

# **THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON**

Lu Hsun

# Table of Contents

<b><u>THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Lu Hsun</u> .....	1
<u>I</u> .....	1
<u>II</u> .....	4
<u>III</u> .....	6

# THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

Lu Hsun

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- I
- II
- III

## I

It is a fact that intelligent beasts can divine the wishes of men. As soon as their gate came in sight the horse slowed down and, hanging its head at the same moment as its rider, let it jog with each step like a pestle pounding rice.

The great house was overhung with evening mist, while thick black smoke rose from the neighbours' chimneys. It was time for supper. At the sound of hoofs, retainers had come out and were standing erect with their arms at their sides before the entrance. As Yi dismounted listlessly beside the rubbish heap, they stepped forward to relieve him of his reins and whip. At the moment of crossing the threshold, he looked down at the quiverful of brand-new arrows at his waist and the three crows and one shattered sparrow in his bag, and his heart sank within him. But he strode in, putting a bold face on things, the arrows rattling in his quiver.

Reaching the inner courtyard, he saw Chang-ngo looking out from the round window. He knew her sharp eyes must have seen the crows, and in dismay he came to a sudden stop but he had to go on in. Serving-maids came out to greet him, unfastened his bow and quiver and took his game bag. He noticed that their smiles were rather forced.

After wiping his face and hands he entered the inner apartment, calling: "Madam. . . ."

Chang-ngo had been watching the sunset from the round window. She turned slowly and threw him an indifferent glance without returning his greeting.

He had been used to this treatment for some time, for over a year at least. But as usual he went on in and sat down on the old, worn leopard skin over the wooden couch opposite. Scratching his head, he muttered:

"I was out of luck again today. Nothing but crows. . . ."

"Pah!"

Raising her willowy eyebrows, Chang-ngo sprang up and swept from the room, grumbling as she went: "Noodles with crow sauce again! Noodles with crow sauce again! I'd like to know who else eats nothing but noodles with crow sauce from one year to the next? How ill-fated I was to marry you and eat noodles with crow sauce the

## THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

whole year round!"

"Madam!" Yi leaped to his feet and followed her. "It wasn't so bad today," he continued softly. "I shot a sparrow too, which can be dressed for you. . . . Nu-hsin!" he called to the maid. "Bring that sparrow to show your mistress."

The game had been taken to the kitchen, but Nu-hsin ran to fetch the sparrow and held it out in both hands to Chang-ngo.

"That!" With a disdainful glance she reached slowly out to touch it. "How disgusting!" she said crossly. "You've smashed it to pieces! Where's the meat?"

"Tich can be dressed for you. . . . Nu-hsin!" he called to the maid. "Bring that sparrow to show your mistress."

The game had been taken to the kitchen, but Nu-hsin ran to fetch the sparrow and held it out in both hands to Chang-ngo.

"That!" With a disdainful glance she reached slowly out to touch it. "How disgusting!" she said crossly. "You've smashed it to pieces! Where's the meat?"

"I know," admitted Yi, discomfited. "My bow is too powerful, my arrow-heads are too large."

"Can't you use smaller arrows?"

"I haven't any. When I shot the giant boar and the huge python. . . ."

"Is this a giant boar or a huge python?" She turned to Nu-hsin and ordered: "Use it for soup!" Then she went back to her room.

Left alone at a loss, Yi sat down with his back to the wall to listen to the crackling of firewood in the kitchen. He remembered the bulk of the giant boar which had loomed like a small hillock in the distance. If he hadn't shot it then but left it till now, it would have kept them in meat for half a year and spared them this daily worry about food. And the huge python! What soups it could have made!

Nu-yi lit the lamp. The vermilion bow and arrows, the black bow and arrows, the crossbow, the sword and the dagger glimmered on the opposite wall in its faint rays. After one look, Yi lowered his head and sighed. Nu-hsin brought supper in and set it on the table in the middle: five large bowls of noodles on the left, two large bowls of noodles and one of soup on the right, in the centre one large bowl of crow sauce.

While eating, Yi had to admit that this was not an appetizing meal. He stole a glance at Chang-ngo. Without so much as looking at the crow sauce, she had steeped her noodles in soup, and she set down her bowl half finished. Her face struck him as paler and thinner than before—suppose she were to fall ill?

By the second watch, in a slightly better mood, she sat without a word on the edge of the bed to drink some water. Yi sat on the wooden couch next to her, stroking the old leopard skin which was losing its fur.

"Ah," he said in a conciliatory tone. "I bagged this spotted leopard on the Western Hill before we married. It was a beauty—one glossy mass of gold."

That reminded him of how they had lived in the old days. Of bears they ate nothing but the paws, of camels nothing but the hump, giving all the rest to the serving-maids and retainers. When the big game was finished they ate wild boars, rabbits and pheasants. He was such a fine archer, he could shoot as much as he pleased.

