

Peony Pavilion
or
Return of
the Soul



T'ang Hsien-tsu, 1550-1616, recognized as the greatest of the Ming dramatists, and a native of Linchuan, Kiangsi, left behind four celebrated works known collectively as "The Four Dreams of Linchuan" (臨川四夢). They are 紫釵記 (The purple hair-pin), 還魂記 (The return of the soul), 邯鄲記 (The story of Han-tan) and 南柯記 (The story of Nan-k'e)—all musical plays employing the dream motif. Of these, the most popular is The Return of the Soul or The Peony Pavilion, a drama of romantic love. Its songs and lyrics, sung in the Wu (Soochow) dialect, represented the quintessence of the Southern drama that dominated the Chinese theatre from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

We present in the following pages eight of the first ten scenes from The Peony Pavilion, translated by Cyril Birch, Chairman of the Department of Oriental Languages of the University of California at Berkeley. Prof. Birch is now engaged in preparing a complete translation of the play, 55 scenes in all.



The plot of the *Return of the Soul*, a long play of fifty-five scenes, revolves around the love story of Liu Meng-mei (the Willow Dreaming Plant), a young student, and Tu Li-niang, the daughter of a high official in Nan-an in southern Kiangsi. In a visit to the family garden at the back of the official residence Tu Li-niang fell asleep and was accosted in a dream by a young scholar, Liu Meng-mei, with whom she had an affair in the Peony Pavilion. Having awakened from her dream, she became lovesick and unconsoled in her longing. Until she finally pined away with a broken heart in the seclusion of her maidenly chamber. But before she died, she had a picture painted of herself which she buried under a stone in the garden, where her remains were later interred beside a plum tree. Shortly afterwards Governor Tu was transferred to a military post in northern Kiangsu. Before the family's departure, provision was made for sacrifices to her spirit tablet in a shrine in the garden. In the meantime Liu Meng-mei, on his way from Kwangtung to the imperial examination in Hangchow, fell ill at Nan-an and was given a resting place at a summer house in the Tu family garden. The discovery of the girl's portrait led to many hours of longing and fond gazing at her lovely form; his wishes were granted for one night she appeared to him and they renewed the relationship of the dream. At her bidding, the coffin was opened and there she lay alive, as fresh and beautiful as ever.

The couple then left for Hangchow, where Liu Meng-mei took the examination but there was a delay in the proclamation of its result due to a national crisis caused by the invasion of northern Kiangsu by a rebel leader in the employ of the Jurchen Tartars. Worried by the news of the war that had spread to her father's district, Tu Li-niang sent her husband to look for him, taking her portrait as an identification. By this time Governor Tu had already quelled the rebellion through a ruse. In celebration of the victory, his subordinates gave him a feast in the yamen. This happy event, however, was disturbed by the intrusion of Liu Meng-mei, who claimed to be the honor-guest's son-in-law. Having been told previously of the supposed burglary of his daughter's grave, Governor Tu suspected imposture and foul play. Instead of recognizing Liu as his son-in-law, he had him arrested and sent under escort to Hangchow, where Governor Tu himself had an appointment for an audience with the emperor. Upon arriving at Hangchow, Liu Meng-mei was given a sound whipping in the governor's yamen before he was rescued by an official party in search of the scholar who had come out first in the imperial examination. Finally, in an audience before the throne, Liu Meng-mei proved successfully his claims, with the help of his resurrected wife. The play ends, as usual, with official promotion and family reconciliation and reunion.

—LIU WU-CHI

The above summary of the story of the much-loved 崑曲 (K'un-shan drama) by T'ang Hsien-tsu is reprinted by permission from Professor Liu Wu-chi's Introduction to Chinese Literature, Indiana University Press, 1966.

湯顯祖：牡丹亭
The Peony Pavilion

By T'ang Hsien-tsu (1550-1616)

Translated by Cyril Birch

Scene One: Prologue

PROLOGUE-SPEAKER:¹

By busy world rejected, in my own world
of retreat
I pondered a hundred schemes
finding joy in none.
All day I spent polishing verses of heart-
rending sadness
for the telling of "love, in all life hardest
to tell."²
Dawns warmed and twilights shadowed
my Hall of Limpid Tea
till "with red candle I welcomed friends"
—and always "the hills and streams raised
high my powers."
Let me only keep faith with the history
of this longing,
of the road which led
through three incarnations³ to the Peony
Pavilion.

To the Prefect Tu Pao
was born a daughter Li-niang
who longed to walk in the spring light.
Roused by a dream of a young scholar
who broke off a branch from the willow
she pined and died of love,
but left her portrait memorial
in the Plum-blossom Shrine where her cold
grave lay.
Three years passed
and a scholar, named Liu, for "willow,"
Meng-mei, for "dreaming of plum-flower"
Found at this Kao-t'ang his dream of love.⁴
Then in turth she returned to life and became
his bride.
But when the examinations took him to Lin-
an
bandits arose at Huai-yang
besieged Prefect Tu

¹The player of the role of Ch'en Tsui-liang, the old tutor who first appears in Scene Four. Here he speaks in the voice of the author himself. Usually it is the player of a less prominent "older male" role who is given the prologue.

²Quotation, slightly altered to suit the present rhyme-scheme, from a poet of the T'ang dynasty. Quotations are extremely frequent throughout the play and are mostly from T'ang poets. The 1958 Peking edition gives the sources: here I shall simply mark them as quotes.

³The history of the girl who died and through the power of love returned to life. "Three incarnations" is an exaggeration born of the belief that it requires three lifetimes for a perfect love to attain consummation. There is

probably a reference here to the "rock of three incarnations": during the T'ang period a strong friendship grew between Li Yuan and the monk Yuan-kuan (or Yuan-tse). Approaching death, Yuan-kuan told Li that in twelve years' time they would meet before the T'ien-chu Temple in Hangchow. When the time came Li Yuan found there, by the "rock of three incarnations," a herd-boy who was the reincarnation of Yuan-kuan. (*T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*, 387).

⁴According to the *Kao-t'ang fu* by the Han poet Sung Yü, the mountain Wu-shan at Kao-t'ang was where Prince Huei of Ch'u made love in a dream to a beautiful woman who told him "At dawn I am the morning clouds, at dusk the driving rain."

and filled Li-niang with fear.
Sent by her to seek news
Liu raised doubts and anger
in the mind of Tu Pao, now First Minister.
A romantic tale,
but a tale whose execution
almost caused the execution⁵
of Prize Candidate⁶ Liu Meng mei,
announced in the nick of time.

⁵Pun on the phrase *shih-hsing*, "put into practice/apply punishment." So far as possible such puns will be retained in the translation, at the risk of some prolixity and occasional inventions.

⁶*Chuang-yuan*, winner of first place for the entire country in the examination held in the palace for the

Tu Li-niang takes coloured inks
to portray herself after dreaming,
Tutor Ch'en uses his tongue
to subdue the "pear-blossom spear,"
The graduate Liu escorts by stealth
a girl returned to the living,
Minister Tu strings up and flogs
the young Prize Candidate.⁷

final proving of scholars.

⁷The *tsa-chü* drama of the Yuan period concluded with *hsia-ch'ang shih*. These verses however are merely cleverly-arranged pastiches of appropriate lines from earlier (usually T'ang) poets, and all are omitted from the present translation.

Scene Two: Declaring Ambition

LIU MENG-MEI:

The house of Liu, pre-eminent
of old clans East of the River,
ruled by the constellation
Chang, for Letters, adjoining
Kuei, whose meaning is "Ghosts."
But leaves of Liu the Willow
buffeted by the storm
suffered many a fall
before the generation
of this poor wintry scholar.
"In books lie fame and fortune," they
say
—then tell me, where are the cheeks of
jade,
the rooms of yellow gold?
Ashen from need and hardship
I yet maintain my "overflowing breath."¹

The successful scholar 'rides the giant turtle'
but I have merely scraped frost from its
back.

¹The quotation from *Mencius*, which originally seems to have referred to some kind of yoga technique, here indicates scholarly purpose.

²Classic examples of scholarly application: K'uang Heng, too poor to buy oil, bored a hole through his wall to use the neighbour's light for his reading; Sun Ching, fearful of nodding over his books, tied his hair to a beam.

