

The Cauldron

by Robert J. Muller

The Cauldron. Great good fortune. Prospering.

**The wood has fire over it: the Cauldron.
The wise man corrects his position to strengthen his fate.**

**The Cauldron is the best way to skin a cat.
Understanding this lets one make proper use of the Cauldron.**

The Cauldron means taking up the new.

**The Cauldron is indeed a symbol.
Using wood, fire cooks and feeds well.
The wise person's success comes from cooking for the Gods.
Also, one's success comes from feeding the wise and eminent.
The fundamental thing is to use eyes and ears sharply.
Adapting promotes firm progress toward the goal.
That is how one prospers.**

**The Cauldron contains the result.
My rivals are envious,
Their art cannot reach mine.
Good fortune.**

**The stand of the Cauldron is broken,
Upsetting the prince's stew
And soiling his appearance.
Misfortune.**

**Keeping still. Keeping one's back still
So that one no longer feels one's character,
Walking into the courtyard,
Not consulting with one's people.
Without fault.**

I Ching, hexagram 50 (Ding, The Cauldron or Establishing the New)
transforming to 52 (Gen, Keeping Still)

Chef Jean-Claude suffered agonies of suspense. His very well paid informant on the newspaper staff, paid in truffles, fois gras, and poulet de Bresse, had sworn that tonight was the night. Despite his best efforts over the years, he had never yet been able to discover a photo of the critic, Peter Stevney. Rumor had it that Stevney was either ex-CIA or possibly still active. Even in these degenerate days of the Internet, intentional leaks, and corruption everywhere, Stevney was nonexistent, untraceable, anonymous.

Even under threat of a truffle drought, his informant at the paper had insisted that no one knew Stevney. "He's just a voice on the phone, Chef--I can't lie to you, tell you something that isn't true. No one here has ever seen him. The reviews just show up by email from an anonymized account in Kazakhstan. Or Tadzhikstan. Or somewhere. I can't remember. Chef, no one *knows*."

The pleading undertone, seasoned with years of unctuous consumption of his best ingredients, did not mollify Chef Jean-Claude, but rationally he had no reason to disbelieve his informant. At least he knew something was up. The rumor at the paper was that Stevney was branching out, joining up with the shadowy bloggers and wiki mavens that came and went, often taking reputations and careers with them when they left. Only the calumnies remained, forever cached and endlessly repeated across the world. There was little to choose between a restaurant reviewer and a terrorist.

Chef Jean-Claude paid a very great deal of money to a large firm that monitored the net for mentions of his name and--for a slight extra charge--that of his restaurants. They had picked up one travesty of a review so far, by a nobody, and

he had been able to purchase the man's silence within a day of the review's appearance. The copious fees to search engines to promote the positive and ignore the negative also took a big bite out of his profits, as did managing the travel guides and independent restaurant guides. So far, he had been able to show everyone his best because he always knew when his best was needed. Not now.

He surveyed his dining room from the kitchen, smiling slightly. He became aware, slowly, of the bustle behind him as Hamid and the line cooks rushed about their work. The smells of the busy kitchen began to tease his senses, and he automatically checked the scents for any hint of scorch or sulfur or any of the other myriad smells of disaster. His conscious brain considered and rejected many alternatives; he would have to work with what he had and make it the best of the best. He resolved that not a single dish with a drop out of place would see the dining room that night.

He turned away from the dining room and beckoned to Hamid, who ambled over, wiping his large, powerful hands on the towel hanging from his apron strings.

"Chef?"

In his gentle voice, Chef Jean-Claude explained the situation to Hamid, his sous chef. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he thought that Hamid paled slightly.

"About what should I be concerned?"

"Nothing, Chef; nothing. It's, well, nothing."

Pulling teeth was what it was, thought Chef Jean-Claude somewhat uncharitably. One at a time, with great pain. His voice never lost its gentleness.

"What, Hamid?"

"Just talk, chatter."

"And, please, what is the purport of this chatter?" His French accent pronounced the word "shatter."

