

THE DIVORCE

Lu Hsun

Table of Contents

<u>THE DIVORCE</u>	1
<u>Lu Hsun</u>	1

THE DIVORCE

Lu Hsun

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

"Ah, Uncle Mu! A happy New Year and good luck to you!"

"How are you, Pa-san? Happy New Year! . . ."

"Happy New Year! So Ai-ku's here as well. . . ."

"Well met, Grandad Mu! . . ."

As Chuang Mu-san and his daughter Ai-ku stepped down into the boat from Magnolia Bridge Wharf a hum of voices broke out on board. Some of the passengers clasped their hands and bowed, and four places were vacated on the benches of the cabin. Calling out greetings, Chuang Mu-san sat down, leaning his long pipe against the side of the boat. Ai-ku sat on his left opposite Pa-san, her feet fanning out to form a V.

"Going into town, Grandad Mu?" asked a man with a ruddy face like the shell of a crab.

"Not to town." Grandad Mu sounded rather dispirited. His dark red face was so wrinkled in any case that he looked much the same as usual. "We're making a trip to Pang Village."

All on board stopped talking to stare at them.

"Is it Ai-ku's business again?" asked Pa-san at last.

"It is. . . . This affair will be the death of me. It's dragged on now for three years. We've quarrelled and patched it up time after time; yet still the thing isn't settled. . . ."

"Will you be going to Mr. Wei's house again?"

"That's right. This won't be the first time he's acted as peace-maker; but I've never agreed to his terms. Not that it matters. Their family's having their New Year reunion now. Even Seventh Master from the city will be there. . . ."

"Seventh Master?" Pa-san opened his eyes very wide. "So he'll be there to put his word in too, eh? . . . Well. . . . As a matter of fact, since we pulled down their kitchen range last year we've had our revenge more or less. Besides, there's really no point in Ai-ku going back there. . . ." He lowered his eyes again.

"I'm not set on going back there, brother Pa-san!" Ai-ku looked up indignantly. "I'm doing this to spite them. Just think! Young Beast carried on with that little widow and decided he didn't want me. But is it as simple as that? Old Beast just egged on his son and tried to get rid of me too as if it were all that easy! What about Seventh Master? Just because he exchanges cards with the magistrate, does that mean he can't talk our language? He can't be such a blockhead as Mr. Wei, who says nothing but: 'Separate, better separate.' I'll tell him what I've had to put up with all these years, and we'll see who he says is right!"

THE DIVORCE

Pa-san was convinced, and kept his mouth shut.

The boat was very quiet, with no sound but the splash of water against the bow. Chuang Mu-san reached for his pipe and filled it.

A fat man sitting opposite, next to Pa-san, rummaged in his girdle for a flint and struck a light, which he held to Chuang Mu-san's pipe.

"Thank you, thank you," said Chuang Mu-san, nodding to him.

"Though this is the first time we've met," said the fat man respectfully, "I heard of you long ago. Yes, who is there in all the eighteen villages by the coast who doesn't know of Uncle Mu? We've known too for some time that Young Shih was carrying on with a little widow. When you took your six sons to tear down their kitchen range last year, who didn't say you were right? . . . All the big gates open for you, you have plenty of face. . . . Why be afraid of *them*. . . ."

"This uncle is a truly discerning man," said Ai-ku approvingly. "I don't know who he is, though."

"My name is Wang Te-kuei," replied the fat man promptly.

"They can't just push me out! I don't care whether it's Seventh Master or Eighth Master. I'll go on making trouble till their family's ruined and all of them are dead! Mr. Wei has been at me four times, hasn't he? Even dad's been thrown off his balance by the sight of that settlement money. . . ." Chuang Mu-san swore softly to himself.

"But, Grandad Mu, didn't the Shih family send Mr. Wei a whole feast at the end of last year?" asked Crabface.

"Makes no difference," said Wang Te-kuei. "Can a feast blind a man completely? If so, what happens when you send him a foreign banquet? Those scholars who know the truth will always stick up for justice. If anyone's bullied by everyone else, for instance, they will up and speak for him no matter whether there's wine to be had or not. At the end of last year, Mr. Yung of our humble village came back from Peking. He's not like us villagers, he's seen the great world. He said that a Madame Kuang there, who's the best. . . ."

"Wang Jetty!" shouted the boatman, preparing to moor. "Any passengers for Wang Jetty?"