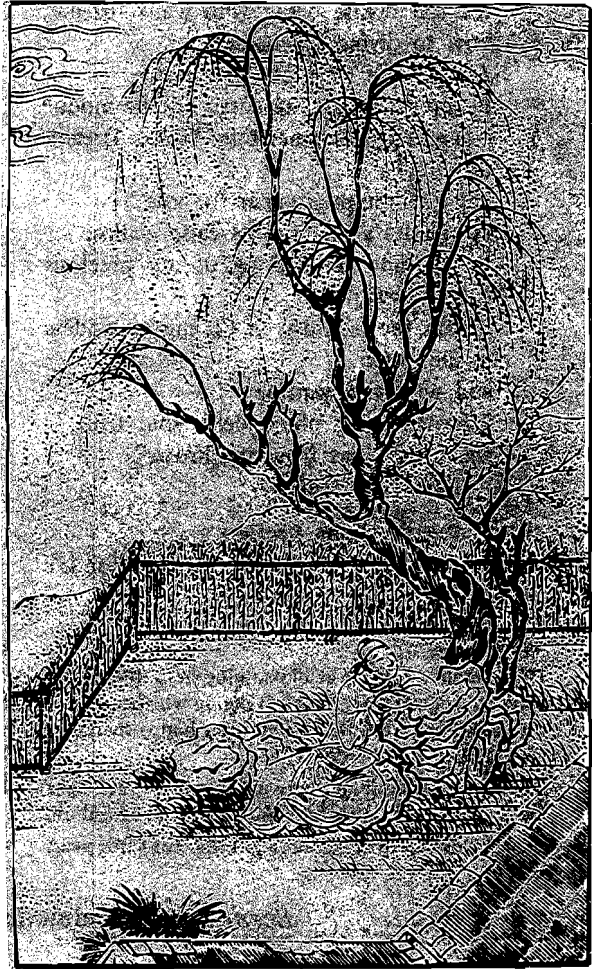
In my winter poverty
I have the luck to live in the fiery South
where, blessed to some slight extent
by the Creator
I have for inheritance a wisp
of the fragrance of classic books.
Drilling the wall for light
hair tied to beam in fear of drowsing²
I wrest from nature excellence in letters,³
and soon the axe of jade to prove its worth
must fell the cassia high in the moon's toad-
palace.⁴

I am Liu Meng-mei. Liu means "willow," Meng-mei "dream of plum-blossom," and I am styled Ch'un-ch'ing, "spring lord." I am a descendant of Liu Tsung-yuan the poet, Prefect of Liuchou in T'ang times, through a branch of the family resident in Ling-nan. My father held the civil rank of *ch'ao-san*, my mother as wife of an official of the fifth grade held the title of *hsien-chün*. (*Sighs:*) It was my sorrow to be orphaned

³Reference to lines by the Sung poet Lu Yu:
"Literary skill is Heaven's creation
But an able student may gain it."

⁴"Breaking off the cassia bough" was a metaphor for success in the literary examinations. One legend defines the moon as the palace of a celestial toad.

LIU MENG-MEI: "My days are a daze of thoughts of love." The illustrations used in this translation are woodcuts taken from a Ming edition of *Peony Pavilion or Return of the Soul*, printed by Tung-wen Book Company, 1598.



at an early age and left with the most meagre livelihood. But I rejoice that I am now a grown man, past my twentieth year, talented and of high purpose, and acquitted myself well in the secondary examinations. Still I have not "met my time" to be placed in office, and so I remain in hunger and cold. My ancestor the Prefect Liu had in his service a certain "Camel" Kuo who tended the gardens of the official residence in Liuchou.⁵ This Camelback Kuo had a camelback descendant who tends trees here in Kuangchou, and it is with his help that I manage to live. But this is no place for a man to fulfil himself. "My days are a daze of thoughts of love"—and about two weeks ago I had a dream, out of

⁵One of the best-known pieces of the celebrated poet and essayist Liu Tsung-yuan (773-819) is a brief allegory in which "Camel" Kuo, a hunchback gardener, lays down

nowhere. In my dream I entered a garden where a lovely girl stood beneath a flowering plum-tree. She was of pleasing height, yet not too tall, and she seemed uncertain whether to welcome or repulse me. In my dream she said, "Master Liu, Master Liu, I am the one you must meet to set foot on your road to love and to high office." This is why I changed my personal name to "Dream of Plum-blossom" and took the style "Spring Lord." Truly,

"Brief dream, long dream, still a dream,
This year, next year, when is the year?"

Though I change both name and style in
readiness

rules for the cultivation of trees which are found to be the perfect prescription for wise government.

for the divine being who waits for me,
 how to divine her name?
 Against the time of our union
 I pant to break the cassia in the moon⁶
 —and Liu Meng-mei, this “Willow Dream-
 of-plum”
 has no “mountain-pear for sale,”⁷
 no vendor’s cry, full of false claims.
 I fear only the wilting of my precious
 dream-flower
 before the jealousy of Ch’ang-o, goddess
 in the moon,
 and with this waiting
 “the flowering plum yields sour fruit,
 the willow has frowning brows”
 —my senses reel.

Possessing no fireflies
 I have riddled with holes the neighbour’s
 wall,⁸

⁶See note 4.

⁷Pursuing his sequence of blossoming trees, the author here refers to a Yuan play, *Pai-hua-t’ing*, in which a vendor of mountain-pear claims that it will bring happy marriage, the cure of all ills, and so on.

⁸See note 2. Fireflies in a bag were used for their light by Ch’e Yin, a third-century scholar too poor to afford oil.

⁹Sung Yü describes in a poem a girl who for three years

but the garden wall to the east
 —don’t say we may not peep over that!⁹
 Some day spring sun will touch in the
 dimness
 the willow to yellow gold
 and the snow’s approach burst open
 the plum-flower white as jade.
 Ah, then shall I ride in pride before the
 palace,
 accept the tasselled whip of betrothal,
 take for my own the star-queen of all
 flowers.

Be all this as it may, I have a friend Han Tzu-
 ts’ai who is a descendant of Han Yü¹⁰ and
 resides at the moment in the Terrace of Prince
 Chao T’o.¹¹ For a temple acolyte he is an excel-
 lent talker and I must make a short pilgrimage
 in his direction.

has been “peeping over the wall,” and the Yuan play *Tung-ch’iang-chi*, “Story of the Eastern Wall,” has a love affair for theme.

¹⁰768-824. Famous poet and scholar, leader of the “ancient-style” movement of his time and close friend of Liu Tsung-yuan.

¹¹Chao T’o proclaimed himself Prince of Nan-Yueh on the collapse of the Ch’in Dynasty in 206 B.C.

Scene Three: Admonishing the Daughter

THE PREFECT TU PAO:

Szechuan scholar of renown
 now Prefect of Nan-an
 I have trodden in turn the covered halls
 of court
 and the riverbanks of retirement.
 Robe of purple, girdle of gold
 can hardly be said to represent
 no achievement whatsoever.
 I “dare not turn my head” to my white
 hair’s reflection
 but long to unpin my cap of office
 and seek, west of the Bridge of Myriad
 Miles,
 the retreat of my ancestor, the great Tu
 Fu.¹

¹Tu Fu, 712-770, generally acknowledged to be the greatest poet, built a retreat by this bridge at Ch’engtu in Szechuan. The Prefect Tu thus neatly caps the claims to

I fear however that the favour of my
 prince
 has not yet extended thus far,
 and so like an undirected steed
 I paw the ground uncertain.

Capping a lifetime of honoured office
 I govern Nan-an as Prefect
 —let no one mistake me
 for a Prefect of the common run.
 Always I have drunk
 “only the local water”;²
 in retirement I shall feast my gaze
 on “the hills before my door.”

I am Tu Pao, Prefect of Nan-an, styled Tzu-
 ch’ung and descended from Tu Fu of the T’ang
 dynasty. My family residence is in Szechuan,

distinguished ancestry made in the preceding scene.

²I.e., I have been content with my official emoluments and accepted no bribes or perquisites of corruption.

my age past fifty. I reflect that I was twenty when I gained my *chin-shih* degree, and now after three years as Prefect here my name is widely synonymous with honesty and benevolent administration. My lady wife, Madam Chen, is in direct line of descent from the Empress Chen of the Wei dynasty. Her family resides at Mount Omei and for generations has been a byword for integrity and virtue. This lady has borne me one daughter only, a girl of good gifts and pleasing person named Li-niang. No arrangement has yet been made for her betrothal. It is evident that no virtuous and eligible young lady can fail to be properly educated, and today, having some respite from my official duties, I have summoned my lady wife to discuss this matter. Truly,

“Ts'ai Yung, rich in learning, had one daughter only,

Teng Yu, poor in office, lacked sons altogether.”³

[Enter MADAM CHEN:]

Of the Szechuan family, in direct line from Empress Chen, Goddess of the River Lo,⁴

wife of Tu Pao, I bear from the court the title Lady of Nan-an.

[She greets her husband. TU PAO:]

I salute you, though this great nation of ours I am unworthy to serve,

MADAM CHEN:

and what have I done, that I should deserve proud title from the court?

TU PAO:

In the women's chambers, days of spring are hard to fill,

MADAM CHEN:

daylong in the blossom-patterned shade we pattern our sewing.

TU PAO: When it comes to sewing and embroidery our daughter shows exceptional delicacy. But it is evident that a virtuous and eligible young lady has always needed an understanding of letters, so that when the time comes for her to marry a learned husband she will not be deficient in

conversation. Is this not also your view?

MADAM CHEN: I bow to your judgment.

[Enter LI-NIANG, followed by maid SPRING FRAGRANCE bearing tray with wine vessels].

LI-NIANG:

The voice of the oriole falters before such radiance of spring. How can this “bramble heart” give thanks for light by loving parents shed?

