

# **A CHINESE GIRL GRADUATE**

R. K. DOUGLAS



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Who among the three hundred million sons of Han does not know the saying:

There's Paradise above, 't is true;  
But here below we've Hang and Soo?  
[Hangchow and Soochow]

And though no one will deny the beauty of those far-famed cities, they cannot compare in grandeur of situation and boldness of features with many of the towns of the providence of the "Four Streams." Foremost among the favoured spots of this part of the empire is Mienchu, which, as its name implies, is celebrated for the silky bamboos which grow in its immediate neighbourhood. These form, however, only one of the features of its loveliness. Situated at the foot of a range of mountains which rise through all the gradations from rich and abundant verdure to the region of eternal snow, it lies embosomed in groves of beech, cypress, and bamboo, through the leafy screens of which rise the upturned yellow roofs of the temples and official residences, which dot the landscape like golden islands in an emerald sea; while beyond the wall hurries, between high and rugged banks, the tributary of the Fu River, which bears to the mighty waters of the Yangtze- Kiang the goods and passengers which seek an outlet to the eastern provinces.

The streets within the walls of the city are scenes of life and bustle, while in the suburbs stand the residences of those who can afford to live in peace and quiet, undisturbed by the clamour of the Les and Changs [i.e., the people. Le and Chang are the two commonest names in China.] of the town. There, in a situation which the Son of Heaven might envy, stands the official residence of Colonel Wen. Outwardly it has all the appearance of a grandee's palace, and within the massive boundary-walls which surround it, the courtyards, halls, grounds, summer-houses, and pavilions are not to be exceeded in grandeur and beauty. The office which had fallen to the lot of Colonel Wen was one of the most sought after in the province, and commonly only fell to officers of distinction. Though not without fame in the field, Colonel Wen's main claim to honour lay in the high degrees he had taken in the examinations. His literary acquirements gained him friends among the civil officers of the district, and the position he occupied was altogether one of exceptional dignity.

Unfortunately, his first wife had died, leaving only a daughter to keep her memory alive; but at the time when our story opens, his second spouse, more kind than his first, had presented him with a much-desired son. The mother of this boy was one of those bright, pretty, gay creatures who commonly gain the affections of men much older than themselves. She sang in the most faultless falsetto, she played the guitar with taste and expression, and she danced with grace and agility. What wonder, then, that when the colonel returned from his tours of inspections and parades, weary with travel and dust, he found relief and relaxation in the joyous company of Hyacinth! And was she not also the mother of his son? Next to herself, there can be no question that this young gentleman held the chief place in the colonel's affections; while poor Jasmine, his daughter by his first venture, was left very much to her own resources. No one troubled themselves about what she did, and she was allowed, as she grew up, to follow her own pursuits and to give rein to her fancies without let or hindrance. From her earliest childhood one of her lonely amusements had been to dress as a boy, and so unchecked had the habit become that she gradually drifted into the character which she had chosen to assume. She even persuaded her father to let her go to the neighbouring boys' school. Her mother had died before the colonel had been posted to Mienchu, and among the people of that place, who had always seen her in boy's attire, she was regarded as an adopted son of her father. Hyacinth was only too glad to get her out of the way as much as possible, and so encouraged the idea of allowing her to learn to read and write in the company of their neighbours' urchins.

Being bright and clever, she soon gained an intellectual lead among the boys, and her uncommon beauty,

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coupled with the magnetism belonging to her sex, secured for her a popularity which almost amounted to adoration. She was tall for her age, as are most young daughters of Han; and her perfectly oval face, almond-shaped eyes, willow-leaf eyebrows, small, well-shaped mouth, brilliantly white teeth, and raven-black hair, completed a face and figure which would have been noticeable anywhere. By the boys she was worshipped, and no undertaking was too difficult or too troublesome if it was to give pleasure to Tsunk'ing, or the "Young Noble," as she was called; for to have answered to the name of Jasmine would have been to proclaim her sex at once. Even the grim old master smiled at her through his horn spectacles as she entered the school-house of a morning, and any graceful turn in her poetry or scholarly diction in her prose was sure to win for her his unsparing praise. Many an evening he invited the "young noble" to his house to read over chapters from Confucius and the poems of Le Taipoh; and years afterward, when he died, among his most cherished papers were found odes signed by Tsunk'ing, in which there was a good deal about bending willows, light, flickering bamboos, horned moons, wild geese, the sound of a flute on a rainy day, and the pleasures of wine, in strict accord with the models set forth in the "Aids to Poetry-making" which are common in the land.

If it had not been for the indifference with which she was treated in her home, the favour with which she was regarded abroad would have been most prejudicial to Jasmine; but any conceit which might have been engendered in the school-house was speedily counteracted when she got within the portals of the colonel's domain. Coming into the presence of her father and his wife, with all the incense of kindness, affection, and, it must be confessed, flattery, with which she was surrounded by her school-fellows, fresh about her, was like stepping into a cold bath. Wholesome and invigorating the change may have been, but it was very unpleasant, and Jasmine often longed to be alone to give vent to her feelings in tears.

One deep consolation she had, however: she was a devoted student, and in the society of her books she forgot the callousness of her parents, and, living in imagination in the bygone annals of the empire, she was able to take part, as it were, in the great deeds which mark the past history of the state, and to enjoy the converse and society of the sages and poets of antiquity. When the time came that she had gained all the knowledge which the old schoolmaster could impart to her, she left the school, and formed a reading-party with two youths of her own age. These lads, by name Wei and Tu, had been her school-fellows, and were delighted at obtaining her promise to join them in their studies. So industriously were these pursued that the three friends succeeded in taking their B.A. degree at the next examination, and, encouraged by this success, determined to venture on a struggle for a still higher distinction.

Though at one in their affection for Jasmine, Tu and Wei were unlike in everything else, which probably accounted for the friendship which existed between them. Wei was the more clever of the two. He wrote poetry with ease and fluency, and his essays were marked by correctness of style and aptness of quotation. But there was a want of strength in his character. He was exceedingly vain, and was always seeking to excite admiration among his companions. This unhappy failing made him very susceptible of adverse criticism, and at the same time extremely jealous of any one who might happen to excel him in any way. Tu, on the other hand, though not so intellectually favoured, had a rough kind of originality, which always secured for his exercises a respectful attention, and made him at all times an agreeable companion. Having no exaggerated ideas of his capabilities, he never strove to appear otherwise than he was, and being quite independent of the opinions of others, he was always natural. Thus he was one who was sought out by his friends, and was best esteemed by those whose esteem was best worth having. In outward appearance the youths were as different as their characters were diverse. Wei was decidedly good-looking, but of a kind of beauty which suggested neither rest nor sincerity; while in Tu's features, though there was less grace, the want was fully compensated for by the strength and honest firmness of his countenance.