"Here, me!" Fatty grabbed his pipe, and darted out of the cabin, jumping ashore just as the boat drew in.

"Excuse me!" he called back with a nod to the passengers.

The boat rowed on in fresh silence, broken only by the splash of water. Pa-san began to doze off, facing Ai-ku's shoes, and by degrees his mouth fell open. The two old women in the front cabin began softly chanting Buddhist prayers and telling their beads. They looked at Ai-ku and exchanged significant glances, pursing their lips and nodding.

Ai-ku was staring at the awning above her, probably considering how best to raise such trouble that Old Beast's family would be ruined and he and Young Beast would have no way to turn. She was not afraid of Mr. Wei. She had seen him twice and he was nothing but a squat, round-headed fellow there were plenty like him in her own village, only a little darker.

Chuang Mu-san had come to the end of his tobacco, and the oil in the pipe was sputtering, but still he went on puffing. He knew that after Wang Jetty came Pang Village. Already, in fact, you could see Literary Star Pavilion at the entrance to the village. He had been here so often it was not worth talking about, any more than Mr. Wei.

THE DIVORCE

He remembered how his daughter had come home crying, how badly her husband and father-in-law had behaved, and how he had worsted them. The past unfolded again before his eyes. Usually when he recalled how he had punished evil-doers, he gave a bleak smile but not this time. The fat form of Seventh Master had somehow intervened, and was squeezing his thoughts out of any semblance of order.

The boat went on in continued silence. Only the Buddhist prayers swelled in volume. Everyone else seemed sunk in thought like Ai-ku and her father.

"Here you are, Uncle Mu. Pang Village."

Roused by the boatman's voice, they looked up to see Literary Star Pavilion before them.

Chuang jumped ashore, and Ai-ku followed him. They passed the pavilion and headed for Mr. Wei's house. After passing thirty houses on their way south, they turned a corner and reached their destination. Four boats with black awnings were moored in a row at the gate.

As they stepped through the great, black-lacquered gate, they were asked into the gatehouse. It was full of boatmen and farm-hands, who were seated at two tables. Ai-ku dared not stare at them, but she took one hasty look round, and saw there was no sign of Old Beast and Young Beast.

When a servant brought in soup containing sweet New Year cakes, without knowing why, she felt even more uncomfortable and uneasy. "Just because he exchanges cards with the magistrate doesn't mean he can't talk our language, does it?" she thought. "These scholars who know the truth will always stick up for justice. I must tell Seventh Master the whole story, beginning from the time I married at the age of fifteen. . . ."

When she finished the soup, she knew the time was at hand. Sure enough, before long she found herself following one of the farm-hands, who ushered her and her father across the great hall, and round a corner into the reception room.

The room was so crammed with things she could not take in all it contained. There were many guests as well, whose short jackets of red and blue satin were shimmering all around her. In the midst of them was a man who she knew at once must be Seventh Master. Though he had a round head and a round face too, he was a great deal bigger than Mr. Wei and the others. He had narrow slits of eyes in his great round face, a wispy black moustache, and though he was bald his head and face were ruddy and glistening. Ai-ku was quite puzzled for a moment, then concluded he must have rubbed his skin with lard.

"This is an anus-stop, which the ancients used in burials."

Seventh Master was holding something which looked like a corroded stone, and, as he spoke, he rubbed his nose twice with this object. "Unfortunately, it comes from a recent digging. Still, it's worth having: it can't be later than Han. Look at this 'mercury stain'. . . ."

The "mercury stain" was at once surrounded by several heads, one of which, of course, was Mr. Wei's. There were several sons of the house as well, whom Ai-ku had not yet noticed, for so awed were they by Seventh Master that they looked like flattened bed-bugs.

She did not understand all he had just said; she was not interested in this "mercury stain," nor did she dare investigate it. Instead she took this chance to look round. Standing behind her by the wall, close to the door, were both Old Beast and Young Beast. She saw at a glance that they looked older than when she had met them by chance half a year before.

THE DIVORCE

People drifted away from the "mercury stain." Mr. Wei took the anus-stop and sat down to stroke it, turning to ask Chuang Mu-san:

"Did just the two of you come?"

"Just the two of us."

"Why have none of your sons come?"

"They hadn't time."