[She greets her parents.] Blessings on you, dear Father and Mother.

TU PAO: What is the purpose of this wine your maid brings, child?

[LI-NIANG, kneeling:] The spring sunlight is so delightful today that I am taking the liberty, as you sit at ease here in the rear hall, of offering three cups of wine to you with my respectful wishes for a thousand such springs.

[TU PAO, smiling:] That's kind of you.

[LI-NIANG, offering the wine:]

Blessings on you, my parents for the boundless joy to your daughter given.

May a hundred springs brighten the Prefect's hall

and this wine be “Heaven's reward” to our family.

O mother gentle as lily

father as cedar strong

though the fairy peach comes only

after thirty centuries to fruit

and even so I your child

was born of your evening years

yet with careful guarding

you bring me now to ripeness.

TU PAO, MADAM CHEN:

Then raise the wine-jar

for the “fledgling phoenix” nurtured

amid the flowers, shaded by tall bamboo.

TU PAO: Spring Fragrance, fill a cup for the young mistress.

Our ancestor Tu Fu

³Teng Yu, an honest and therefore poor official of the Tsin dynasty, disowned his son to save the life of his nephew in a time of rebellion.

⁴The claimed ancestress was consort to the poet Ts'ao

Pei who became Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty. His brother Ts'ao Chih wrote a poem to the Goddess of the River Lo: the present speaker makes the two figures one.

“wandering, drifting, felt shame before
wife and children.”

[*He weeps:*] My state, dear wife, is yet more
pitiable than that of the noble Tu Fu. He at
least had

a son who could “recite his father’s verses”
when all I have is
a daughter who “models her eyebrows on
her mother’s.”

MADAM CHEN: Do not be distressed, my lord. If
we can only find a good husband for our
daughter, won’t that be the same thing as a son
of our own?

[*TU PAO, laughs:*] The same thing?

MADAM CHEN:

When the Emperor of T’ang showered
favours
on Yang Kuei-Fei, “Honoured Consort,”
families wished for a girl
to be born to them, rather than a son.
Now, in your middle years,
why indulge in this complaining?

TU PAO: Child, take the wine things away. [*Exit*
LI-NIANG.]

Spring Fragrance, tell me, how does your young
mistress spend her time all day long in the
“brocade chambers”?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: In the brocade chambers?
She does brocade.

TU PAO: And what does she embroider?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Fabrics with a nap.

TU PAO: What sort of nap?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: A cat-nap.

TU PAO: Oh, very good. Madam, you were speaking
just now of “patterning your sewing in the
blossom-patterned shade,” and here I find you
permitting your daughter to doze in idleness
—what sort of up-bringing is this? Call the girl
here.

[*Enter LI-NIANG:*] What does my father wish?

TU PAO: I was just asking Spring Fragrance about
you. What is the meaning of your drowsing in
broad daylight? If you have time to spare from
your embroidery, there are books on the shelves
which are there to be read. Then when at some
future date you enter your husband’s family,
your understanding of learning and of the rites
will reflect credit on your own. But this your
mother has been neglecting.

Empty chests are mine as I strive for in-
tegrity

nor have my studies dishonoured the
name of scholar.

You, so long a guest in your parents’ house
will see the day when you rule a home of
your own.

Your father, by duties distracted, neglects
your discipline

—it is after all your mother should be
your model.

MADAM CHEN:

You, daughter before my eyes
bring joy to my heart though my limbs
already weary.

Delicately nurtured, jewel held in the palm
now she comes forth the pearl of all her
peers.

Child, note well the meaning of your
father’s words

—only a backward “creature of the
comb”

“reads characters backwards”!

LI-NIANG:

Favoured in the Prefect’s mansion

I have indulged myself in idle pastimes
painting one day a “garden scene with
swing”

the next embroidering mating ducks for a
trousseau.

From now on every idle waking minute
I’ll use to the full

at the bookshelves which will line my
dressing-table!

MADAM CHEN: Very well, but we must still have
a lady tutor to instruct you.

TU PAO: That is not possible.

The tutor engaged by an official residence
must be a scholar soaked in orthodoxy
from the academy.

MADAM CHEN:

Daughter, when you are thoroughly versed
in Confucius

the *Book of Songs* and the *Documents*
then you must gain some knowledge
of the Duke of Chou’s *Book of Rites*.

TU PAO, MADAM CHEN:

Shameful waste

for a "Silver Maid" or "Jade One" to ply
her spinning-wheel
when she could be a Lady Collator of
Texts
like Hsieh Tao-yun or Pan Chi of ancient
times.⁵

TU PAO: It will not be difficult to find a tutor, but
he must be treated with respect.

Lady, as you love your daughter, grudge
no expense
let the tutor's "rice and tea" be of quality
suited
to the quality of his learning.
Observe how there are volumes of instruc-
tion
in my mode of regulation
of state affairs and of my own household.

Scene Four: Pedant's Lament

TUTOR:

Mumbling of texts by window, by lamp-
light
freezes and sours the taste of hopes once
bright,
my progress through the halls of examina-
tion
thwarted, here I dither in desperation.
'Mid sighs for scholarship run down to
waste
only my asthma flourishes apace.

While my coughing waxes
wine-cups tend to wane
an income supplied by village lads
brings little smoke to my kitchen.
"Is there no one at home
up there in Heaven
to take pity on the sorrowful
crane-white locks of a sage?"

I am Ch'en Tsui-liang, styled Po-ts'ui, graduate
of the prefectural academy at Nan-an. My father
and grandfather both were medical practitioners;
I myself followed the path of learning from an
early age, entered the academy at twelve and
was eventually included among the recipients
of government support. Fifteen times in forty-
five years I sat for examination until I had the

misfortune to have my stipend cut off by the
Supervisor, merely because I was placed in the
lowest grade. On top of that, for two years past
I have failed to find any post as tutor. Now,
instead of Ch'en Tsui-liang, "Ch'en So Good,"
the young fellows delight in calling me Ch'en
Ch'eh-liang, "Ch'en No Food,"¹ and because of
my expertise in medicine, divination, geomancy
and such, they have changed my style from Po-
ts'ui, "Lord of Pure Essence" to Po-tsa-sui,
"Jack-of-all-professions." Next year I shall com-
plete my sixth decade, but I have no expectation
of any improvement. I still keep going a herb-
shop started by my grandfather. "When a scholar
turns to medicine he takes leave of meat."—
But no more of this. Yesterday news came that
our Prefect Tu was seeking a tutor for his
daughter. Applicants came swarming for the
post—and why? Reason one: to have something
to brag about in their own village. Reason two:
to have the chance of a bribe or two for a bit of
dirty work. Reason three: to hitch their wagon.
Reason four: to get in with the servants on the
job of cooking the books. Reason five: to trump-
pet around the news of their promotion. Reason
six: to lord it over their inferiors. Reason seven:
to deceive their wives. Seven good reasons why

¹ Confucius, according to the Analects, "went without
grain in the state of Ch'en." This elaborate pun has thus

an additional layer of classical allusion.

they all came tumbling head over heels. Little do they know the perils of service in an official's yamen! Moreover a girl pupil is always a problem. It won't do to be either too lenient or too strict, and if one runs into a problem of face now and then one can neither scare her nor make her cry. Some old fellow like myself would be best:

No other cure for heart sore vexed:
just let me bury my head in a text.

[Enter a PUPIL from the prefectural school:]

Show me the teacher who isn't a pauper
or the pupil who isn't a cunning rogue.

[Greets CH'EN:] Congratulations, Professor Ch'en!

CH'EN: Congratulations on what?

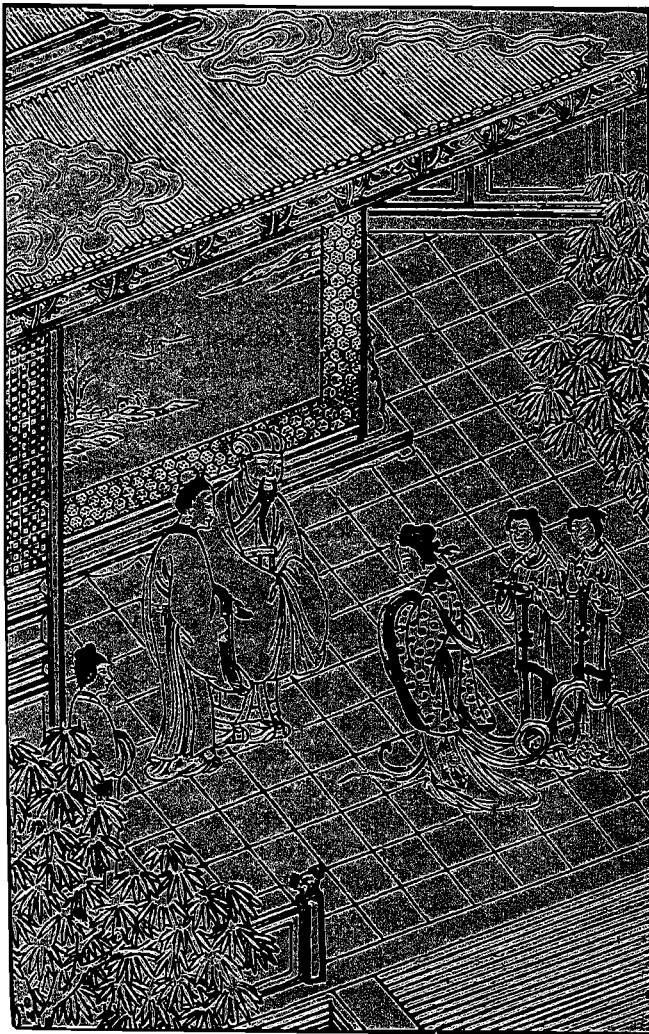
PUPIL: Prefect Tu is seeking a tutor for his daughter, and the Director of the Prefectural Academy turned down a dozen names because he wanted a man of experience. I went to the Director's office and recommended you, and here is his letter of invitation.

