

LANLING XIAOXIAOSHENG

THE GOLDEN  
LOTUS

VOLUME 1

*Translated from the Chinese by Clement Egerton  
with the assistance of Shu Qingchun (Lao She)*





## Translator's Introduction

It is now fifteen years since I set to work on this translation of the *Jin Ping Mei*, and nearly ten since it was, as I imagined, almost ready for press. I did not flatter myself that it was a perfect translation—it would have needed the research of many years to clear up a number of difficult points—but I thought a few months' work would make possible a fairly adequate rendering of what I had come to regard as a very great novel. Now, looking at the proofs, I wish I had another ten years to spend on it. I have made no attempt to produce a "scholarly" translation, but it is not easy, from the staccato brevity of the original, to make a smooth English version and, at the same time, to preserve the spirit of the Chinese. It would, doubtless, have been possible to escape some of the difficulties by omitting the passages in which they occur, but I could not bring myself to do this or even to cut down occasional passages that seem to me a little dull. I made the best I could of them. The position was not quite the same with the poems. Nobody would, I think, claim that they are masterpieces of Chinese poetry, and some of them, turned into English, seemed very much like gibberish. I have allowed myself much more liberty with them and have omitted a great many. After all, they are merely conventional trimmings to the story, and I have no qualms of conscience about them. But for the rest, I confess that I have not even read the proofs. My long-suffering publishers knew that I was so anxious to go on polishing the

translation that they thought the book would be indefinitely delayed if I was allowed to handle the proofs. They have been corrected by Mr. A. S. B. Glover.

There was one other problem that I must mention. I have already said that I could see no excuse for tampering with the author's text. He set out, coldly and objectively, to relate the rise to fortune and the later ruin of a typical household at a time when Chinese officialdom was exceedingly corrupt. He omitted no detail of this corruption, whether in public or in private life. Such detail he obviously considered essential to his story. If he had been an English writer, he would have avoided some subjects completely, skated over thin ice, and wrapped up certain episodes in a mist of words. This he does not do. He allows himself no reticences. Whatever he has to say, he says in the plainest of language. This, of course, frequently is acutely embarrassing for the translator. Again I felt that, if the book was to be produced at all, it must be produced in its entirety. But it could not all go into English, and the reader will therefore be exasperated to find occasional long passages in Latin. I am sorry about these, but there was nothing else to do.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps I may be allowed to say how I came to translate the book. Some time after the Great War I became interested in the social applications of a certain modern school of psychology. I thought I should like to study these applications in the case of a developed civilization other than our own. So I began to learn Chinese and to search about for documentary material. The novel was the obvious field to be investigated.

The Chinese have never regarded novel writing as anything more than a rather doubtful diversion for a literary man. Literature, to them, was almost a sacred art, hedged about by

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<sup>1</sup> The passages formerly cloaked in Latin appear in English in this edition.

conventions. It had a language of its own, and this language must not be profaned. For this reason, though there is a mass of novel "Literature" in Chinese, it has never been accepted as such, and novels were written in the colloquial language of the period and not in the literary language. It is only within the present generation that scholars like Hu Shi have come to appreciate the value and the interest of the Chinese novel.

This depreciatory attitude to the novel of the learned class in China is, perhaps, responsible for the absence of any true development of style. The *Jin Ping Mei* is written in a sort of telegraphese. There are no flowers of language. And when the author goes beyond plain narrative, his descriptions are bare and devoid of any very picturesque quality. But the narrative is so detailed and so ruthless in its searching delineation of character that there is little need for any attempt to convey atmosphere by deliberate means. It is this power of conveying the essential with the utmost economy in the use of literary devices that seems to me to make the *Jin Ping Mei* a great novel. It has something, surely, of the quality of a Greek tragedy in its very ruthlessness. It proceeds slowly and, apparently, unsuspectingly to its climax: and so suddenly, but inevitably, to its end.

In view of its limitations, the characterization of the book is very striking. There is a multitude of characters—Ximen Qing's wives, the women of the household, the singing girls with whom he associates, his disreputable *sponging friends*, the officials with whom he comes into contact—but there is no confusion among them. Each is a living character, clearly drawn and perfectly distinct. This distinctness comes, not from any deliberately drawn picture of each individual, but from his words and actions. I know no other book in any language in which such an effect has been produced by such

means. It is partly for this reason—though my main reason was a very strong belief that a translator has no right to mutilate any author's book—that I felt it necessary not to cut out any of the details of behaviour given by the author. I am convinced that such details were included in the original not for the purpose of titillating the reader's palate for the salacious, but because they, too, indicate shades of character that, given the author's stylistic limitations, could not be indicated by any other means.

