

The Han Koong Tsu, or Autumn of the Palace of Han

Anonymous

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PROLOGUE

Enter Hanchenyu, K'han of the Tartars, reciting four verses.

Khan. The autumnal gale blows wildly through the grass, amidst our woolen tents. And the moon of night, shining on the rude huts, hears the lament of the mournful pipe: The countless hosts, with their bended horns, obey me as their leader.

Our tribes are ten distinguished friends of the family of Han. I am Hanchenyu, the old inhabitant of the sandy waste; the sole ruler of the northern regions. The wild chase is our trade; battle and conquest our chief occupation. The Emperor Wunwong retired before our Eastern tribes; Weikeang trembled at us, and sued for our friendship. The ancient title of our chiefs has in the course of time been changed to that which I now bear. When the two races of Ch'in and Han contended in battle, and filled the empire with tumult, our tribes were in full power: numberless was the host of armed warriors with their bended horns. For seven days my ancestor hemmed in with his forces the Emperor Kaoute; until, by the contrivance of the minister, a treaty was concluded, and the Princesses of China were yielded in marriage to our K'hans. Since the time of Hoeyte and the Empress Leuhow, each successive generation has adhered to the established rule, and sought our alliance with its daughters. In the reign of the late Emperor Seunte, my brothers contended with myself for the rule of our nation, and its power was weakened until the tribes elected me as their chief. I am a real descendant of the empire of Han. I command a hundred thousand armed warriors. We have moved to the South, and approached the border, claiming an alliance with the Imperial race. Yesterday I dispatched an envoy with tributary presents to demand a princess in marriage; but know not if the Emperor will ratify the engagement with the customary oaths. The fineness of the season has drawn away our chiefs on a hunting excursion amidst the sandy steppes. May they meet with success, for we Tartars have no fields our bows and arrows are our sole means of subsistence.

Enter Minister of Han, reciting verses.

Minister. Let a man have the heart of a kite, and the talons of an eagle. Let him deceive his superiors, and oppress those below him; Let him enlist flattery, insinuation, profligacy, and avarice on his side, And he will find them a lasting assistance through life. I am no other than Maouyenshow, a minister of the sovereign of Han. By a hundred arts of specious flattery and address I have deceived the Emperor, until he places his whole delight in me alone. My words he listens to; and he follows my counsel. Within the precincts of the palace, as without them, who is there but bows before me who is there but trembles at my approach? But observe the chief art which I

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have learned: It is this: to persuade the Emperor to keep aloof from his wise counselors, and seek all his pleasures amidst the women of his palace. Thus it is that I strengthen my power and greatness. But, in the midst of my lucubrations Here comes the Emperor.

Enter Emperor Yuenta attended by Eunuchs and Women.

Emperor. [*recites verses*]. During the ten generations that have succeeded our acquisition of Empire, my race has alone possessed the four hundred districts of the world. Long have the frontiers been bound in tranquillity by the ties of mutual oaths. And our pillow has been undisturbed by grief or anxiety. Behold in us the Emperor Yuenta, of the race of Han. Our ancestor Kaoute emerged from a private station, and raised his family by extinguishing the dynasty of Ch'in, and slaughtering their race. Ten generations have passed away since he left this inheritance to us. The four boundaries of the empire have been tranquil; the eight regions at rest! But not through our personal merits; we have wholly depended on the exertions of our civil and military rulers. On the demise of our late father, the female inmates of the palace were all dispersed, and our harem is now solitary and untenanted; but how shall this be endured!

Minister. Consider, sir, that even the thriving husbandman may desire to change his partner; then why not your Majesty, whose title is the Law of Heaven, whose possessions are the whole world! May I advise that commissioners be dispatched to search throughout the empire for all of whatever rank that is most beautiful between the ages of fifteen and twenty, for the peopling of the inner palace.

Emperor. You say well. We appoint you at once our minister of selection, and will invest you with a written authority. Search diligently through our realms; and when you have selected the most worthy, let us be provided with portraits of each, as a means of fixing our choice. By the merits of your services, you may supply us with an occasion of rewarding you on your return. [*Exeunt.*]

ACT FIRST

Minister. [*repeats verses*]. The huge ingots of yellow gold I appropriate to myself. I heed not the seas of blood which flow by perverting the laws. During life I am determined to have abundance of riches; what care I for the curses of mankind after my death? Having received the Emperor's commission to search far and wide for the most beautiful damsels, I have fixed upon ninety and nine. Their families were glad to invite my selection by rich gifts, and the treasure that I have amassed is not small. On arriving yesterday at a district pertaining to Chingtoo city, I met with a maiden, daughter of one Wongehang. The brightness of her charms was piercing as an arrow. She was perfectly beautiful and doubtless unparalleled in the whole empire. But, unfortunately, her father is a cultivator of the land, not possessed of much wealth. When I insisted on a hundred ounces of gold to secure her being the chief object of the Imperial choice, they first pleaded their poverty and then, relying on her extraordinary beauty, rejected my offers altogether. I therefore left them.