For both these young men Jasmine had a liking, but there was no question as to which she preferred. As she herself said, "Wei is pleasant enough as a companion, but if I had to look to one of them for an act of true friendship—or as a lover," she mentally added—"I should turn at once to Tu." It was one of her amusements to compare the young men in her mind, and one day when so occupied Tu suddenly looked up from his book and said to her:

"What a pity it is that the gods have made us both men! If /I/ were a woman, the object of my heart would be to be your wife, and if /you/ were a woman, there is nothing I should like better than to be your husband."

Jasmine blushed up to the roots of her hair at having her own thoughts thus capped, as it were; but before she

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could answer, Wei broke in with:

"What nonsense you talk! And why, I should like to know, should you be the only one the 'young noble' might choose, supposing he belonged to the other sex?"

"You are both talking nonsense," said Jasmine, who had had time to recover her composure, "and remind me of my two old childless aunts," she added, laughing, "who are always quarrelling about the names they would have given their children if the goddess Kwanyin had granted them any half a century ago. As a matter of fact, we are three friends reading for our M.A. degrees, neither more nor less. And I will trouble you, my elder brother," she added, turning to Tu, "to explain to me what the poet means by the expression 'tuneful Tung' in the line:

'The greedy flames devour the tuneful Tung.' "

A learned disquisition by Tu on the celebrated musician who recognised the sonorous qualities of a piece of Tung timber burning in the kitchen fire effectually diverted the conversation from the inconvenient direction it had taken, and shortly afterward Jasmine took her leave.

Haunted by the thought of what had passed, she wandered on to the veranda of her archery pavilion, and while gazing half unconsciously heavenward her eyes were attracted by a hawk which flew past and alighted on a tree beyond the boundary-wall, and in front of the study she had lately left. In a restless and thoughtless mood, she took up her bow and arrow, and with unerring aim compassed the death of her victim. No sooner, however, had the hawk fallen, carrying the arrow with it, than she remembered that her name was inscribed on the shaft, and fearing lest it should be found by either Wei or Tu, she hurried round in the hope of recovering it. But she was too late. On approaching the study, she found Tu in the garden in front, examining the bird and arrow.

"Look," he said, as he saw her coming, "what a good shot some one has made! and whoever it is, he has a due appreciation of his own skill. Listen to these lines which are scraped on the arrow:

'Do not lightly draw your bow;  
But if you must, bring down your foe.' "

Jasmine was glad enough to find that he had not discovered her name, and eagerly exchanged banter with him on the conceit of the owner of the arrow. But before she could recover it, Wei, who had heard the talking and laughter, joined them, and took the arrow out of Tu's hand to examine it. Just at that moment a messenger came to summon Tu to his father's presence, and he had no sooner gone than Wei exclaimed:

"But see, here is the name of the mysterious owner of the arrow, and, as I live, it is a girl's name—Jasmine! Who, among the goddesses of heaven can Jasmine be?"

"Oh, I will take the arrow then," said Jasmine. "It must belong to my sister. That is her name."

"I did not know that you had a sister," said Wei.

"Oh yes, I have," answered Jasmine, quite forgetful of the celebrated dictum of Confucius: "Be truthful." "She is just one year younger than I am," she added, thinking it well to be circumstantial.

"Why have you never mentioned her?" asked Wei, with animation. "What is she like? Is she anything like you?"

"She is the very image of me."

"What! In height and features and ways?"

"The very image, so that people have often said that if we changed clothes each might pass for the other."

"What a good-looking girl she must be!" said Wei, laughing. "But, seriously, I have not, as you know, yet set up a household; and if your sister has not received bridal presents, I would beg to be allowed to invite her to enter my lowly habitation. What does my elder brother say to my proposal?"

"I don't know what my sister would feel about it," said Jasmine. "I would never answer for a girl, if I lived to be as old as the God of Longevity."

"Will you find out for me?"

"Certainly I will. But remember, not a word must be mentioned on the subject to my father, or, in fact, to

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anybody, until I give you leave."

"So long as my elder brother will undertake for me, I will promise anything," said the delighted Wei. "I already feel as though I were nine-tenths of the way to the abode of the phenix. Take this box of precious ointment to your sister as an earnest of my intentions, and I will keep the arrow as a token from her until she demands its return. I feel inclined to express myself in verse. May I?"

"By all means," said Jasmine, laughing.

Thus encouraged, Wei improvised as follows:

" 'T was sung of old that Lofu had no mate,  
Though Che was willing; for no word was said.  
At last an arrow like a herald came,  
And now an honoured brother lends his aid."

"Excellent," said Jasmine, laughing. "With such a poetic gift as you possess, you certainly deserve a better fate than befell Lofu."

From this day the idea of marrying Jasmine's sister possessed the soul of Wei. But not a word did he say to Tu on the matter, for he was conscious that, as Tu was the first to pick up the arrow through which he had become acquainted with the existence of Jasmine's sister, his friend might possibly lay a claim to her hand. To Jasmine also the subject was a most absorbing one. She felt that she was becoming most unpleasantly involved in a risky matter, and that, if the time should ever come when she should have to make an explanation, she might in honour be compelled to marry Wei—a prospect which filled her with dismay. The turn events had taken had made her analyse her feelings more than she had ever done before, and the process made her doubly conscious of the depth of her affection for Tu. "A horse," she said to herself, "cannot carry two saddles, and a woman cannot marry more than one man." Wise as this saw was, it did not help her out of her difficulty, and she turned to the chapter of accidents, and determined to trust to time, that old disposer of events, to settle the matter. But Wei was inclined to be impatient, and Jasmine was obliged to resort to more of those departures from truth which circumstances had forced upon this generally very upright young lady.

"I have consulted my father on the subject," she said to the expectant Wei, "and he insists on your waiting until the autumn examination is over. He has every confidence that you will then take your M.A. degree, and your marriage will, he hopes, put the coping-stone on your happiness and honour."

"That is all very well," said Wei; "but autumn is a long time hence, and how do I know that your sister may not change her mind?"

"Has not your younger brother undertaken to look after your interests, and cannot you trust him to do his best on your behalf?"

"I can trust my elder brother with anything in the world. It is your sister that I am afraid of," said Wei. "But since you will undertake for her—"

"No, no," said Jasmine, laughing, "I did not say that I would undertake for her. A man who answers for a woman deserves to have 'fool' written on his forehead."

"Well, at all events, I will be content to leave the matter in your hands," said Wei.

At last the time of the autumn examination drew near, and Tu and Wei made preparations for their departure to the provincial capital. They were both bitterly disappointed when Jasmine announced that she was not going up that time. This determination was the result of a conference with her father. She had pointed out to the colonel that if she passed and took her M.A. degree she might be called upon to take office at any time, and that then she would be compelled to confess her sex; and as she was by no means disposed to give up the freedom which her doublet and hose conferred upon her, it was agreed between them that she should plead illness and not go up. Her two friends, therefore, went alone, and brilliant success attended their venture. They both passed with honours, and returned to Mienchu to receive the congratulations of their friends. Jasmine's delight was very genuine, more especially as regarded Tu, and the first evening was spent by the three students in joyous converse and in confident anticipation of the future. As Jasmine took leave of the two new M.A.'s, Wei followed her to the outer door and whispered at parting:



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"I am coming to-morrow to make my formal proposal to your sister."