"We wouldn't have troubled you to come at New Year, if not for this business . . . I'm sure you've had enough of it yourself. It's over two years now, isn't it? Better to remove enmity than keep it, I say. Since Ai-ku's husband didn't get on with her, and his parents didn't like her . . . better take the advice I gave you before and let them separate. I haven't enough face to convince you, but Seventh Master, as you know, is a champion of justice. And Seventh Master's view is the same as mine. However, he says both sides must make some concessions, and he's told the Shih family to add another ten dollars to the settlement, making it ninety dollars!"

"."

"Ninety dollars! If you took the case right up to the emperor, you couldn't get such favourable terms. Nobody but Seventh Master would make such a handsome offer!"

Seventh Master widened his slits of eyes to nod at Chuang Mu-san.

Ai-ku saw that the situation was critical and marvelled that her father, of whom all the coastal families stood in awe, should have not a word to say for himself here. This was quite uncalled for, she thought. Although she could not follow all Seventh Master said, he somehow struck her as a kindly old soul, not nearly as frightening as she had imagined.

"Seventh Master's a scholar who knows the truth," she said boldly. "He's nor like us country folk. I had no one to complain to of all the wrong that's been done me; but now I'll tell Seventh Master. All the time I was married I tried to be a good wife I bowed my head as I went in and out, and I didn't fail in a single wifely duty. But they kept finding fault with me each one was a regular bully. That year the weasel killed the big cock, why did they blame me for not closing the coop? It was that mangy cur curse it who pushed open the door of the coop to steal some rice mixed with husks. But that Young Beast wouldn't distinguish black from white. He gave me a slap on the cheek. . . ."

Seventh Master looked at her.

"I knew there must be a reason. This is something Seventh Master will not fail to notice, for scholars who know the truth know everything. He was bewitched by that bitch, and wanted to drive me away! I married him with the proper ceremonies three lots of tea and six presents and was carried to his house in a bridal sedan! Is it so easy for him to toss me aside? . . . I mean to show them, I don't mind going to court. If it can't be settled at the district court, we'll go to the prefecture. . . ."

"Seventh Master knows all this," said Mr. Wei, looking up. "If you persist in this attitude, Ai-ku, it won't be to your advantage. You haven't changed in the least. Look, how sensible your father is! It's a pity you and your brothers aren't like him. Suppose you do take this matter to the prefect, won't he consult Seventh Master? But then the case will be dealt with publicly, and nobody's feelings will be spared. . . . That being so. . . ."

THE DIVORCE

"I'll stake my life if need be, even if it ruins both families!"

"There's no need for such desperate measures," put in Seventh Master slowly. "You're still young. We should all keep the peace. 'Peace breeds wealth.' Isn't that true? I've added a whole ten dollars: that's more than generous. If your father-in-law and mother-in-law say 'Go!', then go you must. Don't talk about the prefecture, this would be the same in Shanghai, Peking or even abroad. If you don't believe me, ask him! He's just come back from the foreign school in Peking." He turned towards a sharp-chinned son of the house. "Isn't that so?" he asked.

Sharp-chin hastily straightened up to answer in low, respectful tones, "Ab so lutely."

Ai-ku felt completely isolated. Her father refused to speak, her brothers had not dared come, Mr. Wei had always been on the other side, and now Seventh Master had failed her, while even this young sharp-chin, with his soft talk and air of a flattened bug, was simply saying what was expected of him. But confused as she was, she resolved to make a last stand.

"What, does even Seventh Master " Her eyes showed surprise and disappointment. "Yes . . . I know, we rough folk are ignorant. My father's to blame for nor even understanding how to deal with people he's lost his old wits completely. He let Old Beast and Young Beast have their way in everything. They stoop to every means, however foul, to fawn on those above them. . . ."

"I'll stake my life if need be, even if it ruins both families!"

"There's no need for such desperate measures," put in Seventh Master slowly. "You're still young. We should all keep the peace. 'Peace breeds wealth.' Isn't that true? I've added a whole ten dollars: that's more than generous. If your father-in-law and mother-in-law say 'Go!', then go you must. Don't talk about the prefecture, this would be the same in Shanghai, Peking or even abroad. If you don't believe me, ask him! He's just come back from the foreign school in Peking." He turned towards a sharp-chinned son of the house. "Isn't that so?" he asked.

Sharp-chin hastily straightened up to answer in low, respectful tones, "Ab—so—lutely."

Ai-ku felt completely isolated. Her father refused to speak, her brothers had not dared come, Mr. Wei had always been on the other side, and now Seventh Master had failed her, while even this young sharp-chin, with his soft talk and air of a flattened bug, was simply saying what was expected of him. But confused as she was, she resolved to make a last stand.