A sigh escaped him.

"The fact is I'm too good a shot," he said. "That's why the whole place is cleaned out. Who could have guessed we'd be left with nothing but crows?"

Chang-ngo gave the ghost of a smile.

"Today I was luckier than usual." Yi's spirits were rising. "At least I caught a sparrow. I had to go an extra thirty *li* to find it."

"Can't you go a little further still?"

"Yes, madam. That's what I mean to do. I'll get up earlier tomorrow morning. If you wake first, call me. I mean to go fifty *li* further to see if I can't find some roebucks or rabbits. . . . It won't be easy, though. Remember all the

## THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

game there was when I shot the giant boar and the huge python? Black bears used to pass in front of your mother's door, and she asked me several times to shoot them. . . ."

"Really?" It seemed to have slipped Chang-ngo's memory.

"Who could have foreseen they would all disappear like this? Come to think of it, I don't know how we're going to manage. *I'm* all right. I've only to eat that elixir the priest gave me, and I can fly up to heaven. But first I must think of you . . . that's why I've decided to go a little further tomorrow. . . ."

"Um."

Chang-ngo finished the water. She lay down slowly and closed her eyes.

The lamp, burning low, lit up her fading make-up. Much of her powder had rubbed off, there were dark circles beneath her eyes and one of her eyebrows was blacker than the other; yet her mouth was as red as fire, and though she wasn't smiling you could see faint dimples on her cheeks.

"Ah, no! How can I feed a woman like this on nothing but noodles and crow sauce!"

Overcome by shame, Yi flushed up to his ears.

---

*[Note: Yi]* Yi or Hon Yi was a heroic archer in ancient Chinese legends.

*[Note: Chang Ngo]* A goddess in ancient Chinese mythology, supposed to be Yi's wife. She took some drug of immortality and flew to the moon to become a goddess there.

## THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

### II

Night passed, a new day dawned.

In a flash Yi opened his eyes. A sunbeam aslant the western wall told him it could not be early. He looked at Chang-ngo, who was lying stretched out fast asleep. Without a sound he threw on his clothes, slipped down from his leopard skin couch and tiptoed into the hall. As he washed his face he told Nu-keng to order Wang Sheng to saddle his horse.

Having so much to do, he had long since given up breakfast. Nu-yi put five baked cakes, five stalks of leek and a package of paprika in his game bag, fastening this firmly to his waist with his bow and arrows. He tightened his belt and strode lightly out of the hall, telling Nu-keng whom he met:

"I mean to go further today to look for game. I may be a little late getting back. When your mistress has had her breakfast and is in good spirits, give her my apologies and ask her to wait for me for supper. Don't forget—my apologies!"

He walked swiftly out, swung into the saddle and flashed past the retainers ranged on either side. Very soon he was out of the village. In front were the *kaoliang* fields through which he passed every day. These he ignored, having learned long ago that there was nothing here. With two cracks of his whip he galloped forward, covering sixty *li* without a pause. In front was a dense forest, and since his horse was winded and in a lather it naturally slowed down. Another ten *li* and they were in the forest, yet Yi could see nothing but wasps, butterflies, ants and locusts—not a trace of birds or beasts. The first sight of this unexplored territory had raised hopes of catching at least a couple of foxes or rabbits but now he knew that had been an idle dream. He made his way out and saw another stretch of green *kaoliang* fields ahead, with one or two mud cottages in the distance. The breeze was balmy, the sun warm; neither crow nor sparrow could be heard.

"Confound it!" he bellowed to relieve his feelings.

A dozen paces further on, however, and his heart leaped with joy. On the flat ground outside a mud hut in the distance there was actually a fowl. Stopping to peck at every step, it looked like a large pigeon. He seized his bow and fitted an arrow to it, drew it to its full extent and then let go. His shaft sped through the air like a shooting star.

With no hesitation, for he never missed his quarry, he spurred after the arrow to retrieve the game. But as he approached it an old woman hurried towards the horse. She had picked up the large pigeon transfixed by his arrow and was shouting:

"Who are you? Why have you shot my best black laying hen? Have you nothing better to do? . . ."

Yi's heart missed a beat. He pulled up short.

"What! A hen?" he echoed nervously. "I thought it was a wood pigeon."

"Are you blind? You must be over forty too."

"Yes, ma'am. Forty-five last year."

"No fool like an old fool, they say. Imagine mistaking a hen for a wood pigeon! Who are you anyway?"

"I am Yi." While saying this he saw that his arrow had pierced the hen's heart, killing it outright. So his voice trailed away on his name as he dismounted.

"Never heard of him!" She peered into his face.

"There are those who know my name. In the days of good King Yao I shot wild boars and serpents. . . ."