Jasmine had no time to answer, but went home full of anxious and disturbed thoughts, which were destined to take a more tragic turn than she had ever anticipated even in her most gloomy moments. The same cruel fate had also decreed that Wei's proposal was to be suspended, like Buddha, between heaven and earth. The blow fell upon him when he was attiring himself in the garments of his new degree, in preparation for his visit. He was in the act of tying his sash and appending it to his purse and trinkets, when Jasmine burst into the young men's study, looking deadly pale and bearing traces of acute mental distress on her usually bright and joyous countenance.

"What is the matter?" cried Tu, with almost as much agitation as was shown by Jasmine. "Tell me what has happened."

"Oh, my father, my poor father!" sobbed Jasmine.

"What is the matter with your father? He is not dead, is he?" cried the young men in one breath.

"No, it is not so bad as that," said Jasmine, "but a great and bitter misfortune has come upon us. As you know, some time ago my father had a quarrel with the military intendant, and that horrid man has, out of spite, brought charges against him for which he was carried off this morning to prison."

The statement of her misery and the shame involved in it completely unnerved poor Jasmine, who, true to her inner sex, burst into tears and rocked herself to and fro in her grief. Tu and Wei, on their knees before her, tried to pour in words of consolation. With a lack of reason which might be excused under the circumstances, they vowed that her father was innocent before they knew the nature of the charges against him, and they pledged themselves to rest neither day nor night until they had rescued him from his difficulty. When, under the influence of their genuine sympathy, Jasmine recovered some composure, Tu begged her to tell him of what her father was accused.

"The villain," said Jasmine, through her tears, "has dared to say that my father has made use of government taxes, has taken bribes for recommending men for promotion, has appropriated the soldiers' ration— money, and has been in league with highwaymen."

"Is it possible?" said Tu, who was rather staggered by this long catalogue of crimes. "I should not have believed that any one could have ventured to have charged your honoured father with such things, least of all the intendant, who is notoriously possessed of an itching palm. But I tell you what we can do at once. Wei and I, being M.A.'s, have a right to call on the prefect, and it will be a real pleasure to us to exercise our new privilege for the first time in your service. We will urge him to inquire into the matter, and I cannot doubt that he will at once quash the proceedings."

Unhappily, Tu's hopes were not realised. The prefect was very civil, but pointed out that, since a higher court had ordered the arrest of the colonel, he was powerless to interfere in the matter. Many were the consultations held by the three friends, and much personal relief Jasmine got from the support and sympathy of the young men. One hope yet remained to her: Tu and Wei were about to go to Peking for their doctor's degrees, and if they passed they might be able to bring such influence to bear as would secure the release of her father.

"Let not the 'young noble' distress himself overmuch," said Wei to her, with some importance. "This affair will be engraven on our hearts and minds, and if we take our degrees we will use our utmost exertions to wipe away the injustice which has been done your father."

"Unhappily," said the more practical Tu, "it is too plain that the examining magistrates are all in league to ruin him. But let our elder brother remain quietly at home, doing all he can to collect evidence in the colonel's favour, while we will do our best at the capital. If things turn out well with us there, our elder brother had better follow at once to assist us with his advice."

Before the friends parted, Wei, whose own affairs were always his first consideration, took an opportunity of whispering to Jasmine, "Don't forget your honoured sister's promise, I beseech you. Whether we succeed or not, I shall ask for her in marriage on my return."

"Under present circumstances, we must no longer consider the engagement," said Jasmine, shocked at his introducing the subject at such a moment, "and the best thing that you can do is to forget all about it."

The moment for the departure of the young men had come, and they had no time to say more. With bitter tears, the two youths took leave of the weeping Jasmine, who, as their carts disappeared in the distance, felt for the first time what it was to be alone in misery. She saw little of her stepmother in those days. That poor lady made herself so ill with unrestrained grief that she was quite incapable of rendering either help or advice. Fortunately the officials showed no disposition to proceed with the indictment, and by the judicious use of the

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money at her command Jasmine induced the prison authorities to make her father's confinement as little irksome as possible. She was allowed to see him at almost any time, and on one occasion, when he was enjoying her presence as in his prosperous days he had never expected to do, he remarked:

"Since the officials are not proceeding with the business, I think my best plan will be to send a petition to Peking asking the Board of War to acquit me. But my difficulty is that I have no one whom I can send to look after the business."

"Let /me/ go," said Jasmine. "When Tu and Wei were leaving, they begged me to follow them to consult as to the best means of helping you, and with them to depend on I have nothing to fear."

"I quite believe that you are as capable of managing the matter as anybody," said her father, admiringly; "but Peking is a long way off, and I cannot bear to think of the things which might happen to you on the road."

"From all time," answered Jasmine, "it has been considered the duty of a daughter to risk anything in the service of her father; and though the way is long, I shall have weapons to defend myself with against injury, and a clear conscience with which to answer any interrogatories which may be put to me. Besides, I will take our messenger, 'The Dragon,' and his wife with me. I will make her dress as a man—what fun it will be to see Mrs. Dragon's portly form in trousers, and gabardine! When that transformation is made, we shall be a party of three men. So, you see, she and I will have a man to protect us, and I shall have a woman to wait upon me; and if such a gallant company cannot travel from this to Peking in safety, I'll forswear boots and trousers and will retire into the harem for ever."

"Well," said her father, laughing, "if you can arrange in that way, go by all means, and the sooner you start the sooner I hope you will be back."

Delighted at having gained the approval of her father to her scheme, Jasmine quickly made the arrangements for her journey. On the morning of the day on which she was to start, the results of the doctors' examination at Peking reached Mienchu, and, to Jasmine's infinite delight, she found the names of Tu and Wei among the successful candidates. Armed with this good news, she hurried to the prison. All difficulties seemed to disappear like mist before the sun as she thought of the powerful advocates she now had at Peking.

"Tu and Wei have passed," she said, as she rushed into her father's presence, "and now the end of our troubles is approaching."

With impatient hope Jasmine took leave of her father, and started on her eventful journey. As evening drew on she entered the suburbs of Ch'engtu, the provincial capital, and sent "The Dragon" on to find a suitable inn for the couple of nights which she knew she would be compelled to spend in the city. "The Dragon" was successful in his search, and conducted Jasmine and his wife to a comfortable hostelry in one of the busiest parts of the town. Having refreshed herself with an excellent dinner, Jasmine was glad to rest from the fatigues and heat of the day in the cool courtyard into which her room opened. Fortune and builders had so arranged that a neighbouring house, towering above the inn, overlooked this restful spot, and one of the higher windows faced exactly the position which Jasmine had taken up. Such a fact would not, in ordinary circumstances, have troubled her in the least; but she had not been sitting long before she began to feel an extraordinary attraction toward the window. She did her best to look the other way, but she was often unconsciously impelled to glance up at the lattice. Once she fancied she saw the curtain move. Determined to verify her impression, she suddenly raised her eyes, after a prolonged contemplation of the pavement, and caught a momentary sight of a girl's face, which as instantly disappeared, but not before Jasmine had been able to recognise that it was one of exceptional beauty.