CH'EN: "The human vice is the urge to teach others," as Mencius said.

PUPIL: Don't worry about the "human vice." What about "human rice"? At least you'll be fed.

CH'EN: Let's leave it at that, then. [They begin to walk.]

Now to sew my scarf when it's worn to holes,



TU LI-NIANG: "*The virtuous young lady is ever a very mirror of decorum.*"

repair my shoes when they need new soles.

PUPIL: If it hadn't been for my efforts
you'd never have found this post.

PUPIL: Now that you're in the tutor's seat
you'll be able to get a new seat for your
pants.

CH'EN: Let me first see if I can keep it
before I repay your kindness.

CH'EN: If I'm not to sour
the rice that will come my way
I must rinse my mouth
with water from my writing-tray
and to guard against the stench from all
those pickles
from now on a toothpick will come in
handy.

CH'EN, PUPIL: Fifth of the fifth month, ninth of the
ninth
when the teacher's fees are paid
then you'll see him leave the yamen
clutching his bulging sleeves.

PUPIL: Now here we are at the Prefect's gate.

Scene Five: Engaging the Tutor

[Enter TU PAO with attendants and underlings.]

TU PAO:

The mountains are at their loveliest
and court cases dwindle.
"The birds I saw off at dawn, at dusk I
watch return,"
petals from the vase cover my seal-case,
the curtains hang undisturbed.
Though I may not aspire to the noble
standard
of Tu Shih, "Mother of his Prefecture,"
in the days of Han,
yet may I take my ease here in Nan-an
as once Duke Chao of Chou beneath the
sweet-apple.¹
Many are the unsung acts of grace
my government has accomplished
but still I find on "the steps of my hall"
no "jade-tree," no "orchid"—no son at
my knee.
I, Tu Pao, Prefect of this region, have a family
limited to my wife and a single daughter for
whom I am seeking a tutor. Yesterday the Pre-
fectural Academy recommended a salaried scho-

¹"Sweet apple," *kan-t'ang*, is in fact used as a metaphor
for a respected official, following the poem by this title in
the *Book of Songs* which is a eulogy of Duke Chao of

lar for the post, one Ch'en Tsui-liang. This is a
sexagenarian who has filled his belly with books,
a man most suitable both as instructor for my
daughter and as companion for my aged self.
Today I shall suspend official duties so that my
subordinates may welcome him with wine and
due ceremony.

[All chorus assent. Enter CH'EN TSUI-LIANG in
scholar's cap and blue robe. He sings:]

Screw the courage
twist the argument:
gown and cap slip away as my old age
withers
but still I "overflow"² and must be treated
"with equal pomp as one who shares this
hall."

ATTENDANT: Professor Ch'en is at the gate.

TU PAO: Invite him in.

[ATTENDANT announces CH'EN:] The graduate of
the Prefectural Academy of Nan-an.

[Exit ATTENDANT. CH'EN kneels, rises, bows and
kneels again:] The graduate Ch'en Tsui-liang
prostrates himself.

[Prostrates himself:]

"Let learned discourse lighten library"

Chou.

²See scene 2, note 1.

TU PAO:

"exalted scholar, gem of our assembly"

CH'EN:

"be trencher and flagon readied for exchange"

TU:

"and seats for guest and host drawn in due order."

While Professor Ch'en and I engage in lofty conversation, dismiss my staff and have my household servants wait on us.

[All chorus assent and withdraw, making way for serving boys] I have long been aware, Sir, of your learned reputation. May I venture to ask your age, and your family history of scholarship?

CH'EN: Permit me to declare.

Already I "incline my ear"
to the Way, being close to sixty;
I approach the "historically rare"
—that is, when I shall be seventy.
Frost at the temples disguised by scholar's cap.

TU: And most recently?

CH'EN:

The study of healing marks the Superior Man:
the "sign of the hanging pot" has been passed
down generations of my house.

TU: Oh, so your family have been medical practitioners. What other skills do you possess?

CH'EN:

All arts and skills
I can attempt
but in the schools of logic
lie my special gifts.

TU: Well, all these things will come in useful.

Name long known
though now first met,
indeed a great scholar worthy of our nation.

CH'EN:

I should not presume. . . .

TU:

My daughter has some claim to learning
I would wish you, as a textual critic
to impart to her a certain gloss.

CH'EN: I shall do as you wish, but I fear I may not be cut out to be a tutor for the young lady.

TU:

To this girl-scholar
you will be another Pan Chao
who taught the ladies of the palace.³
Today is selected as of good omen
to have her salute you as tutor.

Sound the "cloud-board," in the yard there, to summon the young mistress.

[Enter LI-NIANG attended by SPRING FRAGRANCE]

LI-NIANG:

Brows limned black with emerald sheen,
pendants swaying at waist,
pictured beauty steps as from brodered screen.

Lotus feet in tripping measure
set long ago as mark of her reverence
by the daughter of the Master, Confucius himself,
scion of scholars' line I now appear.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Now that your teacher is here, what are we to do?

LI-NIANG: We must go. Understand, my bondmaid,

The virtuous young lady
is ever a very mirror of decorum.
You also must gain some little learning
to improve yourself as my maid.

ATTENDANT: The young mistress!

[LI-NIANG greets her father. TU PAO:] Come here, child.

"Jade unsculpted
unfit for use;
person untutored
unaware of the Way."

Make obeisance before your tutor on this auspicious day.

[Drums and pipes sound from within.]

LI-NIANG, making obeisance: Your student, to her shame "waving as reed or willow," still dares to seek instruction "ripe as peach or plum."

CH'EN Unworthy to accept the regard of a "jewel held in the palm," still I make bold to "sculpt th jade."

TU: Spring Fragrance, prostrate yourself before Tutor Ch'en as the young mistress' "reading companion."

³See scene 3, note 5.

[SPRING FRAGRANCE prostrates herself]

CH'EN: May I enquire what books the young lady has studied?

TU: She has memorized the *Four Books* and the *Four Books for Ladies*, so now she should study something of the classics proper. The *Changes* set forth the cosmic duality of Yin and Yang in mysteries too profound for her; the *Documents* treat of government and are of no concern to a woman; the *Springs and Autumns* and the *Rites* are "orphan texts," being isolated works. *The Book of Songs*, however, devotes its very first lines to the virtue of the consort,⁴ a most appropriate beginning; moreover, as my ancestor the great Tu Fu once wrote, "the *Songs* are our family occupation"—she should study the *Songs*. Of course all the other works and histories would be very well, did she not have the misfortune to be a girl.

Through twoscore years and ten
books have been my delight
"my shelves hold thirty thousand ivory
tallies."

⁴In the view, that is, of the orthodox Confucian commentators, who glossed the opening *Song* (a love-lyric) as a eulogy to the consort of the prince.

[He sighs:]

Like Ts'ai Yung lacking sons, to whom
shall I pass
this rich inheritance of learning?

Tutor Ch'en, let her read what she wants to read. If she falls short of the standard, beat the maidservant.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Ai-yo!

TU:

For my daughter "capped and grown"
she will be a companion in learning
so this little "fragrant plum-blossom"
of a maid must be carefully watched.

CH'EN: I shall take note of this.

TU: Spring Fragrance, help the young mistress to her chamber while I take wine with Tutor Ch'en.

SPRING FRAGRANCE, with an obeisance:

A tutor may get high at "high table,"
but can a lady be a "gentleman-scholar"?⁵

[She exits with LI-NIANG]

TU: Now, Sir, take a drink with me in the rear garden.

⁵The pert maid is punning here on quotes from the *Analects*, deliberately misreading *hsien-sheng* ("elder") as "teacher" and *ju* ("you") as "nü," "woman."

Scene Seven: The Schoolroom

CH'EN TSUI-LIANG:

Droning verses, re-revising
lines composed last spring
pondering, my belly filled,
the taste of the noontime tea;
ants climb up the table leg
to skirt the ink-slab pool
bees invade the window-screen
to raid the blooms in my vase.

