
REGRET FOR THE PAST (by Lu Xun)
Juansheng's Notes

I want, if I can, to record my remorse and grief, for Zijun's sake as well as for my own.

How silent and empty it is, this shabby room in a forgotten corner of the hostel. Time certainly flies. A whole year has passed since I fell in love with Zijun and, thanks to her, escaped from this silence and emptiness. On my return here, as ill luck would have it, this was the only room vacant. The broken window with the half-withered locust tree and old wistaria outside it and the square table in front of it are unchanged. Unchanged too are the mouldering wall and wooden bed beside it. At night I lie alone, just as I did before living with Zijun. The past year has been blotted out as if it had never been, as if I had never moved out of this shabby room to set up house, in a small way but with high hopes, in Lucky Lane.

Nor is that all. A year ago there was a difference in this silence and emptiness for it held expectancy, the expectancy of Zijun's arrival. The tapping of high heels on the brick pavement, cutting into my long, restless waiting, would galvanize me into life. Then I would see her pale round face dimpling in a smile, her thin white arms, striped cotton blouse and black skirt. And she would bring in to show me a new leaf from the half-withered locust tree outside the window, or clusters of the mauve wistaria flowers that hung from a vine which looked as if made of iron.

But now there is only silence and emptiness. Zijun will never come back - never, never again.

When Zijun was not here, I could see nothing in this shabby room. Out of sheer boredom I would pick up a book – science or literature, it was all the same to me - and read on and on till it suddenly dawned on me that I had turned a dozen pages without taking in a word. My sense of hearing, however, was so acute that I seemed able to hear all the footsteps outside the gate, including those of Zijun, gradually approaching - hut all too often they faded away again to be lost at last in the medley of other footfalls. I hated the steward's son who wore cloth-soled shoes which sounded quite different from those of Zijun. I hated the little wretch next door who used face-cream, often wore new leather shoes, and whose steps sounded all too like those of Zijun.

Could her rickshaw have been upset? Could she have been run over by a tram? ...

I would want to put on my hat to go and find her, but her uncle had cursed me to my face.

Then, abruptly, I would hear her draw nearer, step by step, so that by the time I went out to meet her she would already have passed the wistaria trellis, her face dimpling in a smile. Probably she wasn't badly treated after all in her uncle's home. I would calm down and, after we had gazed at each other in silence for a moment, the shabby room would gradually be filled with the sound of my pronouncements on the tyranny of the family, the need to break with tradition, the equality of men and women, Ibsen, Tagore and Shelley. She would nod her head, smiling, her eyes filled with a childlike look of wonder. On the wall was pinned a copper-plate reproduction of a bust of Shelley, cut out from a magazine. It was one of the best-looking likenesses of him, but when I pointed it out to her she only gave it a hasty glance, then hung her head as if in embarrassment. In matters like this, Zijun had probably not freed herself completely from the trammels of old ideas. It occurred to me later that it might be better to substitute a picture of Shelley drowning at sea, or a portrait of Ibsen. But I never got round to it. And now even this print has vanished.

"I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me."

She came out with this statement clearly, firmly and gravely after a thoughtful silence, following a conversation about her uncle who was here and her father in the country. We had known each other then for half a year. By that time I had told her all my views, all about myself, and what my failings were. I had hidden very little, and she understood me completely. These few words of hers stirred me to the bottom of my heart and rang in my ears for many days afterwards. I was unspeakably happy to know that Chinese women were not as hopeless as the pessimists made out, and that we should see in the not too distant future the splendor of the dawn.

Each time I saw her out, I kept several paces behind her. And each time the old wretch's face, bewhiskered as if with fish tentacles, would be pressed so hard against the dirty window-pane that the tip of his nose was flattened. And each time we reached the outer courtyard, against the bright glass window there was the little wretch's face, plastered with facecream. But looking neither right nor left as she walked proudly out, she did not see them. And I walked proudly back.