"Now, if I were a young man," said she to herself, "I ought to feel my heart beat at the sight of such loveliness, and it would be my bounden duty to swear that I would win the owner of it in the teeth of dragons. But as my manhood goes no deeper than my outer garments, I can afford to sit here with a quiet pulse and a whole skin."

The next day Jasmine was busily engaged in interviewing some officials in the interest of her father, and only reached the shelter of her inn toward evening. As she passed through the courtyard she instinctively looked up at the window, and again caught a glimpse of the vision of beauty which she had seen the evening before. "If she only knew," thought Jasmine, "that I was such a one as herself, she would be less anxious to see me, and more likely to avoid me."

While amusing herself at the thought of the fair watcher, the inn door opened, and a waiting-woman entered carrying a small box. As she approached Jasmine she bowed low, and with bated breath thus addressed her:

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"May every happiness be yours, sir. My young lady, Miss King, whose humble dwelling is the adjoining house, seeing that you are living in solitude, has sent me with this fruit and tea as a complimentary offering."

So saying, she presented to Jasmine the box, which contained pears and a packet of scented tea.

"To what am I indebted for this honour?" replied Jasmine; "I can claim no relationship with your lady, nor have I the honour of her acquaintance."

"My young lady says," answered the waiting-woman, "that, among the myriads who come to this inn and the thousands who go from it, she has seen no one to equal your Excellency in form and feature. At sight of you she was confident that you came from a lofty and noble family, and having learned from your attendants that you are the son of a colonel, she ventured to send you these trifles to supplement the needy fare of this rude inn."

"Tell me something about your young lady," said Jasmine, in a moment of idle curiosity.

"My young lady," said the woman, "is the daughter of Mr. King, who was a vice-president of a lower court. Her father and mother having both visited the 'Yellow Springs' [Hades], she is now living with an aunt, who has been blessed by the God of Wealth, and whose main object in life is to find a husband whom her niece may be willing to marry. The young gentleman, my young lady's cousin, is one of the richest men in Ch'engt'u. All the larger inns belong to him, and his profits are as boundless as the four seas. He is as anxious as his mother to find a suitable match for the young lady, and has promised that so soon as she can make a choice he will arrange the wedding."

"I should have thought," said Jasmine, "that, being the owner of so much wealth and beauty, the young lady would have been besieged by suitors from all parts of the empire."

"So she is," said the woman, "and from her window yonder she spies them, for they all put up at this inn. Hitherto she has made fun of them all, and describes their appearance and habits in the most amusing way. 'See this one,' says she, 'with his bachelor cap on and his new official clothes and awkward gait, looking for all the world like a barn-door fowl dressed up as a stork; or that one, with his round shoulders, monkey-face, and crooked legs;' and so she tells them off."

"What does she say of me, I wonder?" said Jasmine, amused.

"Of your Excellency she says that her comparisons fail her, and that she can only hope that the Fates who guided your jewelled chariot hitherward will not tantalise her by an empty vision, but will bind your ankles to hers with the red matrimonial cords."

"How can I hope for such happiness?" said Jasmine, smiling. "But please to tell your young lady that, being only a guest at this inn, I have nothing worthy of her acceptance to offer in return for her bounteous gifts, and that I can only assure her of my boundless gratitude."

With many bows, and with reiterated wishes for Jasmine's happiness and endless longevity, the woman took her leave.

"Truly this young lady has formed a most perverted attachment," said Jasmine to herself. "She reminds me of the man in the fairy tale who fell in love with a shadow, and, so far as I can see, she is not likely to get any more satisfaction out of it than he did." So saying, she took up a pencil and scribbled the following lines on a scrap of paper:

"With thoughts as ardent as a quenchless thirst,  
She sends me fragrant and most luscious fruit;  
Without a blush she seeks a phenix guest [a bachelor]  
Who dwells alone like case-enveloped lute."

After this mental effort Jasmine went to bed. Nor had her interview with the waiting-woman made a sufficient impression on her mind to interfere in any way with her sleep. She was surprised, however, on coming into her sitting-room in the morning, to meet the same messenger, who, laden with a dish of hot eggs and a brew of tea, begged Jasmine to "deign to look down upon her offerings."

"Many thanks," said Jasmine, "for your kind attention."

"You are putting the saddle on the wrong horse," replied the woman. "In bringing you these I am but obeying the orders of Miss King, who herself made the tea of leaves from Pu-erh in Yunnan, and who with her own fair

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hands shelled the eggs."

"Your young lady," answered Jasmine, "is as bountiful as she is kind. What return can I make her for her kindness to a stranger? Stay," she said, as the thought crossed her mind that the verses she had written the night before might prove a wholesome tonic for this effusive young lady, "I have a few verses which I will venture to ask her to accept." So saying, she took a piece of peach-blossom paper, on which she carefully copied the quatrain and handed it to the woman. "May I trouble you," said she, "to take this to your mistress?"

"If," said Jasmine to herself as the woman took her departure, "Miss King is able to penetrate the meaning of my verses, she won't like them. Without saying so in so many words, I have told her with sufficient plainness that I will have nothing to say to her. But stupidity is a shield sent by Providence to protect the greater part of mankind from many evils; so perhaps she will escape."

It certainly in this case served to shield Miss King from Jasmine's shafts. She was delighted at receiving the verses, and at once sat down to compose a quatrain to match Jasmine's in reply. With infinite labour she elaborated the following:

"Sung Yuh on th' eastern wall sat deep in thought,  
And longed with P'e to pluck the fragrant fruit.  
If all the well-known tunes be newly set,  
What use to take again the half-burnt lute?"

Having copied these on a piece of silk-woven paper, she sent them to Jasmine by her faithful attendant. On looking over the paper, Jasmine said, smiling, "What a clever young lady your mistress must be! These lines, though somewhat inconsequential, are incomparable."

But, though Jasmine was partly inclined to treat the matter as a joke, she saw that there was a serious side to the affair, more especially as the colours under which she was sailing were so undeniably false. She knew well that for Sung Yuh should be read Miss King, and for P'e her own name; and she determined, therefore, to put an end to the philandering of Miss King, which, in her present state of mind, was doubly annoying to her.

"I am deeply indebted to your young lady," she said, and then, being determined to make a plunge into the morass of untruthfulness, for a good end as she believed, added, "and, if I had love at my disposal, I should possibly venture to make advances toward the feathery peach [a nuptial emblem]; but let me confess to you that I have already taken to myself a wife. Had I the felicity of meeting Miss King before I committed myself in another direction, I might perhaps have been a happier man. But, after all, if this were so, my position is no worse than that of most other married men, for I never met one who was not occasionally inclined to cry, like the boys at 'toss cash,' 'Hark back and try again.'"

