The barbarians were wiped out, and the imperial capital was founded:
Where dragons fly and phoenixes dance, its features soar
To the left, it is embraced by the vast sea against the endless sky;
To the right, it is flanked by the Tai-hang Mountains. The might of spears and halberds at the nine garrisons pervades the distant frontier;
The rule of inaction awes thousands of countries.
A time of peace, when everyone enjoys utopia come true; Our empire, like a golden bowl, lasts with the shining sun.

This poem eulogizes the magnificence of having our capital established at Yen-thing. Speaking of the position of our capital: to the north it leans on strategic mountain passes, to the south it impinges on the central plains. It is indeed an impregnable city, a rich heavenly abode, a foundation not to be uprooted in tens of thousands of years. In the beginning, when the Hung-wu Emperor swept away the barbarian dust, he established his capital in Chin-ling, which became Nanking, or the southern capital. Later on, the Yung-lo Emperor raised an army in Pei-p'ing to subdue the rebellious forces from the south. The capital was moved to Yen-thing; it was thus called Peking, or the northern capital. As a result of this move, this barren and bleak northern land was transformed into a flowery embroidered world.

After nine successions from the Yung-lo Emperor, the throne came to be occupied by the Wan-li Emperor. He was the eleventh sovereign in our dynasty. This sovereign was discerning and inspired awe, being blessed with both grace and virtue. He acceded to the throne at the age of ten and occupied it for forty-eight years, during which he subdued three major insurrections. Which three? Those caused by Po Ch'eng-en of Hsi-hsia, the Japanese kanpaku Hideyoshi, and Yang Ying-lung of Po-chou. Hideyoshi invaded Korea. Po Ch'eng-en and Yang Ying-lung were provincial officials who plotted rebellions. One after the other they were all suppressed. This struck many foreign countries with fear and awe and they hurried to pay homage to China. Indeed:

When the emperor had Heaven's blessings all were happy; The four seas were undisturbed, and peace reigned in the country.

This story begins with the twentieth year of the Wan-li reign period [1592] when the kanpaku of Japan invaded Korea. The king of Korea submitted a memorandum to China to appeal for help. Our celestial dynasty thus sent an army across the sea to his aid. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Finance proposed that since provisions for the army were insufficient for the expedition, special revenues
should be raised by the sale of positions in the imperial academies. The proposal received the emperor's consent.

Actually, this system offered several advantages to those with money: it facilitated their studies, their passing the examinations, and their making the acquaintance of influential people. It also guaranteed a comfortable future. Because of this, the sons of officials and wealthy families naturally preferred to take advantage of this step to become students of the imperial academies rather than going through the examinations. When this practice went into effect, the number of students in each imperial academy rose to over one thousand.

One of these students was Li Chia, styled Kanhsien, a native of Shao-hsing in Chekiang Province. He was the oldest of the three sons of a provincial commissioner. He had been studying at local schools since childhood, but had failed to pass the prefectural examinations. Now, under the new regulations, he had purchased a place in the imperial academy in Peking. During his residence in the capital he went with a fellow student from his own province, Liu Yu-ch'un, to the pleasure quarters, and there he met a celebrated courtesan. The courtesan was called Tu Wei; because she was the tenth girl in her family, she was also known as Tu Shih-niang [Tu the Tenth Lady]. See just how beautiful she was:

*Her elegance was seductive;*
*A bewitching fragrance flowed from her body.*
*Her arched brows were the color of distant hills;*
*Her clear eyes were moist as flowing tides of autumn.*
*Her face was like lotus—indeed she was a veritable Wen chun;*
*Her lips were like cherries—che was comparable to Fan-su.*
*Alas! A pity that this flawless piece of jade.*
*Should have fallen into the streets of ill fame.*

Shih-niang had become a courtesan at the age of thirteen. Now she was nineteen. In those seven years, she had met countless young men of rich and noble families who were so besotted by her charm that they never hesitated to spend all they had to win her attention. Thus in the quarters went the following four-line song:

*If Shih-niang is at the feast,*
*Even the weakest drinker drains a thousand goblets.*
*When in the quarters Shih-niang appears,*
*All other pretty faces at once seem ghastly.*

This Li Chia, a romantic young man, had never seen a true beauty. When he met Shih-niang he was absolutely captivated by her and fell head over heels in love with her, and since he was not only handsome and amiable but also open-handed and untiring in his pursuit of her, the attraction and the love soon proved mutual. Realizing that her procuress was greedy and heartless, Shihniang had long wanted to get out by getting married; now that she saw how honest and devoted Li was, her heart became all the more set on him. Li, however, was too afraid of his father to commit himself. Even so, they fell more and more deeply in love, spending days and nights together enjoying each other's company, and remaining as inseparable as husband and wife. They solemnly exchanged a vow that they would never love anyone else. Indeed:
Was their love not as deep as the sea? Nay, it was unfathomable.  
Was their faith not as high as the mountains? It was loftier.

Now let us return to the madam of the house. Since Li had become Shih-niang's lover, other wealthy men who heard of her had been trying in vain to see her. At first, when Li could afford to spend money lavishly on her, the madam, all smiles and obsequity, waited on him with the utmost attention. After more than a year, however, Li's means were nearly exhausted. He could no longer be as lavish as he wished, and the old woman began to neglect him. Meanwhile, news of U's frequenting the courtesans' quarters reached the provincial commissioner, who immediately sent letter after letter to urge his son to come home. But the young man was so enamored of Shih-niang's beauty that he kept postponing his return. Later, when he heard how angry his father was with him, he was even more afraid to go home.