"I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me." Her mind was completely made up on this point. She was by far the more thoroughgoing and resolute of the two of us. What did she care about the half pot of facecream or the flattened nose tip?

I cannot remember clearly how I expressed my true, passionate love for her. Not only now: my impression just after the event itself was hazy. Thinking back that night, I recollected only a few disjointed scraps; while a month or two after we started living together, even these vanished like dreams without a trace. All I can remember is that for about a fortnight beforehand I had considered very carefully what attitude to take, how to make my declaration, and how to behave if turned down. But when the time came it was all in vain. In my nervousness, something constrained me to use a method seen in films. The thought of this makes me thoroughly ashamed, yet it is the only thing I remember clearly. Even today it is like a solitary lamp in a dark room, showing me clasping her hand with tears in my eyes and going down on one knee....

At the time I did not even notice Zijun's reaction clearly. All I knew was that she accepted my proposal. However, I seem to remember that her face first turned pale then gradually flushed red, redder than I ever saw it before or after. Sadness and joy mingled with apprehension flashed from her childlike eyes, although she tried to avoid my gaze, looking ready in her confusion to fly out of the window. Then I knew she accepted my proposal, although not knowing what she said or whether she said anything at all.

She, however, remembered everything. She could reel off the speech I made as if she had learned it by heart. She described my conduct in detail, to the life, like a film unfolding itself before her eyes, including of course that trashy scene from the movies which I was only too anxious to forget. The night, when all was still, was our time for review. I was often interrogated and examined, or ordered to repeat everything said on that occasion; yet she often had to fill in gaps and correct my mistakes as if I were a Grade D student.

Gradually these reviews became few and far between. But whenever I saw her gazing raptly into space, a tender look dawning on her dimpling face, I knew she was going over that old lesson again and feared she was visualizing my ridiculous act from the movies. I knew, though, that she must be visualizing it, that she insisted on visualizing it.

But she didn't find it ridiculous. Though I thought it laughable, even contemptible, to her it was no joke. And I knew this beyond a doubt because of her true, passionate love for me.

Late spring last year was our happiest and also our busiest time. I had calmed down by then, although bestirring my mental faculties in step with my physical activity. This was when we started walking side by side in the street. We went several times to the park, but most of our outings were in search of lodgings. On the road I was conscious of searching looks, sarcastic smiles or lewd and contemptuous glances which unless I was on my guard set me shivering, so that at every instant I had to summon all my pride and defiance to my support. She, however, was completely fearless and impervious to all this. She continued slowly and calmly on her way, as if there were no one in sight.

It was no easy matter finding lodgings. In most cases we were refused on some pretext or other, while we ourselves turned down a few places as unsuitable. To start with we were very particular - and yet not too particular either, because we saw that most of these lodgings did not look the sort of place where we could live. Later on, all we asked was to be tolerated. We had looked at over twenty places before we found one we could make do: two rooms with a northern exposure in a small house in Lucky Lane. The owner was a petty official but an intelligent man, who occupied only the central and the side rooms. His household consisted simply of a wife, a baby girl not yet one year old, and a maidservant from the country. As long as the child didn't cry, it would be very quiet.

Our furniture, simple as it was, had already taken the greater part of the money I had raised; and Zijun had sold her only gold ring and earrings too. I tried to stop her, but when she insisted I didn't press the point. I knew that unless allowed to make a small investment in our home she would feel uncomfortable.

She had already quarrelled with her uncle, so enraging him in fact that he had disowned her. And I had broken with several friends who thought they were giving me good advice but were actually either afraid for me, or jealous. Still, this meant we were very quiet. Although it was getting on for dusk when I left the office and the rickshaw man always went slowly, at last the time came when we were together again. First we would look at each other in silence, then relax and talk intimately, and finally fall silent again. We both bowed our heads pensively then, without anything particular in mind. Little by little, body and soul alike, she became an open book to me. In the short space of three weeks I learned more about her, overcoming many impediments which I had fancied I understood but now discovered to have been real barriers.