"This will be sad news for my lady, for she has set her heart upon you ever since you first came to the inn; and when young misses take that sort of fancy and lose the objects of their love, they are as bad as children when forbidden their sugar-plums. But what's the use of talking to you about a young lady's feelings!" said the woman, with a vexed toss of her head; "I never knew a man who understood a woman yet."

"I am extremely sorry for Miss King," said Jasmine, trying to suppress a smile. "As you wisely remark, a young lady is a sealed book to me, but I have always been told that their fancies are as variable as the shadow of the bamboo; and probably, therefore, though Miss King's sky may be overcast just now, the gloom will only make her enjoy to-morrow's sunshine all the more."

The woman, who was evidently in a hurry to convey the news to her mistress, returned no answer to this last sally, but, with curtailed obeisance, took her departure.

Her non-appearance the next morning confirmed Jasmine in the belief that her bold departure from truth on the previous evening had had its curative effect. The relief was great, for she had felt that these complications were becoming too frequent to be pleasant, and, reprehensible though it may appear, her relief was mingled with no sort of compassion for Miss King. Hers was not a nature to sympathise with such sudden and fierce attachments. Her affection for Tu had been the growth of many months, and she had no feeling in common with a young lady who could take a violent liking for a young man simply from seeing him taking his post-prandial ease. It was therefore with complete satisfaction that she left the inn in the course of the morning to pay her

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farewell visits to the governor and the judge of the province, who had taken an unusual interest in Colonel Wen's case since Jasmine had become his personal advocate. Both officials had promised to do all they could for the prisoner, and had loaded Jasmine with tokens of good will in the shape of strange and rare fruits and culinary delicacies. On this particular day the governor had invited her to the midday meal, and it was late in the afternoon before she found her way back to the inn.

The following morning she rose early, intending to start before noon, and was stepping into the courtyard to give directions to "The Dragon," when, to her surprise, she was accosted by Miss King's servant, who, with a waggish smile and a cunning shake of the head, said:

"How can one so young as your Excellency be such a proficient in the art of inventing flowers of the imagination?"

"What do you mean?" said Jasmine.

"Why, last night you told me you were married, and my poor young lady when she heard it was wrung with grief. But, recovering somewhat, she sent me to ask your servants whether what you had said was true or not, for she knows what she's about as well as most people, and they both with one voice assured me that, far from being married you had not even exchanged nuptial presents with anybody. You may imagine Miss King's delight when I took her this news. She at once asked her cousin to call upon you to make a formal offer of marriage, and she has now sent me to tell you that he will be here anon."

Every one knows what it is to pass suddenly from a state of pleasurable high spirits into deep despondency, to exchange in an instant bright mental sunshine for cloud and gloom. All, therefore, must sympathise with poor Jasmine, who believing the road before her to be smooth and clear, on a sudden became thus aware of a most troublesome and difficult obstruction. She had scarcely finished calling down anathemas on the heads of "The Dragon" and his wife, and cursing her own folly for bringing them with her, than the inn doors were thrown open, and a servant appeared carrying a long red visiting-card inscribed with the name of the wealthy inn-proprietor. On the heels of this forerunner followed young Mr. King, who, with effusive bows, said, "I have ventured to pay my respects to your Excellency."

Poor Jasmine was so upset by the whole affair that she lacked some of the courtesy that was habitual to her, and in her confusion very nearly seated her guest on her right hand. Fortunately this outrageous breach of etiquette was avoided, and the pair eventually arranged themselves in the canonical order.

"This old son of Han," began Mr. King, "would not have dared to intrude himself upon your Excellency if it were not that he has a matter of great delicacy to discuss with you. He has a cousin, the daughter of Vice-President King, for whom for years he has been trying to find a suitable match. The position is peculiar, for the lady declares positively that she will not marry any one she has not seen and approved of. Until now she has not been able to find any one whom she would care to marry. But the presence of your Excellency has thrown a light across her path which has shown her the way to the plum-groves of matrimonial felicity."

Here King paused, expecting some reply; but Jasmine was too absorbed in thought to speak, so Mr. King went on:

"This old son of Han, hearing that your Excellency is still unmarried, has taken it upon himself to make a proposal of marriage to you, and to offer his cousin as your 'basket and broom.' [wife] His interview with you has, he may say, shown him the wisdom of his cousin's choice, and he cannot imagine a pair better suited for one another, or more likely to be happy, than your Excellency and his cousin."

"I dare not be anything but straightforward with your worship," said Jasmine, "and I am grateful for the extraordinary affection your cousin has been pleased to bestow upon me; but I cannot forget that she belongs to a family which is entitled to pass through the gate of the palace [a family of distinction], and I fear that my rank is not sufficient for her. Besides, my father is at present under a cloud, and I am now on my way to Peking to try to release him from his difficulties. It is no time, therefore, for me to be binding myself with promises."

"As to your Excellency's first objection," replied King, "you are already the wearer of a hat with a silken tassel, and a man need not be a prophet to foretell that in time to come any office, either civil or military, will be within your reach. No doubt, also, your business in Peking will be quickly brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and there can be no objection, therefore, to our settling the preliminaries now, and then, on your return from the capital, we can celebrate the wedding. This will give rest and composure to my cousin's mind, which is now like a disturbed sea, and will not interfere, I venture to think, with the affair which calls you to Peking."

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As King proceeded, Jasmine felt that her difficulties were on the increase. It was impossible that she should explain her position in full, and she had no sufficient reason at hand to give for rejecting the proposal made her, though, as the same time, her annoyance was not small at having such a matter forced upon her at a moment when her mind was filled with anxieties. "Then," she thought to herself, "there is ahead of me that explanation which must inevitably come with Wei; so that, altogether, if it were not for the deeply rooted conviction which I have that Tu will be mine at last, when he knows what I really am, life would not be worth having. As for this inn-proprietor, if he has so little delicacy as to push his cousin upon me at this crisis, I need not have any compunction regarding him; so perhaps my easiest way of getting out of the present hobble will be to accept his proposal and to present the box of precious ointment handed me by Wei for my sister to this ogling love-sick girl." So turning to King, she said:

"Since you, sir, and your cousin have honoured me with your regard, I dare not altogether decline your proposal, and I would therefore beg you, sir, to hand this," she added, producing the box of ointment, "to your honourable cousin, as a token of the bond between us, and to convey to her my promise that, if I don't marry her, I will never marry another lady."

Mr. King, with the greatest delight, received the box, and handing it to the waiting-woman, who stood expectant by, bade her carry it to her mistress, with the news of the engagement. Jasmine now hoped that her immediate troubles were over, but King insisted on celebrating the event by a feast, and it was not until late in the afternoon that she succeeded in making a start. Once on the road, her anxiety to reach Peking was such that she travelled night and day, "feeding on wind and lodging in water." Nor did she rest until she reached a hotel within the Hata Gate of the capital.