The adage has it: "Friendship based on profit ends once the money is spent." Shih-niang, however, loved Li so truly that the poorer he grew, the more passionately she became attached to him. The madam had told her repeatedly to send Li about his business, and seeing that the girl did not do so, she had tried several times to insult Li, hoping that he would leave in anger. But Li, who had by nature a gentle disposition, only returned with even milder words.

As a last resort, the madam began to berate Shih-niang. "In our profession we depend solely on our clients for food and clothing," she said one day. "It is the nature of our business to send an old customer out the front door while a new one is being received at the back. The more customers we have in our house, the wealthier we are. But with this Li Chia hanging around our place for over a year, not even the old customers are coming, let alone new ones. He must be Chung K'uei incarnate, scaring away even the smallest ghost who comes our way. Don't you see what he has given us? Smoke in our eyes instead of smoke in our chimney! What's to become of us?"

Shih-niang, however, was not one to quietly submit to such a reprimand. "Mr. Li didn't come here empty-handed," she retorted. "He has spent a fortune on us."

"That was one time, this is another. You tell him to give me a little money to buy firewood and rice to feed the two of you. In the other houses the girls are money-growing trees, they can live in style. It's just our bad luck that I'm keeping a white tiger who eats money. I'm the only one who has to worry every day about all the basic needs; I even have to support this tramp. Where do you think my food and clothes are coming from? You go tell that beggar of yours, if he still has some respect, ask him to give me a few taels of silver and I'd be happy to let you go off with him. I'll buy another girl to make my living. What do you say?"

"Do you really mean it?" demanded Shih-niang.

The old woman realized that Li Chia had not a penny left and in fact had pawned almost all his clothes; she was quite certain he would have no way to raise the money. "Have I ever lied?" she retorted. "Of course I mean it."

"Mother," said Shih-niang. "How much do you want from him?"

"If it were anyone else, I would certainly ask for a thousand taels. But I don't think that poor devil could ever afford to pay. Out of the goodness of my heart, I'll ask him for only three hundred. With that I could buy another girl to take your place. But there's one condition: he must pay me within three days. When he hands over the money, I'll hand over the girl. If he cannot pay me after three
days, I don't care whether he's a gentleman or not, I'll beat the hell out of that
wretch and drive him out of my house. You can't blame me for it then."

"Although he's away from home and has run out of money," said Shih-
niang, "he probably could raise three hundred taels. But three days is too short.  
Can't you make it ten?"

"That pauper has nothing now but his bare hands," thought the madam.  
"Even if I gave him a hundred days, where indeed could he raise the money? If  
he fails to produce it, however shameless he is I don't think he'll have the nerve to  
turn up again. Then I can get my establishment under proper control once more,  
and Shih-niang will have nothing to say."

"Well, for your sake," she said, "I'll make it ten days, then. But if he doesn't  
have the money by then, I'm not to blame."

"If he can't find the money in ten days, I don't suppose he will have the  
courage to come back," said Shih-niang. "What I'm afraid of is that you might go  
back on your word if he comes up with the money."

"I'm already fifty-one," protested the madam. "I'm a devout Buddhist and I  
observed the monthly fast. How would I dare commit the sin of lying? If you don't  
trust me, let us clap each other's hands to make a pledge. May I become a dog or  
a pig if I go back on my word!"

*How could the sea be measured with a cup?  
The ill intention of this hag is laughable.  
Sure that the poor scholar's purse was empty,  
She purposely gave the lovely lady a problem with her demand.*

That night in bed Shih-niang discussed her future with Li. "It's not that I  
don't want to marry you," said the young man, "but it would cost at least a  
thousand taels to buy your freedom, and where can I raise the money in my  
situation?"

"I've already spoken to mother. She wants only three hundred taels; but it  
must be paid within ten days. Although the money you brought with you has run  
out, you must have relatives and friends in the capital you can borrow from. If you  
can raise this sum, I'll be yours, and we won't have to suffer the old woman's temper  
anymore."

"My friends and relatives have all been avoiding me because I spend too  
much time here," said Li. "Perhaps tomorrow I'll tell them anyhow that I'm packing  
up to leave and coming to say good-bye, and then ask for money for my traveling  
expenses. I may be able to collect three hundred taels."

The next morning he got up, washed and dressed, and took leave of Shih-
niang. "Return as quickly as you can," urged Shih-niang. "I'll be waiting for the  
good news." Li told Shih-niang not to worry and promised to do his best.

After he had left the quarters, Li called on a number of relatives and friends,  
pretending that he had come to say good-bye. They were pleased to hear that he was  
going home, but when he touched upon the subject of a loan for his homeward  
journey there was no favorable response from them. As the proverb says: "To speak  
of borrowing is to end a friendship." Citing good reasons, they all argued with  
themselves: "Li is a spendthrift whose infatuation with a courtesan has kept him  
away from home for over a year now, and his father is furious with him. Nov.,  
al of the sudden he declares that he's going home; who knows if he's telling the  
truth? What if I lent him money for the journey and he spent it on girls again?
When his father heard of it, what would he think? Since one way or the other I'll be blamed anyway, I might as well wash my hands of it."

"I'm very sorry," each of his relatives would say, "I happen to be short of cash at the moment. I'm afraid I can't help you." Everywhere he went, he received the same reply. Not one of his acquaintances proved generous enough to lend him even ten or twenty taels.

For three days he went from house to house without getting a penny. He dared not tell Shih-niang the truth and had to parry her questions with evasive answers. The fourth day, however, found him in such despair that he was too ashamed to go back to the quarters. But after living so long with Shih-niang, he no longer had a dwelling place of his own. Having nowhere else to go, he went to Liu Yb-ch'un, a fellow student from his home town, to spend the night.