As the days passed, Zijun became more lively. She had no liking for flowers though, and when I bought two pots of flowers at the market she left them unwatered for four days so that they died neglected in a corner. I hadn't the time to see to everything. She had a liking for animals, however, which she may have picked up from the official's wife; and in less than a month our household was greatly increased as four chicks of ours started picking their way across the courtyard with the landlady's dozen. But the two mistresses could tell them apart, each able to identify her own. Then there was a spotted peke, bought at the market. I believe he had a name of his own to begin with, but Zijun gave him another one - Asui. And I called him Asui too, though I didn't like the name.

It is true that love must be constantly renewed, must grow and create. When I spoke of this to Zijun, she nodded understandingly.

Ah, what peaceful, happy evenings those were!

Tranquillity and happiness will grow stale if unchanged, unrenewed. While in the hostel, we had occasional differences of opinion or misunderstandings; but even these vanished after we moved to Lucky Lane. We just sat facing each other in the lamplight, reminiscing, savoring again the joy of the new harmony which had followed our disputes.

Zijun grew plumper, her cheeks became rosier; the only pity was that she was too busy. Housekeeping left her no time even to chat, much less to read or go for walks. We often said we would have to get a maid.

Another thing that upset me on my return in the evening was her covert look of unhappiness, or the forced smile which depressed me even more. Luckily I discovered that this was owing to her secret feud with the petty official's wife, the bone of contention being the two families' chicks. But why wouldn't she tell me outright? People ought to have a home of their own. A lodging of this kind was no place to live in.

I had my routine too. Six days of the week I went from home to the bureau and from the bureau home. In the office I sat at my desk copying, copying endless official documents and letters. At home I kept her company or helped her light the stove, boil rice or steam rolls. This was when I learned to cook.

Still, I ate much better here than in the hostel. Although cooking was not Zijun's forte, she threw herself into it heart and soul. Her ceaseless anxieties on this score made me anxious too, and in this way we shared the sweet and the bitter together. She kept at it so hard all day, perspiration made her short hair cling to her brows, and her hands began to grow rough.

And then she had to feed Asui and the chicks.... No one else could do this chore.

I told her I would rather go without food than see her work herself to the bone like this. She just glanced at me without a word, looking rather wistful, so that I couldn't very well say any more. But she went on working as hard as ever.

Finally the blow I had been expecting fell. The evening before the Double Tenth Festival, I was sitting idle while she washed the dishes when we heard a knock on the door. When I opened it, the messenger from our bureau handed me a mimeographed slip of paper. I had a good idea what it was and, when I took it to the lamp, sure enough it read:

By order of the commissioner, Shi Juansheng is discharged.

The secretariat, October 9th.

I had foreseen this while we were still in the hostel. Face-Cream, being one of the gambling friends of the commissioner's son, was bound to have spread rumors and tried to make trouble. I was only surprised that this hadn't happened sooner. In fact this was really no blow, because I had already decided that I could work as a clerk somewhere else or teach, or even, though it was more difficult, do some translation work. I knew the editor of *Freedom's Friend*, and had corresponded with him a couple of months previously. But all the same, my heart was thumping. What distressed me most was that even Zijun, fearless as she was, had turned pale. Recently she seemed to be weaker, more faint-hearted.

"What does it matter?" she said. "We can make a fresh start. We...."

Her voice trailed off and, to my ears, it failed to carry conviction. The lamplight, too, seemed unusually dim. Men are really ludicrous creatures, so easily upset by trifles.

First we gazed at each other in silence, then started discussing what to do. Finally we decided to live as economically as possible on the money we had, to advertise in the paper for a post as clerk or teacher, and to write at the same time to the editor of *Freedom's Friend* explaining my present situation and asking him to accept a translation from me to help tide me over this difficult period.

"Suit the action to the word! Let's make a fresh start."

