to her advantage: Liuyuan was not a man of stable affections, and meeting and parting so quickly as this meant he had no time to grow tired of her. One short week.. always more memorable than a year. Then again, even if he did come back with a heart full of warm memories, wanting her again, she might have changed by then! A woman near thirty can be unusually attractive, but she can also grow hag-gard in a moment. In the end, trying to hold on to a man without the surety of marriage is a difficult, painful, tiring business, well nigh impossible. But what did it matter, anyway? She had to admit that Liuyuan was delightful, and he really made the sparks fly, but what she wanted from him was, after all, financial security. And on that point, she knew she could rest assured.

They took a house on Babington Road, up on a mountain slope. When the rooms had been painted, they hired a Canton-ese maid called Ah Li. They only managed to set up the basic furnishings before Liuyuan had to leave. Liusu could take her time with the rest. There wasn't any food in the house, so on the winter evening when she saw him off at the pier, they grabbed some sandwiches in the ship's dining hall. Feeling dejected, Liusu had a few drinks and stood in the roar of the sea wind; by the time she got home, she was rather drunk.

When she came in, Ah Li was in the kitchen heating water so she could wash her child's feet. Liusu went through the whole house, turning on all the lights. The green paint on the sitting room door and window was still wet. She touched it with her index finger, then pressed her sticky finger against the wall, leaving a green mark each time. Why not? Was it against the law? This was her house! Laughing, she put a fresh green handprint on the dandelion white of the plaster wall.

The next day, Liusu, Ah Li, and Ah Li's child shared the last biscuits from a tin. Liusu was weak and exhausted, each crack of a screaming bomb slapping her hard in the face. The lumbering sound of an army truck came from the street. It stopped at their door. The doorbell rang, and Liusu answered it. It was Liuyuan. She grabbed his hand and clutched his arm, like Ah Li clutching her child; then she fell forward, hitting her head on the porch wall.

Liuyuan lifted her face with his other hand. "Frightened? Don't worry," he urged her to get your things together. We're going to Repulse Bay. Hurry!"

Liusu ran back in and started rushing around. "Is it safe in Repulse Bay?"

"They say a navy can't land there. Anyway, the hotel has huge stocks of food. There'll be something to eat."

"Your ship .. "

"The ship never left. They took the first-class passengers to the Repulse Bay Hotel. I tried to come yesterday, but I couldn't get a car, and the buses were jammed. Today, I finally managed to get this truck."

Liusu couldn't think clearly enough to pack her things, so she just grabbed a little bag and stuffed it full. Liuyuan gave Ah Li two months' salary and told her to watch the house. Then the two of them got into the truck, lying facedown and side by side in the truck bed, with a canopy of khaki oilcloth overhead. The ride was so bumpy that their knees and elbows were scraped raw.

Liuyuan sighed. "This bombing blasted off the ends of an awful lot of stories!"

Liusu was filled with sorrow. Then, after a moment, she said, "If you were killed, my story would be over. But if I were killed, you'd still have a lot of story left!"

"Were you planning on being my faithful widow?"

They were both a little unnerved, and for no reason at all they began to laugh. Once they started they could not stop. But when they were finished laughing, they shuddered from head to toe.

The truck drove through a rain of bullets back to Repulse Bay. Army troops were stationed on the ground floor, so they stayed in their old room on the second floor. After they had settled in, they found out that the stores of food were all reserved for the troops. Besides canned milk, beef, mutton, and fruit, there were sacks and sacks of bread, both whole wheat and white. But the guests were only allotted two soda crackers, or two lumps of sugar, per meal. Everyone was famished.

For a couple of days all was quiet at Repulse Bay, then suddenly the action heated up. There was nowhere on the second floor to take cover, so they had to leave. Everyone went down-stairs to the dining hall. The glass doors were opened wide, with sandbags piled up in front: the British troops were firing artillery from behind the sandbags. When the gunboats in the bay figured out where the shooting was coming from, they returned fire. Shells flew over the palm tree and the fountain in both directions. Liuyuan and Liusu, along with everyone else, squeezed back against the wall.

It was a dark scene, like an ancient Persian carpet covered with woven figures of many people—old lords, princesses, scholars, beauties. Draped over a bamboo pole, the carpet was being beaten, dust flying in the wind. Blow after blow, it was beaten till the people had nowhere to hide, nowhere to go. The shells flew this way, and the people ran c

there; the shells flew that way, and the people all ran back. In the end, the whole hall was riddled with holes. One wall had collapsed, and they had nowhere to hide. They sat on the ground, awaiting their fate.

By this time, Liusu wished that Liuyuan wasn't there: when one person seems to have two bodies, danger is only doubled. If she wasn't hit, he still might be, and if he died, or was badly wounded, it would be worse than anything she could imagine. If she got wounded, she'd have to die, so as not to be a burden to him. Even if she did die, it wouldn't be as clean and simple as dying alone. She knew Liuyuan felt the same way. Now all she had was him; all he had was her.