[*Considers awhile.*]

But no! I have a better plan.

[*He knits his brows and matures his scheme.*]

I will disfigure her portrait in such a manner that when it reaches the Emperor it shall secure her being doomed to neglected seclusion. Thus I shall contrive to make her unhappy for life. Base is the man who delights not in revenge! [*Exit.*]

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Night. Enter the Lady Chaukeun, with two female attendants.

Chaukeun. [*recites verses*]. Though raised to be an inhabitant of the Imperial dwelling I have long been here without the good fortune to see my prince. This beautiful night must I pass in lonely solitude, with no companion but my lute to solace my retirement. I am a native of Chingtoo city; and my father's occupation is husbandry. My mother dreamed on the day I was born that the light of the moon shone on her bosom, but was soon cast low to the earth. I was just eighteen years of age when chosen as an inhabitant of the Imperial palace; but the minister Maouyenshow, disappointed in the treasure which he demanded on my account, disfigured my portrait in such a manner as to keep me out of the Emperor's presence; and now I live in neglected solitude. While at home, I learned a little music, and could play a few airs on the lute. Thus sorrowing in the stillness of midnight, let me practise one of my songs to dispel my griefs. [*Begins to play on the lute.*]

Enter Emperor, attended by a Eunuch, carrying a light.

Emperor. Since the beauties were selected to grace our palace, we have not yet discovered a worthy object on whom to fix our preference. Vexed and disappointed, we pass this day of leisure roaming in search of her who may be destined for our Imperial choice. [*Hears the lute.*] Is not that some lady's lute?

Attendant. It is. I hasten to advise her of your Majesty's approach.

Emperor. No, hold! Keeper of the yellow gate, discover to what part of our palace that lady pertains; and bid her approach our presence; but beware lest you alarm her.

Attendant. [*approaches in the direction of the sound, and speaks*]. What lady plays there? The Emperor comes! Approach to meet him. [*Lady Advances.*]

Emperor. Keeper of the yellow gate, see that the light burns brightly within your gauze lamp, and hold it nearer to us.

Lady. [*approaching*]. Had your handmaid but known it was your Majesty, she would have been less tardy; forgive, then, this delay.

Emperor. Truly this is a very perfect beauty! From what quarter come such superior charms?

Lady. My name is Chaukeun: my father cultivates at Chingtoo the fields which he has derived from his family. Born in an humble station, I am ignorant of the manners that befit a palace.

Emperor. But with such uncommon attractions, what chance has kept you from our sight?

Lady. When I was chosen by the minister Maouyenshow, he demanded of my father an amount of treasure which our poverty could not supply; he therefore disfigured my portrait, by representing a scar under the eyes, and caused me to be consigned to seclusion and neglect.

Emperor. Keeper of the yellow gate, bring us that picture, that we may view it. [*Sees the picture.*] Ah, how has he dimmed the purity of the gem, bright as the waves in autumn. [*To the attendant.*] Transmit our pleasure to the officer of the guard, to behead Maouyenshow and report to us his execution.

Lady. My parents, sir, are subject to the tax in our native district. Let me entreat your Majesty to remit their contributions and extend favor toward them!

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Emperor. That shall readily be done. Approach and hear ur Imperial pleasure. We create you a Princess of our palace.

Lady. How unworthy is your handmaid of such gracious distinction! [*Goes through the form of returning thanks .*] Early to-morrow I attend your Majesty's commands in this place. The Emperor is gone: let the attendants close the doors: I will retire to rest. [*Exit.*]

ACT SECOND

Enter K'han of the Tartars, at the head of his Tribes.

Khan. I lately sent an envoy to the sovereign of Han, with the demand of a princess in marriage; but the Emperor has returned a refusal, under the plea that the princess is yet too young. This answer gives me great trouble. Had he not plenty of ladies in his palace, of whom he might have sent me one? The difference was of little consequence. Let me recall my envoy with all speed, for I must invade the South with our forces. And yet I am unwilling to break a truce of so many years' standing! We must see how matters turn out, and be guided by the event.