When Liu asked why he looked so worried, Li told him the whole story of Shih-niang's intention to marry him. Liu, however, shook his head and said, "I find this hard to believe. Shih-niang is the most prized courtesan in her profession. I think her price of redemption couldn't be less than ten pecks of pearls and a thousand taels in cash. The madam would never let her go for three hundred taels. I suspect this to be a trick of the old woman. She must have had enough of you because you are penniless and yet you're keeping her girl without paying her. This is her plan to get rid of you. As to Shih-niang, since she has known you for such a long time, she probably finds it hard to put it to you bluntly. Knowing you're short of money, she deliberately asks you for three hundred taels and gives you ten days to raise the sum. If you can't meet this deadline, of course you won't have the face to return; if you did, she would have all the more reason to sneer at you and insult you, making it impossible for you to stay. This is a trick people of her profession usually play. Do think it over; don't let them deceive you. In my humble opinion, the sooner you leave them the better."

When Li heard this, he was lost for words for quite some time. His heart was full of misgiving. Then Liu went on, "Don't make a wrong move. If you do want to go home and need money for the journey, your friends may be able to raise a few taels for you. But I doubt if you could get three hundred taels in ten months, let alone ten days. Nowadays, who would be interested in tiding over a friend in trouble? How well the two women know that you can never raise such a sum, to have devised such a plan to embarrass you!"

"I suppose you're right, my friend," Li at lastreplied.

But, still unwilling to give up Shih-niang, he continued to call on acquaintances for the loan and returned in the evening to stay at Liu's place.

He stayed with Liu Yii-ch'un for three days; thus six of the ten days had passed. Hearing no news from her lover for several days, Shih-niang had grown very anxious. She dispatched her little servant boy Ssu-erh to look for him. The boy found Li on the main street by chance.

"Master!" he called. "Mistress is expecting to hear from you!"

Li felt too ashamed to go back. He said, "I'm busy today. I'll come tomorrow."

But the boy had received instructions from Shih-niang. Taking hold of Li's coat, he would not let him go. "Mistress has asked me to find you," he said. "Please come with me."

On his part, Li also missed Shih-niang. Thus, half reluctantly, he followed the boy to Shih-niang's quarters. He couldn't find anything to say when he saw her.

"Has our plan worked out?" asked Shih-niang.

Tears fell from U's eyes.
"Have people become so unfeeling that you cannot raise even three hundred taels?" she said.

With tears in his eyes, Li said, "Now I have realized it is easier to catch a tiger in the mountain than to seek help from one's friends. I've been running from house to house for six days, but I haven't been able to borrow a penny. It is because I was too ashamed to come to you empty-handed that I've stayed away for the last few days. Now that you've sent for me, I can only come to you with shame on my face. It's not that I haven't done my best, but this is the way of the world."

"Don't let the old woman know," said Shihniang. "Please leave it to me for tonight. I might come up with an idea."

Thereupon she prepared a meal and they enjoyed the food and wine together before going to bed. In the middle of the night Shih-niang asked, "Now that you cannot raise any money, what will become of us?" But Li had no answer for her except tears.

Soon it reached the fifth watch, near dawn. Shih-niang said, "Inside my mattress I've hidden one hundred and fifty taels of silver, all my savings. Take them. Now that I've taken care of half the sum, it should be easier for you to find the balance. Only four days are left now; there's really no time to lose."

When they got up, Shih-niang gave the mattress to Li. He was overjoyed. He asked the servant boy to carry the mattress for him and went straight to Liu's lodging, where he told Liu all that had happened the night before. When they tore up the mattress they found in the cotton padding many silver pieces which, when weighed, totaled one hundred and fifty taels. Liu was very much surprised and impressed. "This girl's devotion is not to be doubted," he said. "Now on your part you must not betray her trust. I'll do what I can to help you."

"Should you succeed in bringing us together, I shall be forever grateful to you!" Li exclaimed.

Thus Liu kept Li in his house while he went out himself to borrow the money. In two days he borrowed one hundred and fifty taels, which he gave to Li, saying, "I have put myself in debt not for your sake but for Shih-niang, whose devotion to you has deeply touched me."

Thereupon Li Chia, carrying the three hundred taels of silver, beaming with smiles, went to see Shih-niang. It was the ninth day—one day ahead of the appointed time.

"Two days ago you still could not borrow a penny," said Shih-niang. "How did you manage to raise one hundred and fifty taels by today?" When Li told her about his fellow student Liu, she pressed her hand to her forehead in token of gratitude. "Thanks to Mr. Liu, now our dreams can come true!" she exclaimed. Both of them were overcome with joy, and they passed the night in the quarters.

The next morning Shih-niang rose early and said to Li, "Once you have paid the money, I'll go with you right away. We should have all our travel arrangements made beforehand. Yesterday I borrowed twenty taels of silver from my sisters; you can take it to pay for our traveling expenses."

Li had, in fact, been worrying about where he was going to get the money for their journey, but had been too ashamed to broach the subject. Now he was truly delighted to have this twenty taels.

As they were talking, the madam knocked at the door. "Today is the tenth day, my child!" she called.

When Li heard this, he opened the door for her. "Thank you," he said. "I was just going to ask you over." Then he placed the three hundred taels on the table.
The madam had never imagined that Li could produce the money. She was dazed for a while and her face fell.

As she was about to retract her promise Shihniang said, "Mother, during these eight years I've earned you a fortune worth several thousand taels. Today is the happy day on which I am to start a new life. You've given me your word. Here are the three hundred taels, delivered on time. If you change your mind, Mr. Li will take the money away, and I'll commit suicide on the spot. You'll then lose not only the money but me, too. Think about it before it is too late."

The old woman could make no reply. After some deliberation, she took out a scale to weigh the silver.