The fighting ended. The men and women who'd been trapped in the Repulse Bay Hotel slowly walked toward the city. They walked past yellow cliffs, then red cliffs, more red cliffs, then yellow cliffs again, almost wondering if they'd got-ten lost, and were going in circles. But no, here was a pit they hadn't seen before, blasted out of the road and full of rubble.

Liuyuan and Liusu spoke very little. It used to be that when-ever they took a short trip in a car there was a dinner-party's worth of conversation, but now, walking together for miles, they had nothing to say. Once in a while, one of them would start a sentence, but since the other knew exactly what would come next, there was no need to finish it.

"Look, on the beach," said. Liuyuan.

"Yes."

The beach was covered. with tangled coils of barbed wire. Past the barbed wire, the white seawater gurgled, drinking in and spitting out the yellow sand. The clear winter sky was a faint blue. The flame of the forest was past its flowering season.

"That wall . ." asked Liusu.

"Haven't gone to check."

Liusu sighed. "Doesn't matter."

Liuyuan was hot from walking, he took off his coat and. slung it over his shoulder, but his back was still covered with perspiration.

"You're too warm," 'Limu. said. "Let me take it."

Before, Liuyuan would never have agreed, but now he wasn't so chivalrous; he handed his coat to her.

As they walked farther, the mountains got taller. Either it was the wind blowing in the trees, or it was the moving shadow of a cloud, but somehow the greenish yellow lo slopes slowly darkened. Looking more closely, you saw that it wasn't the wind and wasn't the clouds but the sun moving slowly over the mountain crest, blanketing tl

lower slope in a giant blue shadow. Up on the mountain, smoke rose from burning houses-white on the shaded slopes, black on the sunlit slopes-while the sun kept on moving slowly over the moun-tain crest.

They were home. They pushed open the half-shut door, and a little flock of pigeons took wing and fled. The hallway was full of dirt and pigeon droppings. Liusu went to the staircase and cried out in surprise. The brand-new trunks she had put in the rooms upstairs were strewn about wide open, and two of them had slid partway down to the ground floor, so that the stairs were buried in a flowing mass of satins and silks. Liusu bent down and picked up a brown wool-lined cheongsam. It wasn't hers. Sweat marks, dirt, cigarette burns, the scent of cheap perfume. She found more women's things, old magazines, and an open can of lychees, the juice dripping out onto her clothes. Had some troops been staying here? British troops who had women with them? They seemed to have left in a hurry. The local poor who'd turned to looting hadn't been here; otherwise, these things would be gone. Liuyuan helped her call for Ah Li. A last gray-backed pigeon scurried past, whirled through the sunlit doorway, and flew off.

Ah Li was gone, who knew where. But even with the servant gone from the house, the masters must go on living. They couldn't worry about the house yet; first they had to think about food. Scrambling around, they finally turned up a bag of rice, which they bought at a very high price. Fortunately the gas lines had not been cut, but there wasn't any running water. Liuyuan took a lead-lined bucket up the mountain to fetch some springwater for cooking. In the days that followed, they spent all their time preparing meals and cleaning house. Liuyuan did all kinds of chores—sweeping, mopping, and helping Liusu wring out the heavy laundered sheets. Even though she'd never cooked before, Liusu managed to give the food some real Shanghainese flavor. Liuyuan was fond of Ma-layan food, so she also learned how to make satay and curried fish. Food became a major source of interest, but they had to be very careful about expenses. Liuyuan didn't have a lot of Hong Kong dollars with him; they'd have to go back to Shanghai as soon as they could get a boat.

Anyway, staying on in Hong Kong after the disaster was not a feasible long-term plan. They had to scramble around all through the day just to get by. Then, at night, in that dead city, no lights, no human sounds, only the strong winter wind, wail-ing on and on in three long tones—ooh, aaah, eeei. When it stopped here, it started up there, like three gray dragons flying side by side in a straight line, long bodies trailing on and on, tails never coming into sight. Oooh, aaah, eeei wailing until even the sky dragons had gone, and there was only a stream of empty air, a bridge of emptiness that crossed into the dark, into the void of voids. Here, everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of leveled wall and, stumbling and fumbling about, a civilized man who had lost his memory; he seemed to be searching for something, but there was nothing left.

Liusu sat up hugging her quilt and listening to the mournful wind. She was sure th:

gray brick wall near Repulse Bay was still as strong and tall as ever. The wind stopped there, like three gray dragons coiling up on top of the wall, the moonlight glinting off their silver scales. She seemed to be going back in a dream, back to the base of that wall, and there she met Liuyuan, finally and truly met him.