I went straight to the table and pushed aside the bottle of sesame oil and saucer of vinegar, while Zijun brought over the dim lamp. First I drew up the advertisement; then I made a selection of books to translate. I hadn't looked at my books since we moved house, and each volume was thick with dust. Last of all I wrote the letter.

I hesitated for a long time over the wording of the letter. When I stopped writing to think, and glanced at her in the dusky lamplight, she was looking very wistful again. I had never imagined a trifle like this could cause such a striking change in someone so firm and fearless as Zijun. She really had grown much weaker lately; this wasn't something that had just started that evening. More put out than ever, I had a sudden vision of a peaceful life -the quiet of my shabby room in the hostel flashed before my eyes, and I was just about to take a good look at it when I found myself back in the dusky lamplight again.

It took me a long time to finish the letter, a very lengthy letter. And I was so tired after writing it that I realized I must have grown weaker myself lately too. We decided to send in the advertisement and post the letter the next day. Then with one accord we straightened up silently, as if conscious of each other's fortitude and strength, able to see new hope growing from this fresh beginning.

Indeed, this blow from outside infused new spirit into us. While in the bureau I had been like a wild bird in a cage, given just enough bird-seed by its captor to keep alive but not to thrive; doomed as time passed to lose the use of its wings, so that if ever released it would be unable to fly. Now, at any rate, I had got out of the cage. I must soar anew through the boundless sky before it was too late, before I had forgotten how to flap my wings.

Of course we could not expect results from a small advertisement right away. However, translating is not so simple either. You read something and think you understand it, but when you come to translate it difficulties crop up everywhere, and progress is very slow. Still, I was determined to do my best. In less than a fortnight, the edge of a fairly new dictionary was black with my fingerprints, which shows how seriously I took my work. The editor of *Freedom's Friend* had said that his magazine would never ignore a good manuscript.

Unfortunately, there was no room where I could be undisturbed, and Zijun was not as quiet or considerate as she had been. Our place was so cluttered up with dishes and 'bowls, so filled with smoke, that it was impossible to work steadily there. But of course I had only myself to blame for not being able to afford a study. On top of this there were Asui and the chicks. The chicks, moreover, had now grown into hens and were more of a bone of contention than ever between the two families.

Then there was the never-ending business of eating every day. All Zijun's energies seemed to go to this. One ate to earn and earned to eat, while Asui and the hens had to be fed too. Apparently she had forgotten all she had ever learned, and did not realize that she was interrupting my train of thought when she called me to meals. And although I sometimes showed a little displeasure as I sat down, she paid no attention at all, just went on munching away quite unconcerned.

It took her five weeks to realize that my work could not be restricted by regular meal-times. When the realization came she was probably annoyed, but she said nothing. After that my work did go forward faster, and soon I had translated 50,000 words. I had only to polish the manuscript, and it could be sent in with two already completed shorter pieces to *Freedom's Friend*. Those meals were still a headache though. I didn't mind the dishes being cold, but there wasn't enough to go round. Although my appetite was much smaller than before now that I was sitting at home all day using my brain, even so there wasn't always even enough rice. It had been given to Asui, sometimes along with the mutton which I myself rarely had a chance of eating recently. Asui was so thin, she said, it was really pathetic; besides it made the landlady sneer at us. She couldn't stand being laughed at.

So there were only the hens to eat my left-overs. It was a long time before I realized this. I was very conscious however that my "place in nature,"* as Huxley describes it, was only somewhere between the peke and the hens.

Later on, after much argument and insistence, the hens started appearing on our table and we and Asui were able to enjoy them for over ten days. They were very thin though, because for a long time they had been fed only a few grains of sorghum a day. After that, life became much more peaceful. Only Zijun was very dispirited and often seemed sad and bored, or even sulky. How easily people change!