"Well, well," she said at last. "Since things have come to this, I don't suppose I can keep you any longer. But if you must go, go at once. Don't think you're going to take any of your clothes or ornaments with you." Immediately she pushed them out of the room, and called for a lock with which she padlocked the door.

It was the ninth lunar month, and the weather was getting cold. Shih-niang, just out of bed and not yet dressed, was still wearing her plain old clothes. She knelt down twice before the madam. Li also made a deep bow to her. Then as husband and wife they left the old woman's place together.

*The carp had freed itself of the golden hook; Lithely it swam off, never to return again.*

Li asked Shih-niang to wait for a while, saying, "Let me call a sedan chair so that we can go to Mr. Liu's place before deciding on what to do."

"My sisters have always been very kind to me," Shih-niang replied. "I ought to say good-bye to them. Besides, it is they who lent us the money for our traveling expenses the other day; we must thank them for that." So she went with Li to thank and take leave of the other courtesans.

Two of these girls, Hsieh Yiieh-lang and Hsii Su-su, lived in the neighborhood and were Shih-niang's closest friends. She called first on Yiieh-lang who, surprised to see her dressed in old plain clothes and without ornaments in her hair, asked what had happened. Shih-niang told her the whole story and introduced Li Chia to her. Then, pointing at Yiieh-lang, Shih-niang said to Li, "This is the sister who lent us the money the other day. You should thank her." Li bowed again and again in gratitude.

Yueh-lang told Shih-niang to comb her hair and wash while she sent for Su-su. Then the two sisters brought out their emerald trinkets, gold bracelets, jasper hairpins, earrings, a brocade tunic and skirt, a phoenix girdle, and a pair of embroidered slippers, and with these they adorned Shih-niang until she was arrayed in finery from head to foot. Then they feasted together in celebration, and Yueh-lang let the couple use her bedroom for the night.

The following day they gave another big feast to which all the girls in the quarters were invited. The girls toasted the happy couple, played music, sang, and danced, giving the best of their talents for the occasion. The feast lasted until midnight, when Shih-niang thanked each of her sisters in turn.

"Shih-niang, you've always been the one we all look up to," said the courtesans. "Now that you're leaving with your husband, we might never meet again. When you've decided on the day of your departure, we'll come to see you off."

"When the date is fixed, I'll let all of you know," said Yiieh-tang. "But since Shih-niang is going to travel thousands of li with Mr. Li, and their resources are scarce, we must make sure that she is equipped for the journey." Her suggestion met with
unanimous approval before the girls retired for the night. Li and Shih-niang again spent the night in Yiieh-lang's room.

Shortly before daybreak Shih-niang asked Li, "Where are we going from here? Have you any definite plan in mind?"

Li replied, "If my father, in his anger, finds out that I've married a courtesan, not only will he make me suffer but you'll also suffer as a result. This has been worrying me for some time, but I haven't yet found a solution."

"The sacred bond between father and son must not be destroyed," said Shih-
niang. "Since we can't expect to have his forgiveness in the immediate future, it might be better for us to go to the scenic Soochow and Hangchow area and stay for a while. You can then go home alone and ask some of your relatives and friends to intercede with your father on your behalf. When you two are reconciled, you can come to take me home, and all will be well."

"That's a sensible idea," Li agreed.

The next morning they said good-bye to Ybehlang and went to Liu Yii-ch'un's lodging to pack their luggage. When Shih-niang saw Liu she got down on her knees to make obeisance, and thanked him for his help. She said, "We'll do our best to return your kindness in the future."

Liu hastily bowed in return and said, "You are a remarkable woman, my lady, not to compromise your love in face of poverty. I was only fanning the fire in the direction of the wind. Such a trifling service is not worth mentioning."

The three of them spent the whole day drinking. The following morning they chose an auspicious day for the journey and arranged for the necessary sedan chairs and horses. Shih-niang also sent her servant boy with a letter to Yueh-lang to thank her and bid her farewell. When they were about to leave, a host of sedan chairs arrived, bearing Yueh-lang, Su-su, and the other courtesans coming to see them off.

"Sister, now that you two are leaving, and we know you are short of money," said Yueh-lang, "we've prepared a small gift to express our affection for you. Please accept it. If you run short of cash on your journey, it might come in handy." Thereupon she instructed a servant to bring a gilt box; but since it was securely locked, its contents could not be seen. Shih-niang did not open the box, nor did she decline this gift. She just heartily thanked them all. By now the sedan chairs and horses were ready, and the couple was urged to start. Liu offered his friend and Shih-niang three cups, and then he and the ladies saw them to Culture Gate, where they all parted in tears. Truly:

To meet again in the future seemed unlikely;  
Woeful it was to bid farewell at such a time.

In due course Li and Shih-niang reached the river Lu," where they were to take a boat. They were lucky enough to find an official dispatch boat returning to Kua-chou," and having settled on the amount of their fare, they booked a cabin. Once aboard, however, Li discovered that he had not a penny left. You may wonder how he had used up the money so quickly. The fact was that, although Shih-niang had given him twenty taels, he had used part of it to redeem a few of his clothes at the pawnshop, after having discovered that he did not have a single decent gown with him in the quarters. He also bought some new bedding. Thus what was left of the money was sufficient only to pay for the sedan chairs and horses.
"Don't worry," said Shih-niang, noting his anxiety. "The gift my sisters gave us may now be useful." Thereupon she took a key and unlocked the box. Li, standing beside her, was too ashamed to look into the box as Shih-niang took out a scarlet silk bag and put it on the table.

"Would you open that and see what is in it Shih-niang asked.
Li picked up the bag, and immediately felt its weight; when he opened it he found pieces of silver, which, after counting, totaled fifty taels. In the meantime, Shih-niang had locked the box again without saying what else it contained. Instead, she turned to Li and said, "The generosity of my sisters not only allows us enough money for our journey; it will also help defray our expenses when we stay in the south."