Jasmine's solitary journey had given her abundant time for reflection, and for the first time she had set herself seriously to consider her position. She recognised that she had hitherto followed only the impulses of the moment, of which the main one had been the desire to escape complications by the wholesale sacrifice of truth; and she acknowledged to herself that, if justice were evenly dealt out, there must be a Nemesis in store for her which would bring distress and possibly disaster upon her. In her calmer moments she felt an instinctive foreboding that she was approaching a crisis in her fate, and it was with mixed feelings, therefore, that on the morning after her arrival she prepared to visit Tu and Wei, who were as yet ignorant of her presence.

She dressed herself with more than usual care for the occasion, choosing to attire herself in a blue silk robe and a mauve satin jacket which Tu had once admired, topped by a brand-new cap. Altogether her appearance as she passed through the streets justified the remark made by a passerby: "A pretty youngster, and more like a maiden of eighteen than a man."

The hostelry at which Tu and Wei had taken up their abode was an inn befitting the dignity of such distinguished scholars. On inquiring at the door, Jasmine was ushered by a servant through a courtyard to an inner enclosure, where, under the grateful shade of a wide-spreading cotton-tree, Tu was reclining at his ease. Jasmine's delight at meeting her friend was only equalled by the pleasure with which Tu greeted her. In his strong and gracious presence she became conscious that she was released from the absorbing care which had haunted her, and her soul leaped out in new freedom as she asked and answered questions of her friend. Each had much to say, and it was not for some time, when an occasional reference brought his name forward that Jasmine noticed the absence of Wei. When she did, she asked after him.

"He left this some days ago," said Tu, "having some special business which called for his presence at home. He did not tell me what it was, but doubtless it was something of importance." Jasmine said nothing, but felt pretty certain in her mind as to the object of his hasty return.

Tu, attributing her silence to a reflection on Wei for having left the capital before her father's affair was settled, hastened to add:

"He was very helpful in the matter of your honoured father's difficulty, and only left when he thought he could not do any more."

"How do matters stand now?" asked Jasmine, eagerly.

"We have posted a memorial at the palace gate," said Tu, "and have arranged that it shall reach the right quarter. Fortunately, also, I have an acquaintance in the Board of War who has undertaken to do all he can in that direction, and promises an answer in a few days."

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"I have brought with me," said Jasmine, "a petition prepared by my father. What do you think about presenting it?"

"At present I believe that it would only do harm. A superabundance of memorials is as bad as none at all. Beyond a certain point, they only irritate officials."

"Very well," said Jasmine; "I am quite content to leave the conduct of affairs in your hands."

"Well then," said Tu, "that being understood, I propose that you should move your things over to this inn. There is Wei's room at your disposal, and your constant presence here will be balm to my lonely spirit. At the Hata Gate you are almost as remote as if you were in our study at Mienchu."

Jasmine was at first startled by this proposal. Though she had been constantly in the company of Tu, she had never lived under the same roof with him, and she at once recognised that there might be difficulties in the way of her keeping her secret if she were to be constantly under the eyes of her friend. But she had been so long accustomed to yield to the present circumstances, and was so confident that Fortune, which, with some slight irregularities, had always stood her friend, would not desert her on the present occasion, that she gave way.

"By all means," she said. "I will go back to my inn, and bring my things at once. This writing—case I will leave here. I brought it because it contains my father's petition."

So saying, she took her leave, and Tu retired to his easy—chair under the cotton—tree. But the demon of curiosity was abroad, and alighting on the arm of Tu's chair, whispered in his ear that it might be well if he ran his eye over Colonel Wen's petition to see if there was any argument in it which he had omitted in his statement to the Board of War. At first, Tu, whose nature was the reverse of inquisitive, declined to listen to these promptings, but so persistent did they become that he at last put down his book—"The Spring and Autumn Annals"—and, seating himself, at the sitting—room table, opened the writing—case so innocently left by Jasmine. On the top were a number of red visiting—cards bearing the inscription, in black, of Wen Tsunk'ing, and beneath these was the petition. Carefully Tu read it through, and passed mental eulogies on it as he proceeded. The colonel had put his case skilfully, but Tu had no difficulty in recognising Jasmine's hand, both in the composition of the document and in the penmanship. "If my attempt," he thought, "does not succeed, we will try what this will do." He was on the point of returning it to its resting—place, when he saw another document in Jasmine's handwriting lying by it. This was evidently a formal document, probably connected, as he thought, with the colonel's case, and he therefore unfolded it and read as follows:

"The faithful maiden, Miss Wen of Mienchu Hien, with burning incense reverently prays the God of War to release her father from his present difficulties, and speedily to restore peace to her own soul by nullifying, in accordance with her desire, the engagement of the bamboo arrow and the contract of the box of precious ointment. A respectful petition."

As Tu read on, surprise and astonishment took possession of his countenance. A second time he read it through, and then, throwing himself back in his chair, broke out into a fit of laughter.

"So," he said to himself, "I have allowed myself to be deceived by a young girl all these years. And yet not altogether deceived," he added, trying to find an excuse for himself; "for I have often fancied that there was the savour of a woman about the 'young noble.' I hope she is not one of those heaven—born genii who appear on earth to plague men, and who, just when they have aroused the affections they wished to excite, ascend through the air and leave their lovers mourning."

Just at this moment the door opened, and Jasmine entered, looking more lovely than ever, with the flush begotten by exercise on her beautifully moulded cheeks. At sight of her Tu again burst out laughing, to Jasmine's not unnatural surprise, who, thinking that there must be something wrong with her dress, looked herself up and down, to the increasing amusement of Tu.

"So," said he at last, "you deceitful little hussy, you have been deceiving me all these years by passing yourself off as a man, when in reality you are a girl."

Overcome with confusion, Jasmine hung her head, and murmured:

"Who has betrayed me?"

"You have betrayed yourself," said Tu, holding up the incriminating document; "and here we have the story of the arrow with which you shot the hawk, but what the box of precious ointment means I don't know."

Confronted with this overwhelming evidence, poor Jasmine remained speechless, and dared not even lift her eyes to glance at Tu. That young man, seeing her distress, and being in no wise possessed by the scorn which he

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had put into his tone, crossed over to her and gently led her to a seat by him.

"Do you remember," he said, in so altered a voice that Jasmine's heart ceased to throb as if it wished to force an opening through the finely formed bosom which enclosed it, "on one occasion in our study at home I wished that you were a woman that you might become my wife? Little did I think that my wish might be gratified. Now it is, and I beseech you to let us join our lives in one, and seek the happiness of the gods in each other's perpetual presence."

But, as if suddenly recollecting herself, Jasmine withdrew her hand from his, and, standing up before him with quivering lip and eyes full of tears, said:

"No. It can never be."

"Why not?" said Tu, in alarmed surprise.