But we couldn't keep Asui either. We had stopped hoping for a letter from anywhere, and Zijun had long had not even a scrap of food with which to get him to beg or stand on his hindlegs. Besides, winter was fast approaching, and we didn't know what to do about a stove. His appetite had long been a heavy liability, of which we were all too conscious. So even the dog had to go

If we had tied a tag to him and put him on sale in the market, we might have made a few coppers. But neither of us could bring ourselves to do this. Finally I muffled his head in a cloth and took him outside the West Gate, where I let him loose. When he ran after me, I pushed him into a pit - not a very deep one.

When I got home, I found the place much more peaceful; but Zijun's tragic expression quite staggered me. I had never seen such a look on her face before. Of course it was because of Asui, but why take it so to heart? And I hadn't told her about pushing him into the pit.

That night, something icy crept into her tragic expression. "Really!" I couldn't help blurting out. "What's got into you today, Zijun?"

"What?" She didn't even glance at me. "The way you look...."

"It's nothing - nothing at all."

Eventually I guessed from her behaviour that she considered me callous. Actually, when on my own I had managed all right, although too proud to mix much with family connections. Since my move I had become estranged from my former friends. But if 'I could only take wing and fly away, I still had plenty of ways to make a living. The wretchedness of my present life was largely due to her -getting rid of Asui was a case in point. But Zijun seemed too obtuse now even to understand that.

When I took an opportunity to hint this to her, she nodded as if she understood. But judging by heck later behaviour, she either didn't take it in or else she didn't believe me.

The cold weather and her cold looks made it impossible for me to be comfortable at home. But where could I go? I could get away from her icy looks in the street and parks, but the cold wind there cut like a knife. Finally I found a haven in the public library.

Admission was free, and there were two stoves in the reading room. Although the fires were very low, the mere sight of the stoves made one warmer. There were no books worth reading: the old ones were out of date, and there were no new ones to speak of.

But I didn't go there to read. There were usually a few other people there, sometimes as many as a dozen, all thinly clad like me. We kept up a pretence of reading in order to keep out of the cold. This suited me down to the ground. In the streets you were liable to meet people you knew who would glance at you contemptuously, but here there was no uncalled-for trouble of that kind, because my acquaintances were all gathered round other stoves or warming themselves at the stoves in their own homes.

Although there were no books for me to read there, I found quiet in which to think. As I sat there alone thinking over the past, I realized that during the last half year, for love - blind love - I had neglected all the other important things in life. First and foremost, livelihood. A man must make a living before there can be any place for love. There must be a way out for those who struggle, and I hadn't yet forgotten how to flap my wings, although I was much weaker than before....

The reading room and the readers gradually faded. I saw fishermen on the angry sea, soldiers in the trenches, dignitaries in their cars, speculators at the stock exchange, heroes in mountain forests, teachers on their platforms, night prowlers, thieves in the dark.... Zijun was nowhere near me. She had lost all her courage in her resentment over Asui and absorption in her cooking. The strange thing was that she didn't look particularly thin....

It grew colder. The few lumps of slow-burning hard coal in the stove had at last burnt out, and it was closing time. I had to go back to Lucky Lane to expose myself to that icy look. Of late I had sometimes been met with warmth, but this only upset me more. One evening, I remember, from Zijun's eyes flashed the childlike look I had not seen for so long, as she reminded me with a smile of something that had happened at the hostel. But there was a constant look of fear in her eyes__ as well. I knew she was worried by the fact that my behaviour recently had been colder than her own; so sometimes, to comfort her, I forced myself to talk and laugh. But each forced laugh and remark at once rang hollow. And the way this hollowness immediately re-echoed in my ears, like a hateful sneer, was more than I could bear.

Zijun may have felt this too, for after this she lost her wooden calm and, though she tried her best to hide it, often showed anxiety. She treated me, however, much more tenderly.

I wanted to speak to her plainly, but lacked the courage. Whenever I made up my mind to speak, the sight of those childlike eyes compelled me, for the time being, to force a smile. But my smile turned straightway into a sneer at myself and made me lose my cold composure.