Here in this uncertain world, money, property, the permanent things—they're all unreliable. The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and this person who lay sleeping beside her. Suddenly, she crawled over to him, hugging him through his quilt. He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand. They looked and saw each other, saw each other entirely. It was a mere moment of deep understanding, but it was enough to keep them happy together for a decade or so.

He was just a selfish man; she was a selfish woman. In this age of chaos and disorder, there is no place for those who stand on their own, but for an ordinary married couple, room can always be found.

One day, when they were out shopping for food, they ran into Princess Saheiyini. Her complexion was sallow; her loosened braids had been piled up in a fluffy topknot. She was dressed in a long black cotton gown she had picked up god knows where, though on her feet she still wore a pair of fancy Indian slippers, colorfully embroidered and bejeweled. She shook their hands warmly, asked where they were living, and wanted very much to come and see their new house. Noticing the shelled oysters in Liusu's basket, she wanted to learn how to make steamed oyster soup. So Liuyuan invited her for a simple meal, and she was very happy to go home with them. Her Englishman had been interned, and she was living now with an Indian policeman's family, people she knew well, people who had often done little things for her. She hadn't eaten a full meal in a long time. She called Liusu "Miss Bai."

"This is my wife," said Liuyuan. "You should congratulate us!"

"Really? When did you get married?"

Liuyuan shrugged and said, "We just put a notice in the Chinese newspaper. You know, wartime weddings are always a bit slapdash."

Liusu didn't understand their English. Saheiyini kissed him, then kissed her. The meal was skimpy, and Liuyuan made sure Saheiyini understood that oyster soup was a treat. Saheiyini did not come back to their house.

After they had seen their guest off, Liusu stood on the threshold and Liuyuan stood behind her. He closed her hands in his and said, "Well, when should we get married?"

Liusu didn't say a thing. She bowed her head and let the tears fall.

"Now, now. ." Liuyuan said, gripping her hands tightly. "We can go and put a notice paper today—unless of course you'd rather wait, and throw a big bash when we go to Shanghai, invite all the relatives—"

"Those people! Who'd want them?" Saying that she laughed, leaned back, and let herself go, falling against him. Liuyuan ran his finger down her face. "First you cry, and then you laugh!" he said.

They walked into town together. Where the road took a sharp turn, the land suddenly fell away—in front of them was only empty space, a damp, pale gray sky. From a little iron gate frame hung an enameled sign with the words DR. ZHAO XIANGQING, DENTIST. The sign creaked on its chains in the wind. Behind it there was only that empty sky.

Liuyuan stopped in his tracks to stare. Feeling the terror in this ordinary scene, he shivered. "Now you must believe 'Facing life, death, distance .. ' How can we decide these things? When the bombing was going on, just one little slip . . "

Liusu chided him: "Are you still saying you're unable to make this decision?"

"No, no, I'm not giving up halfway! What I mean is .. " He saw her face, then laughed. "Okay, I won't try to say it!"

They went on walking, and Liuyuan said, "The gods must be behind this; we really did find out what love is!"

"You said a long time ago that you loved me."

"That doesn't count. We were way too busy falling in love—how could we have found time to really love each other?"

When the marriage announcement was posted in the paper, Mr. and Mrs. Xu rushed over to offer their congratulations. Liusu wasn't altogether pleased with them, since they had moved off to a safe place when the city was besieged, not worrying a bit whether she lived or died. Still she had to greet them with a smile. Liuyuan brought out some wine and a few dishes for a belated celebration. Not much later, travel between Hong Kong and Shanghai became possible again, and they returned to Shanghai.

Liusu went back to the Bai household just once, afraid that with so many blabbermouths, something was sure to go wrong. And trouble could not be avoided: Fourth Mistress had decided to divorce Fourth Master, and everyone blamed Liusu for this. Liusu had divorced and married again with such astonishing success—no wonder other people wanted to follow her example. Liusu crouched down in the lamplight, lighting mosquito-repellant incense. When she thought of Fourth Mistress, she smiled.

Liuyuan even stopped teasing her, saving all his daring talk for other women. That was a good sign, worth celebrating, since it meant that she was his own—his wife in name and in truth. Still, it made her a little sad.

Hong Kong's defeat had brought Liusu victory. But in this unreasonable world, how could he distinguish cause from effect? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that it could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people

suffering, after that an earth-shaking revolution .. Liusu didn't feel there was anything sub-tle about her place in history. She stood up, smiling, and kicked the pan of mosquito-repellant incense under tbe table.

Those legendary beauties who felled cities and kingdoms were probably all like that.

Legends exist everywhere, but they don't necessarily have such happy endings.

When the huqin wails on a night of ten thousand lamps, the bow slides back and forth, drawing forth a tale too desolate for words-oh! why go into it?