"Because I am bound to Wei."

"What! Does Wei know your secret?"

"No. But do you remember when I shot that arrow in front of your study?"

"Perfectly," said Tu. "But what has that to do with it?"

"Why, Wei discovered my name on the shaft, and I, to keep my secret, told him that it was my sister's name. He then wanted to marry my sister, and I undertook, fool that I was, to arrange it for him. Now I shall be obliged to confess the truth, and he will have a right to claim me instead of my supposed sister."

"But," said Tu, "I have a prior right to that of Wei, for it was I who found the arrow. And in this matter I shall be ready to outface him at all hazards. But," he added, "Wei, I am sure, is not the man to take an unfair advantage of you."

"Do you really think so?" asked Jasmine.

"Certainly I do," said Tu.

"Then—then—I shall be—very glad," said poor Jasmine, hesitatingly, overcome with bashfulness, but full of joy.

At which gracious consent Tu recovered the hand which had been withdrawn from his, and Jasmine sank again into the chair at his side.

"But, Tu, dear," she said, after a pause, "there is something else that I must tell you before I can feel that my confessions are over."

"What! You have not engaged yourself to any one else, have you?" said Tu, laughing.

"Yes, I have," she replied, with a smile; and she then gave her lover a full and particular account of how Mr. King had proposed to her on behalf of his cousin, and how she had accepted her.

"How could you frame your lips to utter such untruths?" said Tu, half laughing and half in earnest.

"O Tu, falsehood is so easy and truth so difficult sometimes. But I feel that I have been very, very wicked," said poor Jasmine, covering her face with her hands.

"Well, you certainly have got yourself into a pretty hobble. So far as I can make out, you are at the present moment engaged to one young lady and two young men."

The situation, thus expressed, was so comical that Jasmine could not refrain from laughing through her tears; but, after a somewhat lengthened consultation with her lover, her face recovered its wonted serenity, and round it hovered a halo of happiness which added light and beauty to every feature. There is something particularly entrancing in receiving the first confidences of a pure and loving soul. So Tu thought on this occasion, and while Jasmine was pouring the most secret workings of her inmost being into his ear, those lines of the poet of the Sung dynasty came irresistibly into his mind:

'T is sweet to see the flowers woo the sun,  
To watch the quaint wiles of the cooing dove,  
But sweeter far to hear the dulcet tones  
Of her one loves confessing her great love.

But there is an end to everything, even to the "Confucian Analects," and so there was also to this lovers' colloquy. For just as Jasmine was explaining, for the twentieth time, the origin and basis of her love for Tu, a



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waiter entered to announce the arrival of her luggage.

"I don't know quite," said Tu, "where we are to put your two men. But, by—the—bye," he added, as the thought struck him, "did you really travel all the way in the company of these two men only?"

"O Tu," said Jasmine, laughing, "I have something else to confess to you."

"What! another lover?" said Tu, affecting horror and surprise.

"No; not another lover, but another woman. The short, stout one is a woman, and came as my maid. She is the wife of 'The Dragon.' "

"Well, now have you told me all? For I am getting so confused about the people you have transformed from women to men, that I shall have doubts about my own sex next."

"Yes, Tu, dear; now you know all," said Jasmine, laughing. But not all the good news which was in store for him, for scarcely had Jasmine done speaking when a letter arrived from his friend in the Board of War, who wrote to say that he had succeeded in getting the military intendant of Mienchu transferred to a post in the province of Kwangsi, and that the departure of this noxious official would mean the release of the colonel, as he alone was the colonel's accuser. This news added one more chord of joy which had been making harmony in Jasmine's heart for some hours, and readily she agreed with Tu that they should set off homeward on the following morning.

With no such adventure as that which had attended Jasmine's journey to the capital, they reached Mienchu, and, to their delight, were received by the colonel in his own yamun. After congratulating him on his release, which Jasmine took care he should understand was due entirely to Tu's exertions, she gave him a full account of her various experiences on the road and at the capital.

"It is like a story out of a book of marvels," said her father, "and even now you have not exhausted all the necessary explanations. For, since my release, your friend Wei has been here to ask for my daughter in marriage. From some questions I put to him, he is evidently unaware that you are my only daughter, and I therefore put him off and told him to wait until you returned. He is in a very impatient state, and, no doubt, will be over shortly."

Nor was the colonel wrong, for almost immediately Wei was announced, who, after expressing the genuine pleasure he felt at seeing Jasmine again, began at once on the subject which filled his mind.

"I am so glad," he said, "to have this opportunity of asking you to explain matters. At present I am completely nonplussed. On my return from Peking I inquired of one of your father's servants about his daughter. 'He has not got one,' quoth the man. I went to another, and he said, 'You mean the "young noble," I suppose.' 'No, I don't,' I said; 'I mean his sister.' 'Well, that is the only daughter I know of,' said he. Then I went to your father, and all I could get out of him was, 'Wait until the "young noble" comes home.' Please tell me what all this means."

"Your great desire is to marry a beautiful and accomplished girl, is it not?" said Jasmine.

"That certainly is my wish," said Wei.

"Well then," said Jasmine, "I can assure you that your betrothal present is in the hand of such a one, and a girl whom to look at is to love."

"That may be," said Wei, "But my wish is to marry your sister."

"Will you go and talk to Tu about it?" said Jasmine, who felt that the subject was becoming too difficult for her, and whose confidence in Tu's wisdom was unbounded, "and he will explain it all to you."

Even Tu, however, found it somewhat difficult to explain Jasmine's sphinx-like mysteries, and on certain points Wei showed a disposition to be anything but satisfied. Jasmine's engagement to Tu implied his rejection, and he was disposed to be sullen and disagreeable about it. His pride was touched, and in his irritation he was inclined to impute treachery to his friend and deceit to Jasmine. To the first charge Tu had a ready answer, but the second was all the more annoying because there was some truth in it. However, Tu was not in the humour to quarrel, and being determined to seek peace and ensue it, he overlooked Wei's innuendos and made out the best case he could for his bride. On Miss King's beauty, virtues, and ability he enlarged with a wealth of diction and power of imagination which astonished himself, and Jasmine also, to whom he afterward repeated the conversation. "Why, Tu, dear," said that artless maiden, "how can you know all this about Miss King? You have never seen her, and I am sure I never told you half of all this."

"Don't ask questions," said the enraptured Tu. "Let it be enough for you to know that Wei is as eager for the possession of Miss King as he was for your sister, and that he has promised to be my best man at our wedding to-morrow."

And Wei was as good as his word. With every regard to ceremony and ancient usage, the marriage of Tu and

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Jasmine was celebrated in the presence of relatives and friends, who, attracted by the novelty of the antecedent circumstances, came from all parts of the country to witness the nuptials. By Tu's especial instructions also a prominence was allowed to Wei, which gratified his vanity and smoothed down the ruffled feathers of his conceit.