Enter Minister of Han.

Minister. The severity with which I extorted money, in the selection of beauties for the palace, led me to disfigure the picture of Chaoukeun, and consign her to neglected seclusion. But the Emperor fell in with her, obtained the truth, and condemned me to lose my head. I contrived to make my escape though I have no home to receive me. I will take this true portrait of Chaoukeun and show it to the Tartar Khan, persuading him to demand her from the Emperor, who will no doubt be obliged to yield her up. A long journey has brought me to this spot, and from the troops of men and horses

I conclude I have reached the Tartar camp. [*Addresses himself to somebody.*] Leader, inform King Hanchenyu that a great minister of the empire of Han is come to wait on him.

Khan. [*on being informed*]. Command him to approach. [*Seeing Maouyenshow.*] What person are you?

Minister. I am a minister of Han. In the western palace of the Emperor is a lady, named Chaoukeun, of rare and surpassing charms. When your envoy, great king, came to demand a princess, this lady would have answered the summons, but the Emperor of Han could not bring himself to part with her, and refused to yield her up. I repeatedly renewed my bitter reproaches, and asked how he could bear, for the sake of a woman's beauty, to implicate the welfare of two nations. For this the Emperor would have beheaded me; and I therefore escaped with the portrait of the lady, which I present, great king, to yourself. Should you send away an envoy with the picture to demand her, she must certainly be delivered up. Here is the portrait. [*Hands it up.*]

Khan. Whence could so beautiful a female have appeared in the world!? If I can only obtain her, my wishes are complete. Immediately shall an envoy be dispatched, and my ministers prepare a letter to the Emperor of Han, demanding her in marriage as the condition of peace. Should he refuse, I will presently invade the South: his hills and rivers shall be exposed to ravage. Our warriors will commence by hunting, as they proceed on their way; and thus gradually entering the frontiers, I shall be ready to act as may best suit the occasion. [*Exit.*]

The Palace of Han. Enter lady, attended by females.

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Princess. A long period has elapsed since I had to thank his Majesty for his choice. The Emperor's fondness for me is so great, that he has still neglected to hold a court. I hear he is now gone to the hall of audience, and will therefore ornament myself at my toilet and be ready to wait on him at his return. [*Stands opposite a mirror.*]

Enter Emperor.

Emperor. Since we first met with Chaoukeun in the western palace, we have been as it were deranged and intoxicated; a long interval has elapsed since we held a court; and on entering the hall of audience this day, we waited not until the assembly had dispersed, but returned hither to obtain a sight of her. [*Perceiving the Princess.*] Let us not alarm her, but observe in secret what she is doing. [*Comes close behind and looks over her.*] Reflected in that round mirror, she resembles the Lady in the Moon.

Enter President, and an Officer in waiting.

President. [*recites verses*]. Ministers should devote themselves to the regulation of the empire; They should be occupied with public cares in the hall of government. But they do naught but attend at the banquets in the palace. When have they employed a single day in the service of their prince?

This day, when the audience was concluded, an envoy arrived from the Tartars to demand Chaoukeun in marriage, as the only condition of peace. It is my duty to report this to his Majesty, who has retired to his western palace. Here I must enter. [*Perceiving the Emperor.*] I report to your Majesty that Hanchenyu, the leader of the northern foreigners, sends an envoy to declare that Maouyenshow has presented to him the portrait of the princess, and that he demands her in marriage as the only condition of peace. If refused, he will invade the South with a great power, and our rivers and hills will be exposed to rapine.

Emperor. In vain do we maintain and send forth armies; vain are the crowds of civil and military officers about our palace! Which of them will drive back for us these foreign troops? They are all afraid of the Tartar swords and arrows! But if they can not exert themselves to expel the barbarians, why call for the princess to propitiate them?

President. The foreigners say that through your Majesty's devoted fondness for the princess, the affairs of your empire are falling into ruin. They declare that if the government does not yield her up, they will put their army in motion, and subdue the country. Your servant reflects, that Chow-wong [Last Emperor of the Shang Dynasty] who lost his empire and life entirely through his blind devotion to Takee, is a fit example to warn your Majesty. Our army is weak, and needs the talents of a fit general. Should we oppose the Tartars, and be defeated, what will remain to us? Let your Majesty give up your fondness for the princess, to save your people.

Officer. The envoy waits without for an audience.

Emperor. Well; command that he approach us.

Enter Envoy.