Here in the Prefect's residence I, Ch'en Tsui-liang, have "hung my bedcurtain" so that I may instruct the daughter of the house in the *Book of Songs*. The mistress Madam Chen is treating

¹The first stanza of the first of the *Songs*. Actually a folk love-lyric, this like many more of the *Songs* was traditionally interpreted in didactic fashion as expressing popular esteem for a benevolent prince or what not. I use

me with the greatest kindness. Now that breakfast is over I shall immerse myself for a while in the *Songs*.

[He intones:]

"Kwan-kwan cry the ospreys
on the islet in the river.
So delicate the virtuous maiden
A fit mate for our Prince."¹

"Fit," that is to say, "fit"; "mate," that is to say, "seeking."

[He looks about:] How late it gets, and still no sign of my pupil. Horribly spoiled! Let me try three raps on the cloud-board.

Legge's translation both to accord with this kind of interpretation and for the sake of its by now somewhat fustian quality.

[He raps the cloud-board:] Spring Fragrance, summon the young mistress for her lesson.

[Enter TU LI-NIANG followed by SPRING FRAGRANCE bearing books. LI-NIANG:]

Lightly adorned for morning
to library leisurely strolling;
low tables bathe in rays of window's
brightness.

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

Words of Worth from the Ancients
—what a deadly thought!

but when I'm through

I'll be able to teach the parrot to order
tea.

[They greet TUTOR CH'EN. LI-NIANG:] Our best respects, esteemed sir.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: We hope you're not vexed, esteemed sir.

CH'EN: As the *Rites* prescribe, "it is proper for a daughter at first cock-crow to wash her hands, to rinse her mouth, to dress her hair, to pin the same, to pay respects to father and mother." Once sun is up then each should attend to her affairs. You are now a pupil and your business is to study: you will need to rise earlier than this.

LI-NIANG: We shall not be late again.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: We understand. Tonight we won't go to bed so that we can present ourselves for our lesson in the middle of the night.

CH'EN: Have you rehearsed the portion of the *Songs* I presented yesterday?

LI-NIANG: I have, but await your interpretation.

CH'EN: Let me hear you.

LI-NIANG recites:

"*Kwan-kwan* cry the ospreys
On the islet in the river.
So delicate the virtuous maiden
A fit mate for our Prince."

CH'EN: Now note the interpretation.

"*Kwan-kwan* cry the ospreys":

the osprey is a bird; "*kwan-kwan*," that is to say, its cry.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: What sort of cry is that?

[CH'EN imitates the call of the osprey. SPRING FRAGRANCE ad libs an imitation of CH'EN imitating the osprey. CH'EN:] This bird being a lover of quiet, it is on an islet in the river.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Quite right. Either yesterday

or the day before, this year or last year some time, I lost a needle when I was sewing down by the stream. Then an osprey got trapped in the young mistress' room and she set it free and it found my needle for me, and when we looked there it was, on an eyelet in the river.

CH'EN: Rubbish. This is a 'detached image.'

SPRING FRAGRANCE: What, a graven image? Who detached it?

CH'EN: To "image," that is to say, to introduce thoughts of: It introduces the thought of the "delicate virtuous maiden," who is a nice quiet girl waiting for the prince to come seeking her.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: What's he seeking from her?

CH'EN: Now you are being impudent.

LI-NIANG: My good tutor, to interpret the text by means of the notes is something I can do for myself. I should like you rather to instruct me in the overall significance of the *Book of Songs*.

CH'EN:

Of all Six Classics
the *Book of Songs* is the flower
with "Airs" and "Refinements" most apt
for lady's chamber:
for practical instruction
Ch'ang-yuan bears her offspring
"treading in the print of God's big toe";
warning against jealousy
shine the virtues of queen and consort.

And then there are the

"Song of the Cockcrow,"
the "Lament for the Swallows,"
"Tears by the Riverbank,"
"Longings by the Han River"
to cleanse the face of rouge:
in every verse an edifying homily
to "fit a maid for husband and for family."

LI-NIANG: How long is the book?

CH'EN: "The *Songs* are three hundred, but their meaning may be expressed in a single phrase":

no more than this,
"to set aside evil thoughts,"
and this I pass to you.

End of lesson. Spring Fragrance, fetch the "four jewels of the scholar's study" for our calligraphy.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Here are paper, ink, brushes and inkstone.

CH'EN: What sort of ink is this supposed to be?

LI-NIANG: Oh, she brought the wrong thing. This is "snail black," for painting the brows.

CH'EN: And what sort of brushes?

LI-NIANG, *laughing*: Mascara brushes.

CH'EN: Never did I see such things before! Take them away, take them away. And what sort of paper is this?

LI-NIANG: Notepaper woven by a famous courtesan.

CH'EN: Take it away, take it away. Bring such as was woven by the noble inventor of paper, the ancient Ts'ai Lun. And what sort of inkstone? Is it single or double?

LI-NIANG: It's not single, it's married.

CH'EN: And the "eye" patterns on it—what sort of eyes?

LI-NIANG: Weeping eyes.²

CH'EN: What are they weeping about?—Go change the whole lot.

[SPRING FRAGRANCE, *aside*:] Ignorant old rustic! [to CH'EN:] Very well. [She brings a new set:] Will these do?

[CH'EN examines them:] All right.

LI-NIANG: I believe I could copy some characters. Spring Fragrance, the brush please.

CH'EN: Let me see how you write.

[As LI-NIANG writes, he watches in amazement:] Never did I see writing of this quality! What is the model?

LI-NIANG: The model is "The Beauty Adorns her Hair with Blossoms," the style transmitted by the Lady Wei of Tsin times.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Let me do some characters in the style of "The Maid Apes Her Mistress."

LI-NIANG: Wait a while.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Master, I beg leave to be excused—to leave the room and excuse myself. [She exits.]

LI-NIANG: Esteemed tutor, may I inquire what age your lady has attained?

CH'EN: She will shortly reach the age of sixty.

LI-NIANG: If you would let me have the pattern, I should like to embroider a pair of slippers for her birthday.

CH'EN: Thank you. The pattern should be from *Mencius*, "to make sandals without knowledge of the foot."

LI-NIANG: Spring Fragrance isn't back yet.

CH'EN: Shall I call her? [He calls thrice.]

[Enter SPRING FRAGRANCE:] Clapping like that—I'll give him the clap!

LI-NIANG, *annoyed*: What have you been doing, silly creature?

SPRING FRAGRANCE, *laughing*: Peeling. But I found a lovely big garden full of pretty flowers and willows,³ lots of fun.

CH'EN: Dear dear, instead of studying she is off to the garden. Let me fetch a bramble switch.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: What do you want a bramble switch for?

How can a girl

take the examinations and fill an office?

All it's for is to

read a few characters and scrawl a few crow's-feet.

CH'EN: There were students in ancient times who put fireflies in a bag or read by the moon.

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

If you use reflected moonlight

you'll dazzle the toad up there;

as for fireflies in a bag

just think of the poor things burning!

CH'EN: Then what about the man who tied his hair to a beam to keep from nodding off, or the scholar who prodded himself awake with an awl in the thigh?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: If you were to try

tying your hair to a beam

you wouldn't have much left,

and pricking your thighs

you'd be even scabbier than you are.

What's so glorious about that?

[A flower-vendor's cry comes from within.]

Listen, young mistress,

²Inkstones of a highly-prized variety made at Tuan-hsi in Kwang-tung were decorated with patterns of "eyes" carved to follow the natural grain of the stone. If the "eyes" were not "bright eyes," clear-cut, they were known as "weeping eyes," or worse, "dead eyes."

³"Flowers and willows": this euphemism for "syphilis" reinforces the "clap" of her previous speech. We are no doubt to assume that Li-niang remains innocent of these suggestions of her maid, aimed at Tutor Ch'en.

a flower-vendor's cry
drowns out the drone of studies.

you who carry a "burden of thorns"
like a criminal craving pardon!

CH'EN: Again she distracts the young lady. This
time I shall really beat her. *[He moves to do so.*

*[She grabs the bramble switch and throws it to the
floor. LI-NIANG:]* You wicked creature, kneel
at once for such rudeness to the tutor. *[SPRING
FRAGRANCE kneels]* Since this is her first
offence, Sir, perhaps it will be enough if I give
her a scolding:

SPRING FRAGRANCE, *dodging:*

Try and beat me then
poor little me
—this "peach-like plum-like pupil"
will make you look such a fool,

Your hands must not touch the garden
swing



SPRING FRAGRANCE:
*"Bondmaid with petalled
cheeks, just into my teens;
sweet and charming, wide
awake to the spring's arrival."*

nor your feet tread the garden path.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Just you see.

LI-NIANG: If you answer back, we shall have to scorch with an incense-stick these lips of yours that blow breezes of malice, blind with a sewing-needle these eyes that blossom into nothing but trouble.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: And what use would my eyes be then?

LI-NIANG: I would insist that you hold to the inkstone stand fast by the desk attend to "it is written in the *Songs*" be there when "the Master says" and do not let your thoughts wander.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Oh, do let's wander a little!