Jasmine thought that no time should be lost in reducing Miss King to the same spirit of acquiescence to which Wei had been brought, and on the evening of her wedding-day she broached the subject to Tu.

"I shall not feel, Tu, dear," she said, "that I have gained absolution for my many deceptions until that very forward Miss King has been talked over into marrying Wei; and I insist, therefore," she added, with an amount of hesitancy which reduced the demand to the level of a plaintive appeal, "that we start to-morrow for Ch'engtu to see the young woman."

"Ho! ho!" replied Tu, intensely amused at her attempted bravado. "These are brave words, and I suppose that I must humbly register your decrees."

"O Tu, you know what I mean. You know that, like a child who takes a delight in conquering toy armies, I love to fancy that I can command so strong a man as you are. But, Tu, if you knew how absolutely I rely on your judgment, you would humour my folly and say yes."

There was a subtle incense of love and flattery about this appeal which, backed as it was by a look of tenderness and beauty, made it irresistible; and the arrangements for the journey were made in strict accordance with Jasmine's wishes.

On arriving at the inn which was so full of chastening memories to Jasmine, Tu sent his card to Mr. King, who, flattered by the attention paid him by so eminent a scholar, cordially invited Tu to his house.

"To what," he said, as Tu, responding to his invitation, entered his reception-hall, "am I to attribute the honour of receiving your illustrious steps in my mean apartments?"

"I have heard," said Tu, "that the beautiful Miss King is your Excellency's cousin, and having a friend who is desirous of gaining her hand, I have come to plead on his behalf."

"I regret to say," replied King, "that your Excellency has come too late, as she has already received an engagement token from a Mr. Wen, who passed here lately on his way to Peking."

"Mr. Wen is a friend of mine also," said Tu, "and it was because I knew that his troth was already plighted that I ventured to come on behalf of him of whom I have spoken."

"Mr. Wen," said King, "is a gentleman and a scholar, and having given a betrothal present, he is certain to communicate with us direct in case of any difficulty."

"Will you, old gentleman," [a term of respect] said Tu, producing the lines which Miss King had sent Jasmine, "just cast your eyes over these verses, written to Wen by your cousin? Feeling most regretfully that he was unable to fulfil his engagement, Wen gave these to me as a testimony of the truth of what I now tell you."

King took the paper handed him by Tu, and recognised at a glance his cousin's handwriting.

"Alas!" he said, "Mr Wen told us he was engaged, but, not believing him, I urged him to consent to marry my cousin. If you will excuse me, sir," he added, "I will consult with the lady as to what should be done."

After a short absence he returned.

"My cousin is of the opinion," he said, "that she cannot enter into any new engagement until Mr. Wen has come here himself and received back the betrothal present which he gave her on parting."

"I dare not deceive you, old gentleman, and will tell you at once that that betrothal present was not Wen's but was my unworthy friend Wei's, and came into Wen's possession in a way that I need not now explain."

"Still," said King, "my cousin thinks Mr. Wen should present himself here in person and tell his own story; and I must say that I am of her opinion."

"It is quite impossible that Mr. Wen should return here," replied Tu; "but my 'stupid thorn' [wife] is in the adjoining hostelry, and would be most happy to explain fully to Miss King Wen's entire inability to play the part of a husband to her."

"If your honourable consort would meet my cousin, she, I am sure, will be glad to talk the matter over with her."

With Tu's permission, Miss King's maid was sent to the inn to invite Jasmine to call on her mistress. The maid, who was the same who had acted as Miss King's messenger on the former occasion, glanced long and earnestly at Jasmine. Her features were familiar to her, but she could not associate them with any lady of her acquaintance. As she conducted her to Miss King's apartments, she watched her stealthily, and became more and

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more puzzled by her appearance. Miss King received her with civility, and after exchanging wishes that each might be granted ten thousand blessings, Jasmine said, smiling:

"Do you recognise Mr. Wen?"

Miss King looked at her, and seeing in her a likeness to her beloved, said:

"What relation are you to him, lady?"

"I am his very self!" said Jasmine.

Miss King opened her eyes wide at this startling announcement, and gazed earnestly at her.

"/Haiyah!/" cried her maid, clapping her hands, "I thought there was a wonderful likeness between the lady and Mr. Wen. But who would have thought that she was he?"

"But what made you disguise yourself in that fashion?" asked Miss King, in an abashed and somewhat vexed tone.

"My father was in difficulties," said Jasmine, "and as it was necessary that I should go to Peking to plead for him, I dressed as a man for the convenience of travel. You will remember that in the first instance I declined your flattering overtures, but when I found that you persisted in your proposal, not being able to explain the truth, I thought the best thing to do was to hand you my friend's betrothal present which I had with me, intending to return and explain matters. And you will admit that in one thing I was truthful."

"What was that?" asked the maid.

"Why," answered Jasmine, "I said that if I did not marry your lady I would never marry any woman."

"Well, yes," said the maid, laughing, "you have kept your faith royally there."

"The friend I speak of," continued Jasmine, "has now taken his doctor's degree, and this stupid husband and wife have come from Mienchu to make you a proposal on his behalf."

Miss King was not one who could readily take in an entirely new and startling idea, and she sat with a half-dazed look, staring at Jasmine without uttering a word. If it had not been for the maid, the conversation would have ceased; but that young woman was determined to probe the matter to the bottom.

"You have not told us," she said, "the gentleman's name. And will you explain why you call him your friend? How could you be on terms of friendship with him?"

"From my childhood," said Jasmine, "I have always dressed as a boy. I went to a boy's school—"

"/Haiyah!/" interjected the maid.

"And afterward I joined my husband and this gentleman, Mr. Wei, in a reading-party."

"Didn't they discover your secret?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"That's odd," said the maid. "But will you tell us something about this Mr. Wei?"

Upon this, Jasmine launched out in a glowing eulogy upon her friend. She expatiated with fervour on his youth, good looks, learning, and prospects, and with such effect did she speak that Miss King, who began to take in the situation, ended by accepting cordially Jasmine's proposal.

"And now, lady, you must stay and dine with me," said Miss King, when the bargain was struck, "while my cousin entertains your husband in the hall."

At this meal the beginning of a friendship was formed between the two ladies which lasted ever afterward, though it was somewhat unevenly balanced. Jasmine's stronger nature felt compassion mingled with liking for the pretty doll-like Miss King, while the young lady entertained the profoundest admiration for her guest.

There was nothing to delay the fulfilment of the engagement thus happily arranged, and at the next full moon Miss King had an opportunity of comparing her bridegroom with the picture which Jasmine had drawn of him.

Scholars are plentiful in China, but it was plainly impossible that men of such distinguished learning as Tu and Wei should be left among the unemployed, and almost immediately after their marriage they were appointed to important posts in the empire. Tu rose rapidly to the highest rank, and died, at a good old age, viceroy of the metropolitan province and senior guardian to the heir apparent. Wei was not so supremely fortunate, but then, as Tu used to say, "he had not a Jasmine to help him."