"What, does even Seventh Master " Her eyes showed surprise and disappointment. "Yes . . . I know, we rough folk are ignorant. My father's to blame for nor even understanding how to deal with people—he's lost his old wits completely. He let Old Beast and Young Beast have their way in everything. They stoop to every means, however foul, to fawn on those above them. . . ."

"Look at her, Seventh Master!" Young Beast, who had been standing silently behind her, suddenly spoke up now. "She dares act like this even in Seventh Master's presence. At home she gave us no peace at all. She calls my father Old Beast and me Young Beast or Bastard."

"Who the devil is calling you a bastard?" Ai-ku rounded on him fiercely, then turned back to Seventh Master. "I've something else I'd like to say in public. He was always mean to me. It was 'slut' and 'bitch' all the time. After he started carrying on with that whore, he even cursed my ancestors. Judge between us, Seventh Master. . . ."

She gave a start, and the words died on her lips, for suddenly Seventh Master rolled his eyes and lifted his round face. From the mouth framed by that wispy moustache issued a shrill, trailing cry:

"Come here! . . ."

Her heart, which had—missed a beat, suddenly started pounding. The battle was lost, the tables were turned it seemed. She had taken a false step and fallen into the water, and she knew it was all her own fault.

A man in a blue gown and black jacket promptly came in, and stood like a stick with his arms at his sides in front of Seventh Master.

There was not a cheep in the room. Seventh Master moved his lips, but nobody could hear what he was saying. Only his servant heard, and the force of this order entered his very marrows, for twice he twitched as if overcome

THE DIVORCE

by awe. And he answered:

"Very good, sir." Then he backed away several paces, turned and went out.

Ai-ku knew that something unexpected and completely unforeseen was about to happen—something which she was powerless to prevent. Only now did she realize the full power of Seventh Master. She had been mistaken before, and acted too rashly and rudely. She repented bitterly, and found herself saying:

"I always meant to accept Seventh Master's decision. . . ."

There was not a cheep in the room. Although her words were as soft as strands of silk, they carried like a thunder-clap to Mr. Wei.

"Good!" he exclaimed approvingly, leaping up. "Seventh Master is truly just, and Ai-ku is truly reasonable. In that case, Mu-san, you can't have any objection, since your daughter's consented herself. I'm sure you've brought the wedding certificates as I asked you. So let both sides produce them now. . . ."

Ai-ku saw her father fumble in his girdle for something. The stick-like servant came in again to hand Seventh Master a small, flat, jet-black object shaped like a tortoise. Ai-ku was afraid something dreadful was going to happen. She darted a look at her father; but he was opening a blue cloth package at the table, and taking out silver dollars.

Seventh Master removed the tortoise's head, poured something from its body into his palm, then returned the flat-looking object to the stick-like servant. He rubbed one finger in his palm, then stuffed it up each nostril, staining his nose and upper lip a bright yellow. Then he wrinkled his nose as if about to sneeze.

Chuang Mu-san was counting the silver dollars. Mr. Wei extracted a few from a pile which had not been counted, and handed them to Old Beast. He also changed the position of the red and green certificates, restoring them to their original owners.

"Put them away," he said. "You must see if the amount is correct, Mu-san. This is no joking matter—all this silver. . . ."

"Ah-tchew!"

Though Ai-ku knew it was only Seventh Master sneezing, she could not help turning to look at him. His mouth was wide open and his nose was twitching. In two fingers he was still clutching the small object "used by the ancients in burials." Indeed, he was rubbing the side of his nose with it.

With some difficulty Chuang Mu-san finished counting the money, and both sides put away the red and green certificates. They all seemed to draw themselves up, and their tense expressions relaxed. Complete harmony prevailed.

"Good! This business has been settled satisfactorily," said Mr. Wei. Seeing that they seemed to be on the point of leaving, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, there's nothing more to be done now. Congratulations on unravelling this knot! Must you be going? Won't you stay to share our New Year feast? This is a rare occasion."

"We mustn't stay," said Ai-ku. "We'll come to drink with you next year."

"Thank you, Mr. Wei. We won't drink just now. We have other business. . . ." Chuang Mu-san, Old Beast and Young Beast withdrew most respectfully.

"What? Not a drop before you go?" Mr. Wei looked at Ai-ku who brought up the rear.

"Really we mustn't. Thank you, Mr. Wei."

November 6, 1925