It was more or less accident that made me choose the *Jin Ping Mei* as a suitable novel for my original purpose. I first came across it in Cordier's *Bibliotheca Sinica*. He says of it there, "In it there is set before us a whole company of men and women in all the different relationships that arise in social life, and we see them pass successively through all the situations through which civilized human beings can pass. The translation of such a book would render superfluous any other book upon the manners of the Chinese."

Grube, in his *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur*, says that "the author of this book... displays a power of observation and description so far above the average that all the remaining novel literature of China put together has nothing to compare with it."

Finally, Laufer in his *Skizze der manjurischen Literatur* declares that "As an artistic production, this work belongs... among the highest of its class... That the novel is unmoral must be flatly denied: it is as little unmoral as any work of Zola or Ibsen, and like them a work of art from the hand of a master, who well understands his fellow men; who depicts them with their passions, as they are and not as... they ought to be."

In view of such opinions as these, it was clear that the *Jin Ping Mei* must be a mine of psychological and cultural

material. I began its translation. And it is such a mine, and it is unique. But, as the work of translation progressed, I found that I was becoming more and more absorbed by the book as a work of art, and, I am afraid, its value as a psychological document soon faded into the background. I have no doubt that a deliberately strictly literal translation, with an elaborate apparatus of notes and explanations, would be extremely valuable, but my interest in the book as a masterpiece of novel writing has made me try to render it in such a form that the reader may gain the same impression from it that I did myself. He will need patience occasionally, but his patience will be rewarded.

There is not much that I can say about the history of the book. Since novels were not “Literature,” its authorship and history were not recorded with the care and solemnity that Chinese bibliographical study gives to canonized works. It deals with life in the Song Dynasty, in the reign of Huizong (1101–26 CE), but it was written towards the end of the Ming Dynasty. The identity of its author is not absolutely certain, but most writers attribute it to Wang Shizhen, who died in 1593. A popular tradition says that he poisoned the pages of his manuscript and then offered it to his enemy, the Prime Minister, Yan Shifan, in the hope that he would become engrossed in the reading of it and absorb the poison as he turned over the pages. The book existed in manuscript only for many years and, when it was first printed nearly a hundred years after its assumed author’s death, the fifty-third and fifty-seventh chapters had been lost and were supplied by another unknown hand. The first edition was promptly placed on the list of prohibited books by the famous Emperor Kangxi, though his own brother made a translation of it into Manchu, which is one of the few literary masterpieces in that language.

## Translator's Note

Without the untiring and generously given help of Mr. C. C. Shu, who, when I made the first draft of this translation, was Lecturer in Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies, I should never have dared to undertake such a task. I shall always be grateful to him.

I have to thank also Dr. Walter Simon, formerly Professor of Chinese in Berlin University, and now Reader at the School of Oriental Studies, for most valuable assistance in clearing up certain doubtful points that I have submitted to him. He has always taken the greatest interest in this translation.

Further, my thanks are due to Mr. A. S. B. Glover, who has had the objectionable and difficult task of going through the proofs, and to Mr. L. M. Chefdeville, who checked the Chinese names throughout.

Finally, Mr. Cecil Franklin deserves special thanks for the trouble he has taken in coordinating the labours of such a miscellaneous host of proof-readers and correctors. His was a most exasperating occupation, fulfilled with his accustomed imperturbable serenity.

## List of Principal Characters

AN FENGSHAN, Inspector of the Board of Works; later Secretary of the Board of Waterways

BAI LAIGUANG, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

THE BEANPOLE, wife of Laizhao and mother of Little Iron Rod

BEN THE FOURTH, manager of Ximen's business

BU ZHIDAO, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

CAI, "Old Woman," a midwife

CAI JING, Imperial Tutor, Minister of the Palace of Chong Zheng; a protector of Ximen Qing

CHEN DING, servant of Chen Jingji

CHEN JINGJI, husband of Ximen's daughter Ximen Dajie

CHANG ZHIJIE, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

CUI BEN, friend and employee of Ximen

CUI'ER, (Kingfisher), maid to Sun Xue'e

DAIAN, Ximen's most trusted boy; later faithful servant of Wu Yueniang

FENG, "Old Woman," a go-between, doorkeeper to Li Ping'er when wife of Hua Zixu

FU, "Clerk," manager of Ximen's pharmaceutical shop

GAN CHUSHEN, manager of Ximen's silk shop

GE CUIPING (Hummingbird), wife of Chen Jingji in a marriage arranged by Chunmei

GUAN'GE, son of Ximen by Li Ping'er

HAN AIJIE (Wild Rose) or AIJIE, daughter of Han Daoguo and Wang Liu'er and concubine of Zhai