Hamid looked even more uncomfortable. "It's just the kind of thing people say, Chef. Envy, really. Everyone wants to be chef."

Except the dishwashers, thought Chef Jean-Claude. No one really knew what they wanted. No one could talk to them, and if they chattered, it was among themselves. So we are discussing the cooks, he thought. Everyone wants to be Chef. Hamid wanted to be Chef. Tonight, though, he himself needed to be Chef.

"I understand, Hamid. I'm sure you'll get everyone aligned--how do you say it--with the program?" He smiled his gentle smile. "Let the line know that I'll be taking extra care with each plate." They would know what that meant. The smallest speck of black, the tiniest drop of sauce on the edge of a plate--such a mistake might be a career-limiting move tonight. He filled his senses again with the smell of the kitchen. "They will experience what it really means to be a cook tonight." Hamid nodded and turned away and hurried back to the line, rapidly telling each cook what was up, his large hands giving reassurance to each one in turn.

Chef's hands were delicate and long-fingered, the hands of a pianist or a surgeon or a magician. They did not reassure; they performed their magic with a dexterity wholly natural to the man, not learned by long years in the kitchen, as Hamid had learned. By eight o'clock, the smile on Chef Jean-Claude's face was still gentle, but it was more real. There had been no mistakes; everyone was rising to the occasion. Envy there might be, but the energy level in the kitchen was twice normal,

the heat flowing from the men and women on the line just as much as from the ovens. Envy could translate into success with the right motivation and the right people. The saucier brought a new saucepan of wine reduction to the plating station and mixed the reduced stock with it to make the evening's key sauce, the perfume of the concentrated Chardonnay from the Champagne rising with the steam. Chef waved a finger, then swiped it through the pot and tasted: brilliant, smooth, no edges, no bitterness. He waved the sauce on.

Time to visit the dining room. Chef Jean-Claude wiped his finger on his kitchen towel and deposited the towel on the little table by the door, then inspected himself for stains. Finding himself immaculate, Chef paused for a moment before the doors to gather himself, smiled, and pushed through the doors.

He went first to the financier's table, a regular, after acknowledging the film star's party two tables away. Not too many VIPs tonight, he thought. Pity; one could perhaps identify someone by whom he was not instead of who he was, but not with fifty anonymous people in the dining room. He realized he had been listening and responding to the financier's detailed opinion of the *moules* for several minutes without being able to remember a word. He shook himself mentally and responded more naturally.

He moved from table to table. The film star's possible wife had already had too much excellent Cabernet. An elderly couple, dressed elaborately for a dinner twenty years before, were celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary. He made a mental note to remove the charge for the Champagne they were drinking, perhaps they would be back for their seventieth. With little insight into the kind of

relationship that could last such a length of time, Chef Jean-Claude nevertheless always took the long view.

At the next table, there was a party of four, two couples, apparently having a very good time. He knew none of them. "Hello, I'm Jean-Claude. I hope you're enjoying the meal?" One of the men laughed, while the other man nodded and said, "Very nice, thanks. A great place!" Chef Jean-Claude noticed the man had finished his main long before the others: the duck, from the remains on the plate. Another mental note: order more ducks from that upstate farm, they were really..."Are these girolles local? I haven't seen this type before," said one of the women. He assessed her briefly: moderate clothes, nothing special, about 35 or 40, nothing loaded in the question: her eyes were straight at his, the intonation of the question straightforward. "Yes, that's right; we have a special arrangement."

"Paul Stepanian, right? He's the only one who knows how to find things like this."

Chef Jean-Claude reassessed quickly. "An artist never reveals his sources," he said, putting as much charm into the dismissal as possible. The woman smiled and nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man who had finished early shaking his head slightly. The woman's smile disappeared. An interesting dynamic. Chef Jean-Claude decided to take a little revenge.