Envoy. Hanchenyu, K'han of the Tartars, sends me, his minister, to state before the great Sovereign of Han that the Northern tribes and the Southern empire have long been bound in peace by mutual alliances; but that envoys being twice sent to demand a princess, his requisitions have been refused. The late minister, Maouyenshow, took with him the portrait of a beautiful lady, and presented it to the K'han, who now sends me, his envoy, on purpose to demand the Lady Chaoukeun, and no other, as the only condition of peace between the two nations. Should your Majesty refuse, the K'han has a countless army of brave warriors, and will forthwith invade the South to try the chances of war. I trust your Majesty will not err in your decision.

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Emperor. The envoy may retire to repose himself in his lodging. [*Exit the Envoy.*] Let our civil and military officers consult, and report to us the best mode of causing the foreign troops to retire, without yielding up the princess to propitiate them. They take advantage of the compliant softness of her temper. Were the Empress Leuhow alive let her utter a word which of them would dare to be of a different opinion? It would seem that, for the future, instead of men for ministers, we need only have fair women to keep our empire in peace.

Princess. In return for your Majesty's bounties, it is your handmaid's duty to brave death to serve you. I can cheerfully enter into this foreign alliance, for the sake of producing peace, and shall leave behind me a name still green in history. But my affection for your Majesty, how am I to lay aside!

Emperor. Alas, I know too well that I can do no more than yourself!

President. I entreat your Majesty to sacrifice your love, and think of the security of your Dynasty. Hasten, sir, to send the princess on her way!

Emperor. Let her this day advance a stage on her journey, and be presented to the envoy. To-morrow we will repair as far as the bridge of Pahling, and give her a parting feast.

President. Alas! Sir, this may not be! It will draw on us the contempt of these barbarians.

Emperor. We have complied with all our minister's propositions shall they not, then, accede to ours? Be it as it may, we will witness her departure and then return home to hate the traitor Maouyenshow!

President. Unwillingly we advise that the princess be sacrificed for the sake of peace; but the envoy is instructed to insist upon her alone and from ancient times, how often hath a nation suffered for a woman's beauty!

Princess. Though I go into exile for the nation's good, yet ill can I bear to part from your Majesty! [*Exeunt.*]

ACT THIRD

Enter Envoy, escorting the Princess, with a band of music.

Princess. Thus was I, in spite of the treachery of Maouyenshow, who disfigured my portrait, seen and exalted by his Majesty; but the traitor presented a truer likeness to the Tartar king, who comes at the head of an army to demand me, with a threat of seizing the country. There is no remedy I must be yielded up to propitiate the invaders! How shall I bear the rigors the winds and frosts of that foreign land! It has been said of old that "surpassing beauty is often coupled with an unhappy fate." Let me grieve, then, without entertaining fruitless resentment at the effects of my own attractions.

Enter Emperor, attended by his several officers.

Emperor. This day we take leave of the princess at Pahling bridge! [*To his ministers.*] Can ye not devise a way to send out these foreign troops, without yielding up the princess for the sake of peace? [*Descends from his horse and seems to grieve with Chaoukeun.*] Let our attendants delay awhile, till we have conferred the parting cup.

Envoy. Lady, let us urge you to proceed on your way the sky darkens, and night is coming on.

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Princess. Alas! when shall I again behold your Majesty? I will take off my robes of distinction and leave them behind me. Today in the palace of Han tomorrow I shall be espoused to a stranger. I cease to wear these splendid vestments they shall no longer adorn my beauty in the eyes of men.

Envoy. Again let us urge you, princess, to depart; we have delayed but too long already!

Emperor. 'Tis done! Princess, when you are gone, let your thoughts forbear to dwell with sorrow and resentment upon us! [*They part.*] And am I the great Monarch of the line of Han?

President. Let your Majesty cease to dwell with such grief upon this subject!

Emperor. She is gone! In vain have we maintained those armed heroes on the frontier. Mention but swords and spears, and they tremble at their hearts like a young deer. The princess has this day performed what belonged to themselves: and yet they affect the semblance of men!

President. Your Majesty is entreated to return to the palace: dwell not so bitterly, Sir, on her memory: allow her to depart!

Emperor. Did I not think of her, I had a heart of iron a heart of iron! The tears of my grief stream in a thousand channels this evening shall her likeness be suspended in the palace, where I will sacrifice to it and tapers with their silver lights shall illuminate her chamber.

President. Let your Majesty return to the palace the princess is already far distant! [*Exeunt.*]

The Tartar Camp. Enter K'han at the head of his tribes, leading in the Princess.