Surprised and delighted, Li said, "But for your help, I would have been stranded far away from home and died without a burial place. I'll never forget how much I owe you." From then on, whenever they talked of what had happened, Li would burst into tears of gratitude, and Shihniang would always comfort him tenderly.

In a few days, the boat reached the Kua-chou harbor. Li hired a passenger boat, had their luggage transferred, and arranged to set sail the next morning at dawn. It was the middle of winter, and the full moon was as clear and bright as water. As the two sat together in the bow of the boat, Li said to Shih-niang, "From the time we left the capital we were shut up in the cabin with other people all the time, and were unable to talk freely. Now that we have the whole boat to ourselves, we can say whatever we want. As we're now leaving North China and coming to the Yangtze Valley, don't you think it's time we set aside our anxiety and had a really good time drinking?"

"I couldn't agree more, as I haven't had an opportunity to talk and laugh freely for a long while. What you've suggested is exactly what I had in mind," said Shih-niang.

Li took out the wine cups, spread a rug in the bow, and started drinking with Shih-niang. When they were both warm with wine, Li, cup in hand, said to Shih-niang, "Your voice has always been the loveliest in all the quarters. I still remember that when I first met you and heard you sing so divinely, my soul seemed to take flight. But since then, we've been so beset by worries that I've long missed your heavenly songs. Now, with the bright moon shining on the clear river and with no one near in the depth of night, won't you sing for me?"

Shih-niang was in a happy mood, and so, clearing her throat and then tapping her fan on the deck to keep time, she sang. Her song was about a scholar offering wine to a girl. It was taken from the play Moon Pavilion by Shih Chiin-mei of the Yiian Dynasty and was set to the tune of "The Little Red Peach Blossom":

As her voice soared into the sky, the clouds halted;
As her voice entered the deep river, the fish emerged.

Now in a neighboring boat there was a young man called Sun Fu, styled Shan-lai, a native of Hsin-an in Hui-chou. His family had been in the salt business in Yangchow for generations and was extremely rich. He was now twenty years of age and a student in the imperial academy in Nanking. Sun was a dissolute young man whose habit it was to frequent the courtesans' quarters. Indeed, he was, with his frivolous nature, a leading personage in the business of pleasure.
It so happened that Sun's boat was also moored at the Kua-chou harbor on this particular evening. He was drinking alone and feeling bored when he heard a singing voice so clear and so exquisite that not even the song of a phoenix could match it. He stood up in the bow and listened for some time before he realized that the singing was coming from the next boat. Just as he was going to make inquiries, the song ended. Thereupon he sent his servant to make secret investigations about the singer. The servant questioned the boatman, and was informed that the boat had been hired by a certain Mr. Li; nothing was known about the singer.

"The singer cannot be from a respectable family," thought Sun. "How can I get to see her?" Preoccupation with this problem kept him awake all night.

At the fifth watch a high wind sprang up on the river, and by dawn the sky was filled with dark red clouds. Soon snowflakes were flying madly. Vividly was the scene described in this poem:

Cloud-touching trees of the thousand hills disappeared;  
On the numerous footpaths stirs not a soul.  
From his little boat, an old man in straw hat and coat  
Fishes alone on the chilly river, in snow.

Since the wind and snow made it impossible to sail, all boats had to remain in the harbor. Sun ordered his boatman to steer close to Li's boat; and then, putting on his sable cap and fox-fur coat, he opened the window pretending to watch the snow. It happened that Shih-niang had just finished dressing and, with her slender hands, she raised the curtain of the cabin window to empty her basin into the river. In so doing she was seen by Sun Fu, who was totally enchanted by her unearthly beauty. He fastened his gaze on the spot where she had appeared, hoping to catch another glimpse of her. But his patience was not rewarded. After some reflection, he leaned against his cabin window and chanted two lines from the "Plum Blossom Poem" by Scholar Kao:

On the snow-clad hill sleeps the unworldly hermit;  
From the moonlit woods emerges the beautiful lady.

When Li heard someone chanting poetry in the next boat, he leaned out to look, thus falling victim to Sun's plan. Sun's poetry chanting was precisely to attract Li's attention so that he could get acquainted with him. Now, hastily raising his hands in greeting, Sun asked, "What is your honorable name, sir?" Li introduced himself and then naturally asked the same question. Sun introduced himself, and they began to exchange gossip about the imperial academies. Very soon they became well acquainted.

"Heaven must have sent this snowstorm to hold up our boats so that we would meet," said Sun. "This is indeed my good fortune. Since we've nothing in particular to do in the boat, may I propose that we go ashore to a restaurant, so that I may have the benefit of your conversation? I beg you not to refuse."

"But we've just met," replied Li. "How can I put you to all that trouble?  
"You shouldn't say that," Sun protested. "'Within the four seas all men are brothers.'"

Then he told his boatman to put down the gangplank and his servant boy to hold an umbrella to bring Li over to his boat. Then they performed obeisance in the bow and Sun politely asked Li to go first as they went ashore.
A few paces brought them to a restaurant. They went upstairs, chose a clean table by the window, and sat down. After the waiter had brought them food and drink, Sun raised his cup and toasted Li. Thus they drank and enjoyed the snow scene. After exchanging a few conventional phrases of courtesy, they gradually moved to topics surrounding the women of pleasure. Since both of them were old hands at this kind of life, their talk soon became more and more congenial until they had shared enough secrets to be in each other's confidence.

Before long Sun sent away all those who waited on him, and asked in a low voice, "Who is the girl who sang in your boat last night?"