"Oh, you liar! Those were shot by Lord Feng Meng and some others. Maybe you helped. But how can you boast of doing it all yourself? For shame!"

"Why, ma'am, that fellow Feng Meng has just taken to calling on me during the last few years. We never worked together. He had no part in it."

"Liar! Everybody says so. I hear it four or five times a month."

"All right. Let's come down to business. What about this hen?"

"You must make it up! She was my best: she laid me an egg every day. You'll have to give me two hoes and three spindles in exchange."

## THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

"Look at me, ma'am—I neither farm nor spin. Where would I get hoes or spindles? I've no money on me either, only five baked cakes—but they're made of white flour. I'll give you these for your hen with five stalks of leek and a package of paprika into the bargain. What do you say? . . ."

Taking the cakes from his bag with one hand, he picked up the hen with the other.

The old woman was not averse to taking cakes of white flour, but insisted on having fifteen. After haggling for some time they agreed on ten, and Yi promised to bring the rest over by noon the next day at the latest, leaving the arrow there as security. Then, his mind at rest, he stuffed the dead hen in his bag, sprang into his saddle and headed home. Though famished, he was happy. It was over a year since they had last tasted chicken soup.

It was afternoon when he emerged from the forest, and he plied his whip hard in his eagerness to get home. His horse was exhausted, though, and they did not reach the familiar *kaoliang* fields till dusk. He glimpsed a shadowy figure some way off, and almost at once an arrow sang through the air towards him.

Without reining in his horse, which was trotting along, Yi fitted an arrow to his bow and let fly. Zing! Two arrowheads collided, sparks flew into the air and the two shafts thrust up to form an inverted V before toppling over and falling to the ground. No sooner had the first two met than both men loosed their second, which again collided in mid-air. They did this nine times, till Yi's supply was exhausted; and now he could see Feng Meng opposite, gloating as he aimed another arrow at his throat.

"Well, well!" thought Yi. "I imagined he was fishing at the seaside, but he's been hanging about to play dirty tricks like this. Now I understand the old woman talking as she did. . . ."

In a flash, his enemy's bow arched like a full moon and the arrow whistled through the air towards Yi's throat. Perhaps the aim was at fault, for it struck him full in the mouth. He tumbled over, transfixed, and fell to the ground. His horse stood motionless.

Seeing Yi was dead, Feng Meng tiptoed slowly over. Smiling as if drinking to his victory, he gazed at the face of the corpse.

As he stared long and hard, Yi opened his eyes and sat up.

"You've learned nothing in a hundred visits or more to me." He spat out the arrow and laughed. "Don't you know my skill in 'biting the arrow'? That's too bad! These tricks of yours won't get you anywhere. You can't kill your boxing master with blows learned from him. You must work out something of your own."

"I was trying to 'pay you out in your own coin' . . ." mumbled the victor.

Yi stood up, laughing heartily. "You're always quoting some adage. Maybe you can impress old women that way, but you can't impose on *me*. I've always stuck to hunting, never taken to highway robbery like you. . . ."

Relieved to see that the hen in his bag was not crushed, he remounted and rode away.

"Curse you . . ." An oath carried after him.

"To think he should stoop so low . . . Such a young fellow, and yet he's picked up swearing. No wonder that old woman was taken in."

Yi shook his head sadly as he rode along.

## THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

### III

Before he came to the end of the *kaoliang* fields, night had fallen. Stars appeared in the dark blue sky, and in the west the evening star shone with unusual brilliance. The horse picked its way along the white ridges between the fields, so weary that its pace was slower than ever. Fortunately, at the horizon the moon began to shed its silver light.

"Confound it!" Yi, whose belly was rumbling now, lost patience. "The harder I try to make a living, the more tiresome things happen to waste my time." He spurred his horse, but it simply twitched its rump and jogged on as slowly as before.

"It's so late, Chang-ngo is sure to be angry," he thought. "She may fly into a temper. Thank goodness I've this little hen to make her happy. I'll tell her: 'Madam, I went two hundred *li* there and back to find you this.' No, that's no good: sounds too boastful."

Now to his joy he saw lights ahead and stopped worrying. And without any urging the horse broke into a canter. A round, snow-white moon lit up the path before him and a cool wind soothed his cheeks—this was better than coming home from a great hunt!

The horse stopped of its own accord beside the rubbish heap. Yi saw at a glance that something was amiss. The whole house was in confusion. Chao Fu alone came out to meet him.

"What's happened? Where's Wang Sheng?" he demanded.

"He's gone to the Yao family to look for our mistress."

"What? Has your mistress gone to the Yao family?" Yi was too taken aback to dismount.

"Yes, sir." Chao took the reins and whip.