After that she revived the old questions and started new tests, forcing me to give all sorts of hypocritical answers to show my affection for her. Hypocrisy became branded on my heart, so filling it with falseness that it was hard to breathe. I often felt, in my depression, that really great courage was needed to tell the truth; for a man who lacked courage and reconciled himself to hypocrisy could never open up a new path in life. What's more, he just could not exist.

Then Zijun started looking resentful. This happened for the first time one morning, one bitterly cold morning, or so I imagined. I laughed up my sleeve with freezing indignation. All the ideas and intelligent, fearless phrases she had learned were empty after all; yet she had no inkling of their emptiness. She had given up reading long ago, so

did not understand that the first thing in life is to make a living and that to do this people must advance hand in hand, or else soldier on alone. All she could do was cling to someone else's clothing, making it hard for even a fighter to struggle, and bringing ruin on both.

I felt that our only hope lay in parting. She ought to make a clean break. The thought of her death occurred to me abruptly, but at once I reproached myself and felt remorse. Happily it was morning, and there was plenty of time for me to tell her the truth. Whether or not we could make a fresh start depended on this.

I deliberately brought up the past. I spoke of literature, then of foreign authors and their works, of Ibsen's *A Dolls House* and *The Lady from the Sea*. I praised Nora for being strong-minded.... All this had been said the previous year in the shabby room in the hostel, but now it rang hollow. As the words left my mouth I could not free myself from the suspicion that an unseen urchin behind me was maliciously parroting everything I said.

She listened, nodding agreement, then was silent. And I wound up abruptly, the last echo of my voice vanishing in the emptiness.

"Yes," she said presently, after another silence. "But.... Juansheng, I feel you're a different person these days. Is that true? Tell me honestly."

This was a head-on blow. But taking a grip of myself, I explained my views and proposals: only by making a fresh start and building a new life could we both avoid ruin.

To clinch the matter I said firmly:

"... Besides, you can go boldly ahead now without any scruples. You asked me for the truth. You're right: we shouldn't be hypocritical. Well, the truth is it's because I don't love you any more. Actually, this makes it much better for you, because it'll be easier for you to go ahead without any regret... I'

I was expecting a scene, but all that followed was silence. Her face turned ashen pale, as pale as death; but in a moment her color came back and that childlike look darted from her eyes. She gazed around like a hungry or thirsty child searching for its kindly mother. But she only stared into space, fearfully avoiding my eyes.

The sight was more than I could stand. Fortunately it was still early. Braving the cold wind, I hurried to the public library.

There I saw Freedom's Friend, with my short articles in it. This took me by surprise and breathed a little fresh life into me. "There are plenty of ways open to me," I reflected. "But things can't go on like this."

I started calling on old friends with whom I had long been out of touch, but didn't go more than once or twice. Naturally their rooms were warm, yet I felt chilled to the marrow. And in the evenings I huddled in a room colder than ice.

An *icy* needle was piercing my heart so that it kept aching numbly. "There are plenty of ways open to me," I reflected. "I haven't forgotten how to flap my wings." The thought of her death occurred to me abruptly, but at once I reproached myself and felt remorse.

In the library the new path ahead of me often flashed before my eyes. She had faced up bravely to the facts and boldly left this *icy* home. Left it, what's more, without any sense of grievance. Then light as a cloud I floated through the void, the blue sky above me and, below, mountain ranges, mighty oceans, sky-scrapers, battlefields, motor-cars, thoroughfares, rich men's mansions, bright busy shopping centres, and the dark night....

What's more, indeed, I foresaw that this new life was just around the corner. Somehow we managed to live through the fearful winter, a bitter Beijing winter.

But like dragonflies caught by mischievous boys who tie them up to play with and torment at will, although we had come through alive we were prostrate - the end was only a matter of time.