Khan. The Emperor of Han having now, in observance of old treaties, yielded up to me the Lady Chaoukeun in marriage, I take her as my rightful queen. The two nations shall enjoy the benefits of peace. [*To his generals.*] Leaders, transmit my commands to the army to strike our encampment, and proceed to the north. [*They march.*]

The river Amur. Tartar army on its march.

Princess. What place is this?

Envoy. It is the River of the Black Dragon, the frontier of the Tartar territories and those of China. This southern shore is the Emperor's; on the northern side commences our Tartar dominion.

Princess. [*to the Khan.*] Great King, I take a cup of wine, and pour a libation toward the South my last farewell to the Emperor [*pours the libation*] of Han, this life is finished. I await thee in the next!

[*Throws herself into the river. The Khan, in great consternation, endeavors to save her, but in vain.*]

Khan. Alas! alas! so determined was her purpose against this foreign alliance she has thrown herself into the stream, and perished! 'Tis done, and remediless! Let her sepulcher be on this river's bank, and be it called "the verdant tomb." She is no more; and vain has been our enmity with the dynasty of Han! The traitor Maouyenshow was the author of all this misery. [*To an officer.*] Take Maouyenshow and let him be delivered over to the Emperor for punishment. I will return to our former friendship with the dynasty of Han. We will renew and long preserve the sentiments of relationship. The traitor disfigured the portrait to injure Chaoukeun then deserted his sovereign, and stole over to me, whom he prevailed on to demand the lady in marriage. How little did I think that she would thus precipitate herself into the stream, and perish! In vain did my spirit melt at the sight of her! But if I detained this profligate and traitorous rebel, he would certainly prove to us a root of misfortune: it is better to

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deliver him for his reward to the Emperor of Han, with whom I will renew, and long retain, our old feelings of friendship and amity. [*Exeunt.*]

ACT FOURTH

Enter Emperor, with an attendant.

Emperor. Since the princess was yielded to the Tartars we have not held an audience. The lonely silence of night but increases our melancholy! We take the picture of that fair one and suspend it here, as some small solace to our griefs. [*To the attendant.*] Keeper of the yellow gate, behold, the incense in yonder vase is burned out: hasten then to add some more. Though we can not see her, we may at least retain this shadow; and, while life remains, betoken our regard. But oppressed and weary, we would fain take a little repose.

[*Lies down to sleep. The Princess appears before him in a vision .*]

Princess. Delivered over as a captive to appease the barbarians, they would have conveyed me to their Northern country: but I took an occasion to elude them and have escaped back. Is not this the Emperor, my sovereign? Sir, behold me again restored.

[*A Tartar soldier appears in the vision.*]

Soldier. While I chanced to sleep, the lady, our captive, has made her escape, and returned home. In eager pursuit of her, I have reached the imperial palace. Is not this she?

[*Carries her off. The Emperor starts from his sleep.*]

Emperor. We just saw the Princess returned but alas, how quickly has she vanished! In bright day she answered not to our call but when morning dawned on our troubled sleep, a vision presented her in this spot. [*Hears the wild fowl's cry.*] Hark, the passing fowl screamed twice or thrice! Can it know there is no one so desolate as I? [*Cries repeated.*] Perhaps worn out and weak, hungry and emaciated, they bewail at once the broad nets of the South and the tough bows of the North. [*Cries repeated.*] The screams of those water-birds but increase our melancholy.

Attendant. Let your Majesty cease this sorrow, and have some regard to your sacred person.

Emperor. My sorrows are beyond control. Cease to upbraid this excess of feeling, since ye are all subject to the same. Yon doleful cry is not the note of the swallow on the carved rafters, nor the song of the variegated bird upon the blossoming tree. The princess has abandoned her home! Know ye in what place she grieves, listening like me to the screams of the wild bird?

Enter President.

President. This day after the close of the morning council, a foreign envoy appeared, bringing with him the fettered traitor Maouyenshow. He announces that the renegade, by deserting his allegiance, led to the breach of truce, and occasioned all these calamities. The princess is no more! and the Khan wishes for peace and friendship between the two nations. The envoy attends, with reverence, your imperial decision.

Emperor. Then strike off the traitor's head, and be it presented as an offering to the shade of the princess! Let a fit

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banquet be got ready for the envoy, preparatory to his return. [*Recites these verses:*

At the fall of the leaf, when the wild fowl's cry was heard in the recesses of the palace,
Sad dreams returned to our lonely pillow; we thought of her through the night:
Her verdant tomb remains but where shall we seek herself?
The perfidious painter's head shall atone for the beauty which he wronged.

THE END