Li Chia was only too eager to prove he was as good as his word, so he announced earnestly, "That is Tu Shih-niang, a well-known courtesan in Peking."

"If she was a girl in one of the quarters, how did you manage to get her?"

Thereupon Li told him the whole story: how they had met, how they had fallen in love, how Shih-niang had wanted to marry him, and how he had borrowed money to redeem her.

"It must be a pleasant thing to return home with a beautiful woman. But do you have your family's approval?"

"My wife is no cause for worry. What worries me is my very strict father," replied Li.

This at last gave Sun the opening he had been waiting for. So he asked, "Since your honorable father may not approve, where do you intend to install the lady? Have you discussed this with her?"

"Yes, I have," replied Li with a frown.

"Well then, she must have a good plan." Sun looked relieved.

"She intends to spend some time in the Soochow and Hangchow area and asks me to return home first. What I'm supposed to do is to have my friends and relatives intercede with my father for me. When, hopefully, his anger subsides, I'll think about getting her home. What do you think of this plan?"

Sun looked thoughtful for a while. Then he deliberately put on a worried look, saying, "Since we have only just met, I do fear you will take offense if I advise you on such an intimate matter."

"I need your advice," urged Li. "Please don't hesitate to speak frankly."

"Very well," said Sun. "As your father is a highranking provincial official, he is bound to be very strict in family discipline. If he has expressed displeasure over your spending time in low places, do you think he will allow you to marry a girl of easy virtue? As for your relatives and friends, who would not bow to your respected father's wish? If you seek their help, you're bound to be refused. Even if some of them are foolish enough to plead your cause, once they realize the old gentleman is against this marriage they are certain to change their tune. As things are, you'll never bring about harmony in your family, nor will you have a satisfactory answer to give to your loved one. Even if you use delaying tactics and linger amid mountains and rivers, you cannot remain there indefinitely. When your resources were exhausted you would find yourself in a quandary."

Realizing that he had already spent more than half of the fifty taels he had possessed, Li nodded in agreement as soon as Sun touched upon the subject of his dwindling expense money.

"There is yet a sincere word of advice which I want to offer you," Sun went on. "But I don't know if you want to hear it."

"I'm only too grateful for your concern. Please don't keep anything back."
“I’d better not say it,” declared Sun. “Who am I, a casual acquaintance, to come between you and someone dear to you?”

“Please say it; it’s really all right,” importuned Li.

“As the ancients said: ‘Women are as fickle as water.’ How much more so are the girls from pleasure houses! Since your mistress is a well-known courtesan, she must have paramours everywhere. There might be some former lover of hers in the south, and she might be employing your help in order to join him there.”

“I don’t think that can be the case,” said Li hastily.

“Even if it is not,” replied Sun, “the young southerners are notorious philanderers; if you leave your mistress by herself, there is no way to make sure she won’t succumb to their temptation. On the other hand, if you take her home you will only further provoke the anger of your father. In fact, there doesn’t seem to be an ideal solution to your problem at all.”

“The sacred relationship between father and son is inviolable. If you offend your father and abandon your home for the sake of a courtesan, the whole country will condemn you for being a dissolute and reckless man. There will come a day when your wife will not consider you worthy of being her husband, your younger brother will not consider you worthy of being their elder brother, and your acquaintances will not take you for a friend. How will you stand up to the world? You must think about it carefully right now.”

This speech left Li at a loss. Hitching his seat nearer to Sun, he asked anxiously, “What do you think I should do?”

“I have an idea which you would do well to follow. But I only fear that you are too fond of your new love to carry it out,” Sun replied.

“If you have a good plan to restore me to the bosom of my family, you are no less than my savior. Why should you hesitate to speak?”

Sun obliged, saying, “You have been far away from home for over a year. Your father is angry with you and your wife displeased. If I were you, I would be unable to eat or sleep. Your honorable father is angry with you only because you have let yourself become infatuated with a courtesan and are spending money like water. In short, he fears that you would squander the family fortune, once it came into your hands. Your returning home empty-handed would surely infuriate him. But if you are willing to give up your woman to make the best of a bad bargain, I’m willing to offer you a thousand taels of silver for her. With this sum, you can tell your father that you have been teaching in the capital and have not spent a penny of your allowance. He will certainly believe you. Peace will then be restored in your family. Now, as you can see, at a single stroke you might turn calamity into good fortune. Please consider my offer carefully. It is not that I covet your concubine’s beauty; I only want to do what I can for you as a friend.”

Li had always been of weak character, and was afraid of his father. Sun’s words had succeeded in intensifying his worries. Rising from his seat, he bowed to Sun in gratitude. “Your judicious advice has opened my eyes,” he said. “But since my concubine has followed me all these thousands of li, it would be unethical for me to sever relations with her too abruptly. Let me return to talk it over with her; I’ll let you know as soon as I have her consent.”

Sun reminded him, "Break the news tactfully. If she's so fond of you, how could she bear to estrange you from your father? I'm certain she'll help you to return home."
They went on drinking until dusk, when the wind and snow stopped. Then Sun told his servant boy to pay the bill, and walked hand in hand with Li back to the boat. Alas!

Be discreet when you speak to people;  
Baring your heart to them is jar from wise.

In the boat Shih-niang had prepared wine and food to enjoy with Li. But he was out the whole day. When dusk fell she lighted the lamp and continued waiting. At last Li returned. Shih-niang rose to welcome him, but noticed that he looked upset. She poured a cup of warm wine for him; he shook his head in refusal and went to bed without a word.

Shih-niang was disturbed. Having put away the cups and plates and helped Li to change, she asked, "What happened earlier today that has made you feel so bad?"