HAN DAOGUO, clerk to Ximen, husband of Wang Liu'er and father of Han Aijie

HE YONGSHOU (Captain He), neighbour of Ximen

HUATONG, boy of Ximen

HUA ZIXU, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood. The first husband of Li Ping'er

HUIXIANG (Cherry Blossom), wife of Laibao

KONG, "Old Woman," a procuress

LAIAN, boy of Ximen

LAIBAO, Tang Bao, servant of Ximen

LAIWANG, Zheng Wang, boy of Ximen; later lover of Sun Xue'e

LANXIANG, (Fragrance), maid to Meng Yulou

LAIXING, Gan Laixing, boy of Ximen

LAIZHAO, Liu Zhao, servant of Ximen

LI GUIJIE (Cassia) or GUIJIE, a singing girl, niece of Ximen's Second Lady, sister of Li Guiqing

LI JIAO'ER (picture of Grace), Ximen's Second Lady; later wife of Zhang the Second

LI MING, a young musician, brother of Li Guijie

LI PING'ER (Lady of the Vase), wife of Hua Zixu, later Sixth Lady of Ximen

LIN, LADY, a lady of quality, mother of Wang the Third, and mistress of Ximen

LIU, "Old Woman," a procuress

MENG YULOU (Tower of Jade) or YULOU, Third Lady of Ximen; later, wife of Li Gongbi

PING'AN, boy of Ximen

PAN JINLIAN (Golden Lotus) or JINLIAN, originally a singing girl, later wife of Wu Da, and afterwards Fifth Lady of Ximen

PAN, "Old Woman," mother of Jinlian

PANG CHUNMEI, (Plum Blossom) or CHUNMEI, maid to Wu Yueniang and later to Pan Jinlian; afterwards wife of Major Zhou

QITONG, boy of Ximen

QINTONG, boy of Meng Yulou; later lover of Pan Jinlian

QIUJU (Chrysanthemum), kitchen maid of Pan Jinlian

RUYI'ER, (Heart's Delight), or Zhang the Fourth, nurse of Guan'ge

SHUTONG, Zhang Song, secretary to Ximen

SONG HUILIAN (Wistaria), wife of Laiwang and mistress of Ximen

SUN GUAZUI or SUN TIANHUA, or Crooked-headed Sun, associate of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

SUN XUE'E (Beauty of the Snow) or XUE'E originally a maid in Ximen's household; afterwards Ximen's fourth wife; also known as the Kitchen Lady

WANG, a Buddhist nun

WANG, "Old Woman," a procuress

WANG CAI, (Wang the Third), a young nobleman; son of Lady Lin

WANG JING, brother of Wang Liu'er, later servant of Ximen

WANG LIU'ER (Porphyry), wife of Han Daoguo and mistress of Ximen

WEN BIGU, a dissolute scholar, secretary of Ximen

WEN, "Old Woman," a procuress

WU The Immortal," a fortune-teller

WU, "Uncle," or Wu the Elder, brother of Wu Yueniang

WU DA, brother of Wu Song and first husband of Jinlian

WU DIAN'EN, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

WU SONG, brother of Wu Da, and avenger of his murder

WU YIN'ER (Silver Maid), mistress of Hua Zixu, adopted as ward by Li Ping'er

WU YUENIANG (Moon Lady), or the Great Lady, Ximen's principal wife

WU ZONGJIA, abbot of the Temple of the Jade Emperor

XIA YANLING, a magistrate, friend of Ximen

XIAOGE, posthumous son of Ximen by Wu Yueniang

XIAOYU (Tiny Jade), maid of Wu Yueniang; later, wife of Daian

XIE XIDA, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

XIMEN QING, the central figure of this book, originally the owner of a considerable estate at Qinghe, later a magistrate

XIMEN DAJIE (Orchid), daughter of Ximen and wife of Chen Jingji

XIUHUN (Hibiscus), maid to Li Ping'er and later to the Second Lady

XUE, a eunuch of the Imperial Household, friend of Ximen

XUE, "Old Woman," a procuress

YANG GUANGYAN, also Yang the Elder or Iron Fingernails, manager of one of Ximen's shops