[LI-NIANG seizes her by the hair:] Do you want as many

weals on your back as there are hairs on your head? I'll have you show respect for the "controller of the household" —the whip Madame Chen my mother keeps in her room!

SPRING FRAGRANCE: I won't do it again.

LI-NIANG: You understand then?

CH'EN: That will be enough, we shall let her go this time. Get up.

[SPRING FRAGRANCE rises to her feet. CH'EN:] Except she lacks ambition for the fame of office instruction of the girl pupil parallels the boy's.

Only when you have finished studying your lesson may you return to the Prefect's residence. Now I shall go exchange a few words with your father.

ALL THREE: Why should we waste

this new green gauze on the sunlit window?

[Exit CH'EN TSUI-LIANG. SPRING FRAGRANCE points scornfully at his retreating back:] Ignorant old ox, dopey old dog, not an ounce of understanding.

[LI-NIANG tugs at her sleeve:] Stupid creature, "a tutor for a day is a father for a lifetime." Do you think he is incapable of beating you? But tell me, where is this garden of yours?

[SPRING FRAGRANCE refusing to speak, LI-NIANG gives an embarrassed laugh and asks again. SPRING FRAGRANCE points:] Over there of course!

LI-NIANG: What is there to look at?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Oh, lots to look at, half a dozen pavilions, one or two swings, a meandering stream one can float winecups down, weathered T'ai-hu rocks on the other bank. It's really beautiful, with all those prize blooms and rare plants.

LI-NIANG: How surprising to find such a place. But now we must go back to the house.

Scene Nine: The Secluded Garden

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

Little Spring Fragrance favoured among the servants used to pampered ways within the painted chambers waiting on the young mistress I mix her powder, match her rouge set her feather adornments, arrange her

flowers ever waiting beside the boudoir mirror ready to smoothe the brocaded quilt ready to light the fragrant night-time incense urged on by Madam's stick on my puny shoulders.

Bondmaid with petalled cheeks
 just into my teens
 sweet and charming, wide awake
 to the spring's arrival.
 A real "passion-flower"
 is what we need now
 to follow our every step
 with admiring glances.

Day and night you will find me, Spring Fragrance, by the side of my young mistress. She, though she might win fame above all others for her beauty, is more concerned with jealous guarding of the family reputation. Maiden modesty composes her gentle features, and it is her nature to be serious and reverent. The master having engaged a tutor to instruct her, she commenced the study of the *Book of Songs*: but when she reached the lines "So delicate the virtuous maiden, A fit mate for our Prince," she quietly put the book down and sighed, "Here we may observe the full extent of the sages' sentiments. As men felt in ancient times, so they feel today, and how should it be other than this?" So then I suggested, "Miss, you are tired from your studies, why don't you think of some way to amuse yourself?" She hesitated and thought for a moment. Then she got to her feet. "And how would you have me amuse myself, Spring Fragrance?" she asked me. So I said, "Why, miss, nothing special, just to take a walk in that garden behind the house." "Stupid creature," says the young mistress, "what would happen if the governor found out?" But I said, "The governor has been out visiting the country districts for several days now." Then for ages the young mistress walked up and down thinking, not saying a word, until at last she began to consult the calendar. She said tomorrow was a bad day, and the day after not very good, but the day after that is a propitious day because the God of Pleasure Trips is on duty for the day. I was to tell the gardener to sweep the paths ready for her visit. I said I would. I'm scared of Madam finding out, but there's nothing we can do about that. So let me go give the gardener his instructions. Hello, there's Tutor Ch'en at the other end of the verandah. Truly,

On every side the glory of the spring
 and what does this old fool see?—Not a thing.

[Enter CH'EN:]

Ageing book-lover
 now for a while "within the green gauze tent"
 where once the learned Ma Jung gave instruction

I draw the curtains against the warmth of the sun.

Ha, there on the verandah
 young girl with hair in double coil
 seeming to speak, but wordless
 closer now, who can it be?

Oh, it's Spring Fragrance. Tell me,
 where is your gracious lord
 and where his lady?

And why is my pupil absent from her lessons?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Oh, it's you, Tutor Ch'en. I'm afraid the young mistress has not had time for classes these last few days.

CH'EN: And why is that?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: I'll tell you:
 Spring in its splendour
 cruel to a sensitive nature
 —everything's gone wrong.

CH'EN: Why, what has gone wrong?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Ah, you've no idea how angry the governor is going to be with you.

CH'EN: For what reason?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Why, that *Book of Songs* of yours, you've been singing a bit too sweetly, my poor young mistress—

your classical exegesis
 has turned her heart to thoughts of love.

CH'EN: All I did was explicate the line "*Kwan-kwan* cry the ospreys."

SPRING FRAGRANCE: That was the one. *Kwan* means "shut in," doesn't it? My young mistress said, "Even though the ospreys were shut in, they still had the freedom of the island: why should a human being be treated worse than a bird?"

In books the head must be buried
 but it lifts itself to gaze on a scene of beauty.

Now she has ordered me to take her in a day or two to stroll in the garden behind the house.
 CH'EN: What will be the purpose of this stroll?

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

Unsuspected the spring has struck
and before it hastens past
she must cast off there in the garden
spring's disquiet.

CH'EN: She should not do this.

When woman walks abroad
lest eyes should light upon her
at every step she should be screened from
view.

Spring Fragrance, by the grace of Heaven, I your
tutor have enjoyed some sixty years of life, yet
never have I felt any such thing as "spring-
struck," nor have I ever strolled in any garden.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Why not?

CH'EN: You should learn how aptly Mencius put
the matter. The myriad sayings of the sage are
devoted to this alone: to urge men to "retrieve
their lost goodness of heart."

But the way the world goes
they claim some "spring-struck" state
and demand some sort of "spring stroll."

And in "seeing out the spring"
they see out also the springs of goodness
in their own hearts.

For the time being, then, if the young lady will
not be taking her lessons I shall request a few
days' leave. Spring Fragrance,
go often to the classroom
make frequent visits to the shrine of
learning
for fear the swallows' droppings
spatter with filth the lute and the books
therein.

I shall leave you now.

Young lady leaves brocaded chamber
to idle among the flowers
while like the ancient Tung Chung-shu
I con my texts behind drawn shades
with never a glance at the garden.

[*He exits.* SPRING FRAGRANCE:] How lovely,
Tutor Ch'en has gone away. Now, I wonder if
the gardener's there? [*She calls:*] Gardener!

[*Enter GARDENER'S LAD, tipsy:*]

Just a lad who tends the blooms in the
garden
flower-seller too (*on the side*)—beg your
pardon.
Runners grab me

sergeants nab me
and ooh, this hot rice wine
makes a pot of boiled sausage out of my
intestines.

[*Sees SPRING FRAGRANCE:*] Hello, Miss Fragrance.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: You should have a beating,
sneaking out on the street to cadge wine, and
no vegetables delivered for days now.

LAD: That's the greengrocer's job.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: No water piped either.

LAD: That's the water-carrier's job.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: No flowers delivered either.

LAD: I've brought flowers every morning, a bunch
for Madam, a bunch for the young mistress.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: What about the third bunch?

LAD: I'm sorry, I deserve a beating.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: What's your name?

LAD: Flower-lad.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Well, make up a song for me
about your name. If it's a good one I'll let you
off your beating.

LAD: All right.

Bedding-plants have I set out, wave on
wave like the sea,
but you're as succulent a shoot as ever I
did see.

Let's do some bedding-out today while
the sun shines merrily
but what if my little blossom withers
under me?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Now here's a song for you:

Troubles you have brought about, wave
on wave like the sea
—just you dare come looking for some-
thing nice from me!

LAD: Ai-yo!

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Just you wait
till I go tell the governor, then perhaps
we'll see

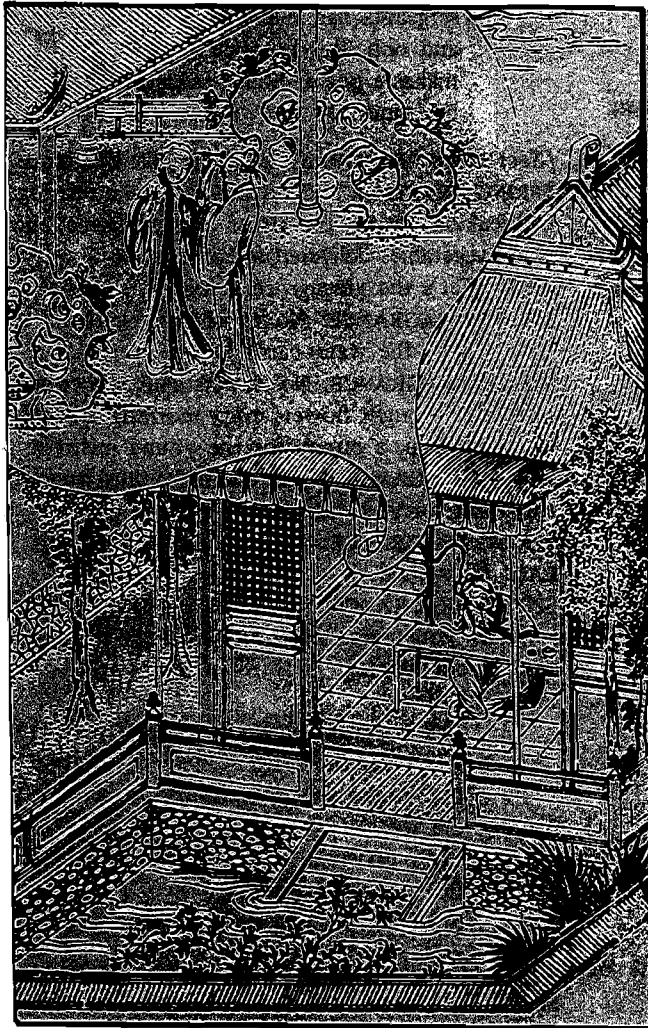
[*She seizes him by the hair:*]

how a bamboo rod or two can prune your
apple-tree!