Li just sighed. By the time she had repeated her question several times he was asleep. She was so ill at ease that she was unable to close her eyes, so she remained seated on the edge of the bed. In the middle of the night Li woke up and heaved another great sigh.

"What is troubling you so badly that you keep sighing over and over again?" Shih-niang asked.

Li sat up, drew the quilt around him, and tried several times to speak; but he broke off each time and tears poured down his cheeks. Taking Li in her arms, Shih-niang comforted him with kind words, saying, "We have been in love for nearly two years and have gone through many difficulties to get where we are today. We have traveled thousands of li, and you've had no cause for sorrow. It truly perplexes me to see you so upset when we are about to cross the Yangtze to embark on a happy life. There must be a reason. Just as we shall live and die together as husband and wife, so should we discuss our troubles together. Please don't keep your worries from me."

After he had been pressed several times to speak, Li, with tears in his eyes, finally opened his mouth: "When I was poverty-stricken and far away from home you were so good as to share my hardships; for this I am immensely grateful to you. But I have been thinking things over: my father, holding a high provincial post, must follow convention, not to mention the fact that he is a very stern and severe man by nature. If he is so angry as to drive us out of the family, we shall be forced to wander, homeless. What will become of us then? If this happens, not only shall I lose my father's love, but the happiness of our marriage cannot be guaranteed either. Today my friend Sun from Hsin-an discussed this with me while we were drinking, and it really breaks my heart."

"What do you plan to do?" asked Shih-niang, greatly alarmed.

"As I am the one involved in this dilemma, I have been unable to see my way clearly. But Mr. Sun has thought out a good plan for me; only you may not agree to it," Li said.

"Who is this Mr. Sun?" Shih-niang was puzzled. "If his plan is good, why shouldn't I agree to it?"

"His name is Sun Fu, a salt merchant from Hsin-an and a gallant young scholar. He heard you singing last night and inquired about you, so I told him our story. When he heard that we would not be able to go home, he was willing to offer a thousand taels of silver for your hand, so that with the money I would find it less
difficult to face my parents, and you would have a home, too. But I cannot bear to leave you; such a thought makes me weep." As he said this, his tears fell like rain.

Shih-niang withdrew her hands from him, smiling sardonically. "He must be a fine gentleman, indeed a hero, to have conceived this plan for you," she said. "You will have your thousand taels, and with me going to another man, you will no longer have any burden. This indeed is what is called 'initiated from feeling but kept within the proprieties.' Yes, this plan suits us both. Where is the silver now?"

"Since I had not received your consent," said Li, who had stopped weeping, "the money is still with him. It has not yet changed hands."

"Then you must close the transaction with him the first thing tomorrow morning," urged Shihniang. "This opportunity is not to be missed. But a thousand taels is a lot of money; be sure the silver pieces are properly weighed and handed over before I cross to the other boat. You must not let that salt merchant trick you."

It was now the fourth watch. Shih-niang got up, lighted the lamp, washed, and adorned herself. "Today I am dressing to speed an old client and receive a new one," she said. "This is an important occasion." She applied rouge, powder, and scented oil with great care, and arrayed herself in splendid head ornaments and a magnificent embroidered gown. Her perfume scented the air, and her beauty was dazzling.

By the time she had finished dressing it was already dawn, and a servant arrived from Sun asking for a reply. Shih-niang stole a glance at Li and, seeing that he looked pleased, urged him to reply at once so that he could be in possession of the silver as soon as possible. Thus Li went to Sun's boat to announce that Shih-niang was willing.

"There's no difficulty about the money. But I must have some article as a pledge," said Sun.

When Li told Shih-niang of Sun's request, she pointed at her gilt box and said, "Let them take this."

Sun, in great exultation, promptly sent the thousand taels of silver to Li's boat. When Shihniang had looked through the packages and satisfied herself that the silver was of full standard purity and that the amount was correct, she held to the side of the boat and beckoned to Sun, who was immediately overwhelmed by her bewitching charm. Shih-niang then said, "May I have that box back for a moment? It contains Mr. Li's travel permit, which I must return to him."

Satisfied that Shih-niang was now his caged bird, Sun ordered his servant to carry back her gilt box and set it down in the bow. Shih-niang took her key and unlocked it, disclosing a series of small drawers inside, the first of which she asked Li to pull out. He did, and found it filled with precious ornaments to the value of several hundred taels of silver. To the consternation of Li, Sun, and the others in the two boats, Shihniang immediately tossed them into the river.

Then she told Li to pull out a second drawer containing jade flutes and golden pipes, and a third drawer filled with curios of jade and gold worth several thousand taels. All these, too, Shihniang threw into the water.

By this time the bank was thronged with spectators. "What a pity!" they all exclaimed.

While they were still mystified by her behavior, Shih-niang pulled out the last drawer, in which there was a casket. She opened the casket and they saw in it a handful of bright pearls; the rest of the casket was packed with other precious stones such as emeralds and cat's-eyes, the like of which they had never seen and the value of which they did not even dare guess. The onlookers let out thunderous cries of
amazement and admiration. When Shih-niang was about to toss all these jewels into the river, Li was suddenly overcome by remorse and he threw his arms around her and wept bitterly, while Sun also came over to plead with her. But Shih-niang pushed Li away and turned angrily to Sun. "You know what Mr. Li and I have gone through to come this far! But you were cruel and heartless enough to tear us apart with your cunning words, only to gratify your lust. You are my greatest enemy! If my spirit survives after death, I will certainly take my case to the gods. You can stop dreaming about having your lustful will of me."