I wrote three letters to the editor of *Freedom's Friend* before receiving a reply. The envelope contained nothing but two book tokens, one for twenty cents, the other for thirty cents. So my nine cents spent on postage to press for payment and my whole day without food had all gone for nothing.

Then what I had been expecting finally happened.

As winter gave place to spring and the wind became less icy, I spent more time roaming the streets, not getting home generally before dark. On one such dark evening I came home listlessly as usual and, as usual, grew so depressed at the sight of our gate that my feet began to drag. Eventually, however, I reached my room. It was dark inside. As I groped for the matches and struck a light, the place seemed extraordinarily quiet and empty.

I was standing there in bewilderment, when the official's wife called me outside.

"Zijun's father came today and took her away," she said simply.

This was not what I had expected. I felt as if hit on, the back of the head, and stood speechless.

"She went?" I finally managed to ask.

"Yes."

"Did - did she say anything?"

"No. Just asked me to tell you when you came back that she'd gone."

I couldn't believe it; yet the room was extraordinarily quiet and empty. I gazed around in search of Zijun, but all I could see were some shabby sticks of furniture scattered sparsely about the room, as if to prove their inability to conceal anyone or anything. It occurred to me that she might have left a letter or at least jotted down a few words, but no. Only salt, dried chilli, flour and half a cabbage had been placed together, with a few dozen coppers at the side. These were all our worldly goods, and now she had solemnly left these all to me, mutely bidding me to use them to eke out my existence a little longer.

As if repelled by my surroundings, I hurried out to the middle of the courtyard where all around me was dark. Bright lamplight showed on the window-paper of the central room, where they were teasing the baby to make her laugh. My heart grew calmer as by degrees I glimpsed a way out of this heavy oppression: high mountains and marshlands, thoroughfares, brightly lit banquets, trenches, pitch-black night, the thrust of a sharp knife, utterly noiseless footsteps....

Relaxing, I thought about travelling expenses and sighed.

As I lay with closed eyes I conjured up a picture of the future, but before the night was half over it had vanished. In the gloom I suddenly seemed to see a pile of groceries, then Zijun's ashen face appeared to gaze at me beseechingly with childlike eyes. But as soon as I pulled myself together, there was nothing there.

However, my heart was still heavy. Why couldn't I have waited a few days instead of blurting out the truth to her like that? Now she knew all that was left to her was the blazing fury of her father - to his children he was a heartless creditor -and the cold looks of bystanders, colder than frost or ice. Apart from this there was only emptiness. What a fearful thing it is to bear the heavy burden of emptiness, walking what is called one's path in life amid cold looks and blazing fury! This path ends, moreover, in nothing but a grave without so much as a tombstone.

I ought not to have told Zijun the truth. Since we had loved each other, I should have indulged her to the last with lies. If truth is precious, it should not have proved such a heavy burden of emptiness to Zijun. Of course lies are empty too, but at least they would not have proved so crushing a burden in the end.

I had imagined that if I told Zijun the truth she could go forward boldly without scruples, just as when we started living together. But I must have been wrong. Her courage and fearlessness then were owing to love.

Lacking the courage to shoulder the heavy burden of hypocrisy, I thrust the burden of the truth on to her. Because she had loved me she would have to bear this heavy burden amid cold looks and blazing fury to _ the end of her days.

I had thought of her death.... I saw that I was a weakling who deserved to be cast out by the strong, honest men and hypocrites both. Yet she, from first to' last, had hoped that I could eke out my existence....

I must leave Lurkry Lane, which was so extraordinarily empty and lonely. To my mind, if only I could get away, it would be as if Zijun were still at my side; or at least as if she were still in town and might drop in on me at any time, as she had when I lived in the hostel.

However, all my letters went unanswered, as did applications to friends to find me a post. There was nothing for it but to seek out a family connection whom I had not visited for a long time. This was an old classmate of my uncle's, a highly respected senior licentiate* who had lived in Beijing for many years and had a wide circle of acquaintances.