Then Yi got down from his horse and crossed the threshold. After a moment's thought he turned to ask:

"Are you sure she didn't grow tired of waiting and go to a restaurant?"

"No, sir. I've asked in all three restaurants. She isn't there."

His head lowered in thought, Yi entered the house. The three maids were standing nervously in front of the hall. He cried out in amazement:

"What! All of you here? Your mistress never goes alone to the Yao family."

They looked at him in silence, then took off his bow, the quiver and the bag holding the small hen. Yi had a moment of panic. Suppose, in anger, Chang-ngo had killed herself? He sent Nu-keng for Chao Fu, and told him to search the pond in the back and the trees. Once in their room, though, he knew his guess had been wrong. The place was in utter disorder, all the chests were open and one glance behind the bed showed that the jewel-case was missing. He felt as if doused with cold water. Gold and pearls meant nothing to him, but the elixir given him by the priest had been in that case too.

After walking twice round the room, he noticed Wang Sheng at the door.

"Please, sir, our mistress isn't with the Yaos. They're not playing mah-jong today."

Yi looked at him and said nothing. Wang Sheng withdrew.

"Did you call me, sir?" asked Chao Fu, coming in.

Yi shook his head and waved him away.

He walked round and round the room, then went to the hall and sat down. Looking up he could see on the opposite wall the vermilion bow and arrows, the black bow and arrows, the crossbow, the sword and the dagger. After some reflection, he asked the maids who were standing there woodenly:

"What time did your mistress disappear?"

"She wasn't here when I brought in the lamp," said Nu-yi. "But no one saw her go out."

"Did you see her take the medicine in that case?"

"No, sir. But she did ask me for some water this afternoon."

Yi stood up in consternation. He suspected that he had been left alone on earth!

"Did you see anything flying to heaven?" he asked.

"Oh!" Nu-hsin was struck by a thought. "When I came out after lighting the lamp, I did see a black shadow



## THE FLIGHT TO THE MOON

flying this way. I never dreamed it was our mistress. . . ." Her face turned pale.

"It must have been!" Yi clapped his knee and sprang up. He started out, turning back to ask Nu-hsin: "Which way did the shadow go?"

Nu-hsin pointed with one finger. But all he could see in that direction was the round, snow-white moon, with its hazy pavilions and trees, suspended in the sky. When he was a child his grandmother had told him of the lovely landscape of the moon; he still had a vague recollection of her description. As he watched the moon floating in a sapphire sea, his own limbs seemed very heavy.

Fury took possession of him. And in his fury he felt the urge to kill. With eyes starting from his head, he roared at the maids:

"Bring my bow! The one with which I shot the suns! And three arrows!"

Nu-yi and Nu-keng took down the huge bow in the middle of the hall and dusted it. Together with three long arrows they handed it to him.

Holding the bow in one hand, with the other he fitted the three arrows to the string. He drew the bow to the full, aiming straight at the moon. Standing there firm as a rock, his eyes darting lightning, his beard and hair flying in the wind like black tongues of flame, for one instant he looked again the hero who, long ago, had shot the suns.

There was a whistle, one only. The three shafts left the string, one after the other, too fast for eye to see or ear to hear. They should have struck the moon in the same place, for they followed each other without a hair's breadth between them. But to be sure of reaching his mark he had given each a slightly different direction, so that the arrows struck three different points, inflicting three wounds.

The maids gave a cry. They saw the moon quiver and thought it must surely fall—but still it hung there peacefully, shedding a calm, even brighter light, as if completely unscathed.

Yi threw back his head to hurl an oath at the sky. He watched and waited. But the moon paid no attention. He took three paces forward, and the moon fell back three paces. He took three paces back, and the moon moved forward.

They looked at each other in silence.

Listlessly, he leaned his bow against the door of the ball. He went inside. The maids followed him.

He sat down and sighed. "Well, your mistress will be happy on her own for ever after. How could she have the heart to leave me and fly up there alone? Did she find me too old? But only last month she said: 'You're not old. It's a sign of mental weakness to think of yourself as old. . . .'"

"That couldn't be it," said Nu-yi. "Folk still describe you as a warrior, sir."

"Sometimes you seem like an artist," put in Nu-hsin.

"Nonsense! The fact is, those noodles with crow sauce were uneatable. I can't blame her for not being able to stomach them. . . ."

"That leopard skin is worn out on one side. I'll cut a piece of the leg facing the wall to mend it. That will look better." Nu-hsin walked inside.

"Wait a bit!" said Yi and reflected. "There's no hurry for that. I'm famished. Make haste and cook me a dish of chicken with paprika, and make five catties of flapjacks. After that I can go to bed. Tomorrow I'm going to ask that priest for another elixir, so that I can follow her. Tell Wang Sheng, Nu-keng, to give my horse four measures of beans!"

---

*December 1926*