Then Shih-niang turned to Li and said, "I've been living in the mire as a courtesan for many years. For all these years I've saved something to support me for the rest of my life. Since we met we've sworn a love everlasting. When we left the capital I pretended that this box was a present from my sisters. Indeed, it was my intention to fit you out splendidly with the invaluable jewels it contained, so that when you returned to your parents they might appreciate my love for you and admit me into the family. I might then have remained happily with you and lived out my days without regret. But how was I to know that you did not trust me and were easily swayed by unfounded words? Now you've abandoned me halfway. In vain have I given you my true love. I've opened this box in front of all these people to show you that a trifling thousand taels means little to me. Like jade I have kept my heart and soul pure for you, but you have eyes that cannot see. Alas! I was born under the wrong star. I escaped from the bitter lot of a courtesan only to be cast aside by you. All those here today are my witnesses! I have not been untrue to you; it's you who have betrayed me!"

All those who had gathered were moved to tears. Bitterly they condemned Li for his ingratitude and disloyalty. Li, overwhelmed with remorse and shame, was about to turn to beg Shih-niang's forgiveness when, clasping the casket in her arms, she threw herself into the river. They shouted for help, but a thick mist obscured the river and the current was strong. She was nowhere to be found. How sad that such a beautiful courtesan of high renown should have found her way into the stomach of the fish.

Her lonely soul sank into the deep; 
As if in a dream, she made for Hades.

The onlookers gnashed their teeth in rage and wanted to fall upon Li and Sun; the two men, greatly frightened, immediately shouted to the boatmen to cast off and escaped in opposite directions. In the boat, Li caught sight of the thousand taels of silver and his longing for Shih-niang began to grow, his shame and regret growing with it until eventually he took leave of his senses, never to recover them for the rest of his life.

As for Sun, he fell ill with fright and was laid up in bed for over a month, constantly seeing Shih-niang standing by his bed reprimanding him. Little by little he wasted away until he died. People who knew of this took it to be a just retribution for the sin he had committed on the river.

Now we must come back to Liu Yi-ch'un. In good time he completed his studies in the capital and packed up to return home. When he reached Kua-pu t' he moored his boat. While he was washing his face by the side of the boat, his brass basin fell into the river. He asked a fisherman to try to recover it, but the man drew up instead a small casket.
Liu opened the casket and found it full of priceless jewels, pearls, and other treasures. He rewarded the fisherman handsomely and placed the casket at the head of his bed, intending to look at its contents more closely when he was at leisure. That night, he saw a girl in a dream coming over the waves; as he looked at her, he recognized her as Shih-niang. She came up to him, curtseyed, and related to him how faithless Li had proved.

"You were generous enough to help me with one hundred and fifty taels," she said to Liu. "At that time I thought I could repay you after we had overcome our difficulties, not knowing what was to befall me. Although I was unable to repay you in person I have not forgotten your kindness. So this morning I sent you this casket through the fisherman to express my gratitude. Now farewell. We shall never meet again." Liu awoke with a start. Only then did he realize that Shih-niang was dead.

For the next several days he could not but sigh for her. Later generations, commenting on this incident, condemned Sun for his wickedness in his plot to obtain a beautiful girl for a thousand taels of silver. Li was no less than a common fool to have failed to appreciate Shih-niang's heart. For this he was not even worth one's contempt. As for Shiniang, who was such an extraordinary woman, it was a tragedy that instead of finding a husband worthy of her and leading a life she deserved, she had to waste her affection on Li Chia. Indeed, it was like rendering bright pearls and rare jade to a blind man. It is truly pitiable that her love should have turned to hate, and that all her affection was gone with the flowing river. Appropriately, the following poem glosses the episode:

*If you know not how to love, do not talk about it;*  
"Love," this single word, is too profound to comprehend.  
*If indeed you have fully comprehended it,*  
Call yourself a lover; you have no reason to be ashamed.

Notes:
1. Hung-wu (1368-1398) is the reign title of Emperor Taitsu, the founder of the Ming Dynasty.  
2. Yung-lo (1403-1424) is the reign title of Emperor Ch'entsu of the Ming Dynasty.  
3. It was in fact a seizure of power in which the Yung-lo Emperor usurped the throne from the legitimate sovereign.  
4. Wan-li (1573-1620) is the reign title of Emperor Shentsung of the Ming Dynasty.  
5. Po Cheng-en, the deputy commander at Hsi-hsia (in modern Kansu Province), rebelled in 1592. His rebellion was soon suppressed.  
6. Kanpaku Hideyoshi (1536-1598), better known as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, was the key military and political figure during the Momoyama period of Japan. After being made kanpaku, or chief adviser to the emperor, in 1585, he exterminated the ruling HOj6 clan in 1590 and united the country. He then planned to subjugate Ming China and incited Korea to demand tribute from China. When Korea refused, Hideyoshi invaded Korea in 1592 and ran into the Ming forces. He had to negotiate peace and withdraw his troops. This is known as the Bunrouku Expedition in Japanese history. In 1597, Hideyoshi invaded Korea again, but he died before the expedition, known as the Keicha Expedition, reached its goal, and the Japanese forces were withdrawn. It was Hideyoshi who placed a ban on the newly introduced Catholicism.  
7. Yang Ying-lung, the border pacification commissioner of Po-chou (the present Tsun-yi in Kweichow Province), rebelled in 1598. He was defeated in i6oo.  
8. Cho We n-chin.  
9. A favorite concubine of the celebrated T'ang poet Po ChiiYi (772-846)  
10. This river marks the northern end of the Grand Canal.
11. Kua-chou, to the south of Chiang-tu in Kiangsu, is located at the junction of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal Hsi County in modern Anhwei Province.
12 The well-known Ming poet Kao Ch'i (1336-1374)
13 Kua-pu, to the southeast of Liu-ho in Kiangsu, is not the same place where the drowning incident takes place. Kua-pu is further upstream along the Yangtze River.