YING BAO, eldest son of Ying Bojue

YING BOJUE, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood; known as Beggar Ying

YINGCHUN (Welcome Spring), maid of the Sixth Lady, later of Wu Yueniang

YING'ER, (Jasmine), daughter of Wu Da by his first wife and stepdaughter of Pan Jinlian

YUN LISHOU, friend of Ximen and member of his brotherhood

YUXIAO (Autumn), maid of Wu Yueniang

ZHANGJIE, Qiao Zhangjie, infant daughter of Madam Qiao, betrothed to Guan'ge

ZHANG SHENG, servant of Major Zhou  
ZGENG AIXIANG (Perfume) or AIXIANG, a singing girl,  
sister of Zheng Feng and Zheng Aiyue  
ZHENG AIYUE (Moonbeam) or AIYUE, a singing girl  
ZHENG FENG, a young actor  
ZHONGQUI, maid of Wu Yueniang  
ZHOU, Major, later General Zhou, neighbour of Ximen  
ZHU SHINIAN, friend of Ximen and member of his brother-  
hood; called Pockmarked Zhu

## The Golden Lotus

*When wealth has taken wing, the streets seem desolate.  
The strains of flute and stringed zither are heard no more.  
The brave long sword has lost its terror; its splendour is  
tarnished.*

*The precious lute is broken, faded its golden star.*

*The marble stairs are deserted; only the autumn dew visits  
them now.*

*The moon shines lonely where once were dancing feet and  
merry songs.*

*The dancers are departed: the singers have gone elsewhere.*

*They return no more.*

*Today they are but ashes in the Western Tombs.*

*Beautiful is this maiden; her tender form gives promise of  
sweet womanhood,*

*But a two-edged sword lurks between her thighs, whereby  
destruction comes to foolish men.*

*No head falls to that sword: its work is done in secret,*

*Yet it drains the very marrow from men's bones.*

This poem was written by one Lū Yan [Lū Dongbin], an immortal whose name in religion was Master Chunyang. He lived in the dynasty of Tang and spent his days in the pursuit of virtue and the mortification of the flesh. So he attained to

paradise, leaving this mortal world, and there was given to him a seat in the Purple Palace. The gift of immortality was bestowed upon him, and he was made the Governor of the Eight Caverns that are above, whence he brings succour to them in trouble and adversity.

It seems, unfortunately, too true that they who live in this world can never wholly free themselves from their bondage to the Seven Feelings and the Six Desires. There is no escape from the fatal circle of Wine and Women, Wealth and Rage. Sooner or later the end comes to every man, and he must give up his hold upon all of these, for, after death, they will avail him nothing. Experience would seem to show that of these four evils, women and wealth most surely bring disaster. Let us for a moment consider the case of one who falls upon evil times, so that he finds himself in sore need, suffering misfortunes whereof he never dreamed. At night he searches diligently for a grain of rice, and finds the morrow must be foodless. In the morning he rises and looks around the kitchen, but cannot discover even the makings of a fire. His family is hungry and cold; his wife and children are starving, and he knows not where to turn for food. Where shall he find the money to buy wine? Worse even than this, his relatives and friends turn aside their eyes, and show him nothing but coldness and contempt. There may have been a time when the poor wretch had ambitions; now they must perish, for he is in no position to enter into rivalry with others.

Then there is the man who squanders his wealth to purchase the delights of love. It matters not how great that wealth may be, in one adventure he may cast away ten thousand golden pieces. Should he crave for wine, he will find it precious indeed, precious as molten jade, for to the outpouring of amber cups there is no end. Should it be rank he seeks, his wealth may

conjure up spirits; a gesture may bring servants running to serve him, and a nod may summon his attendants. Men will flock to his presence and press forward to curry favour with him. They will hasten to abase themselves before his majesty, even to lick his sores and set their tongues where tongue should not be set. Only so long as he maintains his power will this continue: when once his influence is gone, they will shrug their shoulders and wait on him no more. No trial is more hard to bear than this change from hot to cold. Are not both the upstart and they who fawn upon him sufferers from the plague of wealth?