"You're very knowledgeable, miss...?" The question lingered in the air, the French accent making it seem indecent. The woman smiled slowly and declined the gambit, merely gazing into Chef's eyes. He let the silence lengthen. Bewitching, no doubt; but he had to abandon the chase and move on to the next customer. He

smiled his gentle smile, nodded in a general way to the party, and continued his tour of inspection.

When he had finished his walkabout, Chef stopped briefly by the host's station and touched a few keys on the computer with long fingers. Table 24, Hadley, party of four, phone number supplied. He memorized the number, though without much hope; these things never worked out well, and he was very busy at the moment.

He reflected on his tour. No one had come close to his expectation of Peter Stevney. Nobody taking surreptitious notes under the table, no one picking and choosing meal items. He turned toward the kitchen door; and that was when he heard the shriek.

People didn't shriek in Chef Jean-Claude's restaurants. People hardly ever even talked loudly. The sound level barely ever rose above a civilized murmur of satisfaction. This was a shriek. Chef spun around and saw the unthinkable: table of four, Hadley, with the men standing, one woman immobilized in horror, and Miss Girolle Hadley with her hands scrabbling at the plate in her lap. A waiter--no, a soon-to-be-ex-waiter--was making futile semi-movements with his hands, unable to touch the plate or the said lap. Chef Jean-Claude thought he remembered this scene from a Jacques Tati film of the sixties. At the time, he had thought it funny. His mind unfroze.

Chef strode to the table, stretching his spine as he walked. He motioned the waiter aside with his eyes, then with decision lifted the plate from the woman's lap. A salad, a between-course to clear the palate. It had done that, presumably.

"I am so sorry," he said formally. "Please, come with me, we will get you cleaned up. Please do not mind that," he said, as she stood and brushed the perfectly torn lettuce from her dress. He looked around. "Please, gentlemen. Your meal is of course complimentary. I am deeply apologetic for this carelessness. We shall return in a moment." He motioned with his hand, pointing at the plate and salad, which the waiter began to clean up.

Chef's long fingers touched her elbow and guided her away from the table. He led the woman quickly past the avid eyes of the other diners, none asking to have what she had ordered. The film star's wife said something very loudly and unintelligibly, then laughed.

Chef Jean-Claude and his companion moved past the server's station in the back of the dining room and into the corridor hiding the lounges. He stopped, his fingers again on her arm. "I'm really very sorry," he said again.

"That's all right; I'm just sad to have missed eating the salad," she replied in a perfectly even tone. "I'm sorry, too, for screaming like that. It took me a bit by surprise."

"You mean, in a restaurant like this. I can say with certainty it has never happened before and will not soon happen again."

"It wasn't the waiter's fault," she said, responding to the coldness of his tone. "He tripped on the foot of my, ah, friend."

One part of Chef's mind dealt with the unobservant waiter, another part with the protuberant "friend," and the last part, the barely conscious part, with the tone of voice and pause before the word "friend."

"You will of course send us the cleaning bill; there will be no problem about that," he said. "And, please--allow me to make it up to you, let me take you to dinner at the restaurant of your choice. May I know your name?"

"Petra. Petra Stevney." She smiled, again looking into his eyes. He realized that he was no longer in control of his life or his restaurant. The knowledge surprised him but was oddly pleasing. He smiled his gentle smile. Petra Stevney smiled back.

Chef Jean-Claude stepped out the back door of his restaurant, his chest expanding with deep lungfuls of the city night air. The door closed behind him with a whoosh, shutting out the clatter and bustle of the kitchen. He had walked through that kitchen without seeing anyone. Hamid had addressed him, unheard. He looked up at the silent moon and down at his well-ordered organic garden. He thought about the years of apprenticeship, the years of building a reputation. He thought about the perfection of his art as he grew into an empire. The perfection was of course illusory but necessary, now gone. The smile within him rose unbidden to his lips, and he laughed. At least she had not refused the offer of dinner. His cares drained away as he breathed out the air. The door opened behind him.

"Chef?" Hamid's voice was tentative. "Everything OK?"

"Yes," he replied. "I think it is."