The gatekeeper eyed me scornfully, no doubt on account of my shabby clothes. When finally I was admitted, my uncle's friend still acknowledged our acquaintance but treated me very coldly. He knew all about us.

"Obviously you can't stay here," he told me coldly, after being asked to recommend me to a job elsewhere. "But where will you go? It's extremely difficult.... That, h'm, that friend of yours, Zijun, I suppose you know, is dead."

I was dumbfounded.

"Are you sure?" I blurted out at last.

He laughed drily. "Of course I am. My servant Wang Sheng comes from the same village as her family."

"But - how did she die?"

"Who knows? At any rate, she's dead."

I have forgotten how I took my leave and went home. I knew he wouldn't tell a lie. Zijun would never come back as she had last year. Although she had thought to bear the burden of emptiness amid cold looks and blazing fury till the end of her days, it had been too much for her. Fate had decreed that she should die believing the truth I had told her - die in a world without love.

Obviously I could not stay there. But where could I go?

Around me was a great void and deathlike silence. I seemed to see the darkness before the eyes of those, each one in turn, who died unloved; to hear all their bitter, despairing cries as they struggled.

I was waiting for something new, something nameless and unexpected. But day after day passed in the same deathlike silence.

I went out much less than before, sitting or lying in the great void, allowing this deathlike silence to eat away my soul. Sometimes the silence itself seemed afraid, seemed to recoil. At such times there flashed into my mind nameless, unexpected new hope.

One overcast morning when the sun had failed to struggle out from behind the clouds and the very air was tired, sounds of pattering paws and snuffling made me open my eyes. A glance around the room revealed nothing, but looking down I saw a

tiny creature perambulating the floor. It was thin, covered with dust, more dead than alive....

When I took a closer look, my heart missed a beat. I jumped up.
It was Asui. He had come back.

I left Lucky Lane not just because of the cold glances of my landlord, his wife and their maid, but largely on account of Asui. But where could I go? There were many ways open to me of course, this I knew, and sometimes I glimpsed them stretching out before me. What I didn't know was how to take the first step.

After much cogitation and weighing of pros and cons, I decided that the hostel was the only possible lodging place for me. Here is the same shabby room as before, the same wooden bed, half-withered locust tree and wistaria vine. But all that formerly gave me love and life, hope and happiness, has vanished. Nothing remains but emptiness, the empty existence I exchanged for the truth.

There are many ways open to me and I must take one of them, because I am still living. I still don't know, though, how to take the first step. Sometimes the road seems like a great grey serpent, writhing and darting at me. I wait and wait, watching it approach, but it always vanishes suddenly in the darkness.

The early spring nights are as long as ever. Sitting idle as the time drags, I recall a funeral procession I saw in the street this morning. There were paper figures and paper horses in front and, behind, weeping like singing. Now I see how clever they are - this is so simple.

Then Zijun's funeral springs to my mind. She bore the heavy burden of emptiness alone, advancing down the long *grey* road only to be swallowed up amid cold looks and blazing fury.

If only there really were ghosts, really were a hell! Then, no matter how the infernal whirlwind roared, I would seek_out_Zijun to tell her of my remorse and grief, to beg for her forgiveness. Failing this, the poisonous flames of hell would engulf me and fiercely consume all my remorse and grief.

In the whirlwind and flames I would put my arms round Zijun and ask her pardon, or let her take her revenge....

However, this is emptier than my new life. I have nothing now but the early spring night which is still as long as ever. Since I am living, I must make a fresh start. And the first step is just to record my remorse and grief, for Zijun's sake as well as for my own.

All I have is weeping like singing as I mourn for Zijun, burying her in oblivion.

I want to forget. For my own sake, I do not want to remember the oblivion I gave Zijun for her burial.

I must make a fresh start in life. Hiding the truth deep in my wounded heart, I must advance silently, taking oblivion and falsehood as my guide. . . .

October 21, 1925