[*LAD, falling flat:*] All right, I give up. To what do
we owe the honour of this visit, Miss?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: The young mistress will be
coming to view the garden in three days' time,
so make sure the paths are swept.

LAD: It will be done.



*"In secret dreams by whose side
do I lie? Hidden longings roll with
the spring-swelling stream, linger-
ing where to reveal my true de-
sires!"*

Scene Ten: The Interrupted Dream

TU LI-NIANG:

Orioles dream-waking coil their song
through all the brilliant riot of the new
season
to the listener in the tiny leaf-locked
court.

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

Burnt to ashes the aloes-wood
cast aside the broidering thread
no longer able as in past years
to quiet stirrings of the spring's passions.

LI-NIANG:

Like one "eyeing the plum-flower to slake
her thirst"
at dawn, cheeks blurred with last night's
rouge
I gaze at Plum-flower Pass.

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

The coils of your hair
dressed with silken swallows in the mode of
spring
tilt aslant as you lean
across the balustrade.

LI-NIANG:

Rootless ennui
 “where are the scissors can cut,
 the comb can untangle this grief?”

SPRING FRAGRANCE:

I have told the oriole and the swallow
 to leave their urging of the flowers
 and with spring as their excuse
 to come look at you.

LI-NIANG: Spring Fragrance, have you given orders
 for the paths to be swept?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Yes.

LI-NIANG: Now bring my mirror and my gown.

[SPRING FRAGRANCE, *re-entering with these:*]

“Cloud coiffure set to perfection
 still she questions the mirror
 robe of gauze soon to be changed
 still she dabs on perfume.”

I’ve brought your mirror and gown.

LI-NIANG:

The spring a rippling thread
 of gossamer gleaming sinuous in the sun
 borne idly across the court.
 Pausing to straighten
 the flower heads of hair-ornaments
 I tremble to find that my mirror
 stealing its half-glance at my hair
 has thrown these “gleaming clouds”
 into alarmed disarray.

[*She takes a few steps:*]

Walking here in my chamber
 how should I dare let others see my form!

SPRING FRAGRANCE: How beautifully you are
 dressed and adorned today!

LI-NIANG:

See now how vivid shows my madder skirt
 how brilliant gleam these combs all set
 with gems

—you see, it has been
 always in my nature to love fine things.
 And yet, this bloom of springtime no eye
 has seen.

What if my beauty should amaze the birds
 and out of shame for the comparison

¹A prince of the T’ang court strung tiny gold bells on red thread to hang on the stems of flowers and instructed the gardener to tug the thread when necessary to scare off the birds. Here Spring Fragrance, though aware that this was done out of compassion for the flowers, takes sensibility a stage further by lamenting the burden they must

“cause fish to sink, wild geese to fall to
 earth,
 petals to close, the moon to hide her face”
 while all the flowers tremble?

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Please come now, it’s almost
 breakfast-time. [*They begin to walk.*]

Look how

while on the lacquered walkway
 traces of gold-dust glitter
 there on the lodge at pool’s edge
 mosses make a green mass.

Timid lest the grass stain
 out newly-broidered socks
 we grieve that the flowers must bear
 the tug of tiny gold bells.¹

LI-NIANG: Without visiting this garden, how could
 I ever have realized this splendour of spring!

See how deepest purple, brightest scarlet
 open their beauty only to the dry well’s
 crumbling parapet.

“Bright the morn, lovely the scene,” list-
 less and lost the heart
 —where is the garden “gay with joyous
 cries”?

My mother and father have never spoken of any
 such exquisite spot as this.

LI-NIANG, SPRING FRAGRANCE:

Flying clouds of dawn, rolling storm at
 dusk
 pavilion in emerald shade against the sun-
 set glow
 fine threads of rain, petals borne on breeze
 gilded pleasure-boat in waves of mist:
 sights little treasured by the cloistered
 maid

who sees them only on a painted screen.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: All the flowers have come
 into bloom now, but it’s still too early for the
 peony.

LI-NIANG:

The green hillside
 bleeds with the cuckoo’s tears of red
 azalea²

bear.

²An involved word-play here. *Tu-chüan*: means both a flower, the azalea, and a bird, the cuckoo. An old legend related that the Prince of Shu in ancient times was transformed after death into the cuckoo, which ever since has wept tears of blood.

shreds of mist lazy as wine-fumes thread
the sweetbriar.

However fine the peony
how can she rank as queen
coming to bloom when spring has said
farewell!

SPRING FRAGRANCE: See them pairing, orioles and
swallows!

SPRING FRAGRANCE, LI-NIANG:

Idle gaze resting
there where the voice of swallow shears
the air
and liquid flows the trill of oriole.

LI-NIANG: We must go now.

SPRING FRAGRANCE: Really one would never
weary of enjoying this garden.

LI-NIANG: How true. [*They begin to walk back.*]

Unwearying joy—how should we break
its spell
even by visits each in turn
to each of the Twelve Towers of Fairy-
land?
But better now, as first elation passes
to find back in our chamber
some pastime for idle hours.

[*They reach the house.* SPRING FRAGRANCE:]

Open the west chamber door
in the east room make the bed
fill the vase with azalea
light aloes in the incense-burner.
Take your rest now, young mistress, while I go
to report to Madam. [*She exits.*]

LI-NIANG, *sighing*:

Back from spring stroll
to silent room
what to do but try on
the spring's new adornments?
Ah spring, now that you and I have formed so
strong an attachment, what shall I find to fill

³See scene 2, note 4.

⁴*Poem on the Red Leaf (T'i-hung-chi)* is the title of a play by T'ang Hsien-tsu's friend, Wang Chih-te. The theme is taken from the T'ang story of the Lady Han, who wrote a poem on a red leaf which she set adrift on the water of the palace drain. The leaf was found by Yu Yu, who returned a message to her by similar means, and eventually met and married her. The Western Chamber (*Hsi-hsiang-chi*) is Wang Shih-fu's famous play on romance, again of

my days when you are past? Oh this weather, how sleepy it makes one feel. Where has Spring Fragrance got to? [*She looks about her, then lowers her head again, pondering.*] Ah heaven, now I begin to realize how disturbing the spring's splendour can truly be. They were all telling the truth, those poems and ballads I read which spoke of girls of ancient times "in springtime moved to passion, in autumn to regret." Here am I at the "double eight," my sixteenth year, yet no fine "scholar to break the cassia bough" has come my way. My young passions stir to the young spring season, but where shall I find an "entrant of the moon's toad-palace"?³ Long ago the Lady Han found a way to a meeting with Yu Yu, and the scholar Chang met with Miss Ts'ui by chance. Their loves are told in the *Poem on the Red Leaf* and the *Western Chamber*,⁴ how these "fair maids and gifted youths" after clandestine meetings made marital unions "as between Ch'in and Tsin"—⁵ [*She gives a long sigh.*] Though born and bred of a noted line of holders of office, I have reached the age to "pin up my hair" without plan made for my betrothal to a suitable partner. The green spring-time of my own life passes unfulfilled, and swift the time speeds by as dawn and dusk interchange. [*She weeps.*] O pity one whose beauty is a bright flower, when life endures no longer than leaf on tree!

From turbulent heart these springtime
thoughts of love
will not be banished
—O from what spring, what hidden source
comes this sudden discontent?
I was a pretty child, and so
of equal eminence must the family be
truly immortals, no less
to receive me in marriage.
But for what grand alliance
is this springtime of my youth

T'ang times, of the scholar Chang and Ts'ui Ying-ying whom he met by chance on his visit to the temple in which she was lodging during a journey. In fact our text does not name the *Hsi-hsiang-chi* at this point but the *Tsui Hwei chuan*, the story of another Miss Ts'ui, but this seems an unnecessary complication.

⁵Two states of the "Springs and Autumns" period whose ruling families for generations made marriage alliances.

so cast away?
 Who may perceive
 these passions that lie dormant in my
 heart?
 My only course this coy delaying
 but in secret dreams
 by whose side do I lie?
 —hidden longings roll with the spring-
 swelling stream,
 Lingering
 where to reveal my true desires!
 Suffering
 this wasting
 where but to Heaven shall my lament be
 made!

I feel rather tired, I shall rest against this low
 table and drowse for a while. [*She falls asleep
 and begins to dream of LIU MENG-MEI, who
 enters bearing a branch of willow in his hand.*]

LIU MENG-MEI:

As song of oriole purls in warmth of sun
 so smiling lips open to greet romance.
 Tracing my path by petals borne on stream
 I find the Peach Blossom Source of my
 desire.⁶

I came along this way with Miss Tu—how is it
 that she is not with me now? [*He looks behind
 him and sees her.*] Ah, Miss Tu! [*She rises,
 startled from sleep, and greets him. He con-
 tinues.*] So this is where you were—I was
 looking for you everywhere. [*She glances shyly
 at him but does not speak.*] I just chanced to
 break off this branch from a weeping willow in
 the garden. You are so deeply versed in works
 of literature, I should like you to compose a
 poem to honour it. [*She starts in surprised de-
 light, and opens her lips to speak but checks
 herself. Aside, she says.*] I have never seen this
 young man in my life—what is he doing here?
 [*LIU, smiling at her.*] Lady, I am dying of love for
 you! I am the

partner born of fairest line
 for whom you wait as the river of years
 rolls past.

⁶Allusion to a story of Liu Ch'en and Juan Chao of
 Han times who found fairy love by following a "peach
 blossom spring" into the T'ien-t'ai ("Terrace of Heaven")
 Mountains. Even more celebrated is the Peach Blossom

Everywhere I have searched for you
 in compassion for you, secluded in your
 chamber.

Lady, come with me just over there where we
 can talk. [*She gives him a shy smile but refuses
 to move; he tries to draw her by the sleeve, and
 she asks in a low voice.*] Where do you mean?
 LIU:

There, just beyond this railing peony-lined
 against the mound of weathered T'ai-hu
 rocks.

[*LI-NIANG, in a low voice.*] But sir, what do you
 mean to do?

[*LIU, also in a low voice.*]

Open the fastening at your neck
 loosen the girdle at your waist
 while you
 screening your eyes with your sleeve
 white teeth clenched on the fabric as if
 against pain
 bear with me patiently a while
 then drift into gentle slumber.

[*LI-NIANG turns away, blushing. LIU advances to
 take her in his arms, but she resists him. LIU,
 LI-NIANG:*]

Somewhere at some past time you and I
 met.

Now we behold each other in solemn awe
 but do not say
 in this lovely place we should meet and
 speak no word.

[*LIU exits carrying off LI-NIANG by force. Enter
 FLOWER SPIRIT in red cloak strewn with petals
 and ornamental headdress on piled-up hair.*]

Commissioner of the Flowers' Blooming
 come with new season
 from Heaven of Blossom-Guard
 to fulfil the springtime's labours.
 Drenched in red petal rain
 the beholder, heartsore
 anchors his yearnings
 beyond the shining clouds.

Spring of an allegory by Tao Ch'ien describing, at the
 stream's source, a secluded Shangri-la upon which a mortal
 stumbled.

In my charge as Flower Spirit is this garden in the rear of the prefectural residence at Nan-an. Between Li-niang, daughter of Prefect Tu, and the young graduate Liu Meng-mei there exists a marriage-affinity which must some day be fulfilled, and now Miss Tu's heart has been so deeply moved by her spring strolling that she has summoned the graduate Liu into her dream. To cherish in compassion the "jade-like incense ones" is the special concern of a Flower Spirit, and that is why I am here to watch over her and to ensure that the "play of clouds and rain" will be a joyous experience for her.

Ah, how the male force surges and leaps as in the way of wanton bee he stirs the gale of her desire while her soul trembles at the dewy brink of a sweet, shaded vale. A mating of shadows, this, consummation within the mind no fruitful Effect but an apparition within the Cause. Ha, but now my flower-palace is sullied by lust.

I must use a falling petal to wake her.
[Scatters petals in the entrance to the stage:]

Loth she may be to loose herself from the sweet spellbound dream of spring's delight but petals flutter down like crimson snow.

So, graduate Liu, the dream is but half-complete. When it is over, be sure to see Miss Tu safely back to her chamber. I leave you now. [Exits.]
[Enter LIU MENG-MEI, leading LI-NIANG by the hand:] For this brief moment

nature was our comforter leaves for pillow, our bed a bed of flowers. Are you all right, Miss Tu? [She lowers her head.]

Disarrayed the clouds of her hair combs set with ruby and emerald falling aslant.

O lady, never forget how close I clasped you and with what tenderness longing only to make

of our two bodies one single flesh but bringing forth a glistening of rouge raindrops in the sun.

LI-NIANG: Sir, you must go now.

LI-NIANG, LIU:

Somewhere at some past time you and I met.

Now we behold each other in solemn awe but do not say in this lovely place we should meet and speak no word.

LIU: Lady, you must be tired now. Please take a rest. [He sees her back to the table against which she had been drowsing, and gently taps her sleeve:] Lady, I am going now. [Looking back at her:] Lady, have a good rest now, I shall come to see you again.

Rain threatened the spring garden as she approached and when she slept the "clouds and rain" broke over Wu-shan, hill of fairy love.

[He exits. LI-NIANG wakes with a start, and calls in a low voice:] Young sir, young sir, oh you have left me.

[She falls asleep again. Enter MADAM CHEN:]

Husband on Prefect's dais daughter in cloistered chamber —yet when she broiders patterns on a dress above the flowers the birds fly all in pairs. Child, child, what are you doing asleep in a place like this?

[LI-NIANG wakes and calls again after LIU MENG-MEI:] Oh, oh.

[MADAM CHEN:] Why child, what is the matter?

[Startled, LI-NIANG rises to her feet:] Mother, it's you!

MADAM CHEN: Child, why aren't you passing your time pleasantly with needlework or a little reading? Why were you lying here sleeping in the middle of the day?

LI-NIANG: Just now I took an idle stroll in the garden, but all at once the raucousness of the birds began to distress me and so I came back to my room. Lacking any means to while away the time I must have fallen asleep for a moment. Please excuse my failure to receive you in proper fashion.

MADAM CHEN: The rear garden is too lonely and deserted, child. You must not go strolling there again.

LI-NIANG: I shall take care to do as you bid, mother.

MADAM CHEN: Off to the schoolroom with you now for your lesson.

LI-NIANG: We are having a break just now, the tutor is not here.

MADAM CHEN, *sighing*: There must always be troubles when a girl approaches womanhood, and she must be left to her own ways. Truly, moiling and toiling in the children's wake many the pains a mother needs must take.

[*She exits. LI-NIANG, watching her leave and sighing heavily:*] Ah Heaven, Li-niang, what strange adventures have befallen you today! Chancing to visit the garden behind the house I found a hundred different flowers in bloom everywhere, and the beauty of the scene set my heart in turmoil. When my elation passed and I came back I fell into a midday slumber here in my incense-laden chamber. Suddenly a most handsome and elegant youth appeared, of age just fit for the "capping ceremony" of the twentieth year. He had broken off a branch from a willow in the garden, and he smiled and said to me, "Lady, you are so deeply versed in works of literature, I should like you to compose a poem in honour of this willow branch." I was on the point of replying when the thought came to me that I had never seen this man in my life before and did not even know his name. How should I so lightly enter into conversation with him? But just as this was in my mind he came close and began to speak fond words to me; then taking me in his arms he carried me to a spot beside the peony pavilion, beyond the railings which the tree-peonies line, and there together we found the "joys of cloud and rain." Passion was matched by passion, and indeed a thousand fond caresses, a million tendernesses passed between us. After our bliss was accomplished he led me back to where I had been sleeping and many times said "Rest now." Then, just as I

was about to see him off, suddenly my mother came into my room and woke me. Now perspiration chills all my body—it was no more than a "dream of Nan-k'o, the human world in an anthill." I hastened to greet my mother with the proper decorum, and was duly given a good talking-to. Though there was nothing I could say in my defence, how can I now free my mind from memories of all that happened in my dream? Walking or sitting still I find no peace, all I can feel is a sense of loss. Ah mother, you tell me to be off to the schoolroom to my lesson—but what kind of book has lessons to lighten this heavy heart! [*She weeps, screening her face with her sleeve.*]

Through scudding of "clouds and rain"
I had touched the borders of dream
when the lady my mother
called me, alas! and broke
this slumber by window's sunlit green.
Now clammy cold a perspiration breaks
now heart numbs, footsteps falter
thought fails, hair slants awry
and whether to sit or stand
is more than mind can decide
—then let me sleep again.

[*Enter SPRING FRAGRANCE:*]

Against the coming of night
rid cheeks of powder's traces
against the damp of spring
add incense to the burner.

Young mistress, I have aired the bedclothes for you to sleep now.

LI-NIANG:

For heart spring-burdened, limbs
now lax from garden strolling
no need of incense-aired
brocaded covers to entice to slumber.

Ah Heaven

Let the dream I dreamed be not yet fled
too far.

(For Chinese text of Scenes Nine and Ten see page 181)