Then there is the danger that is to be had from women. Look around the world, I pray you. Liuxia Hui, though a fair lady seated herself upon his knee, remained unmoved. Where in these days shall we find conduct such as his? And he of Lu, who when a maid would have come to him, made fast his door and would not let her enter; where shall we find one like him? Or to Guan Yunchang who, with a lighted candle, kept chaste watch until the dawn? How many such heroes can history make known to us? What shall we say of those who, though they have four wives already, daily go forth to spend their substance on unlawful loves, unceasingly craving amorous delights? For the moment we will leave them, for there is that kind of lustful beast who cannot see a woman of even ordinary comeliness, without devising a hundred or a thousand plots to seduce her. He ensnares the woman, craving the pleasure of a moment, and for this neglects the affection of his friends, and takes no heed for the governance of his own household. To attain this paltry end, he pours forth countless wealth and casts immeasurable treasure to the dogs. His wantonness exceeds all bounds, and then come disputes, bloodshed, and all manner of evil. He is doomed. His wife and children are forever ruined, and his business brought to the dust.

Such a man was Shi Jilun who, for love of his mistress Lu Zhu, died wretchedly in prison, though, at one time, the masses of his wealth were high enough to touch the skies. Another was Bawang [Xiang Yu] of Chu, whose heroism might have uprooted mountains. Because of his madness for Yu Ji [Concubine Yu], his head hung in Gaixia. The gate of Love may be the gate of Life, but just as surely is it the gate of Death. Time and time again our common sense reminds us of this fact; and yet our hearts still carry us away. So do men fall victims to the plague of love.

It is easy to talk thus of women and of wealth, yet there is none who is forever free of these plagues. If, in all the world, there be one who appreciates the truth, he will tell us that all our piles of gold and silver, all the jade we treasure, can never follow us beyond the grave. They are but refuse, no more worth than dust and slime. Our wealth may be so great that nothing can contain it, our rice so plentiful that it may rot because we cannot consume it: to our dead bodies it will be of no avail; all will become corruption and decay. Our lofty palaces and spacious halls will bring no joy to us when we are in the grave. Our silken gowns and our embroidered skirts, our robes of fur and wraps of sable, what are they but worthless rags, for all the pride our bones will take in them?

Those charming dainty maidens who serve our lusts so well, whose skill in self-adornment is so exquisite: when once the veil is torn aside, what shall we find in them but falseness? Are they not like a general who, when the signal is given for battle, can only manifest his valour by the noise he makes?

Those scarlet lips, those white and glistening teeth, that flashing of eyes and dallying with the sleeve: if true understanding were vouchsafed us, we should know them for the loathsome grimaces of the powers of Hell within the palace of the Prince of Hades.

The silken hose, the tiny feet are like the pick and shovel that dig our graves. Soft dalliance upon the pillow, the sport of love upon the bed, are but the forerunners of an eternity wherein, within the Fifth Abode of Hades, we shall be boiled in boiling oil.

Well does the *Diamond Sutra* speak of this foolish life “as dream and as illusion; as lightning and as dew.” For though at the end of life all things are vain, during life men cannot bear the loss even of a trifle. We may be so strong that, unaided, we can lift a cauldron or tow a ship, but, when the end draws near, our bones will lose their strength and our sinews their power. Though our wealth may give us mountains of bronze and valleys of gold, they will melt like snow when the last moment comes. Though our beauty outshine the moon, and the flowers dare not raise their heads to look on us, the day will come when we shall be nothing but corruption, and men will hold their noses as they pass us by. Though we have the cunning of Lu Jia and Sui He, it will avail us nothing when our lips are cold, and no word may issue from our mouths.

Let us then purify our senses, and put upon us the garment of repentance, that so, contemplating the emptiness and illusion of this world, we may free ourselves from the gate of birth and death, and, falling not into the straits of adversity, advance towards perfection. Thus only may we enjoy leisure and good living and still escape the fires of Hell.

I am brought to these reflections upon the true significance of wine and women, wealth and rage, remembering a family that, once flourishing, sank at length into a state of deepest misery. Then neither worldly wisdom nor ingenuity could save it, and not a single relative or friend would put forth a hand to help. For a few brief years the master of this household enjoyed his wealth, and then he died, leaving behind a reputation that

none would envy. There were many in that household who always sought to flatter, to do well for themselves, to join in amorous pleasures, to stir up strife, and to turn their influence to their own profit. At first it seemed that all was well with them, yet it was not long before their corpses lay in the shadow, and their blood stained the deserted chamber.

## Chapter 1

### THE BROTHERHOOD OF RASCALS

In the mighty dynasty of Song, when Huizong was Emperor, and in the Zhenghe period of his reign [1111–1119], there lived at Qinghe, a city of the prefecture of Dongping in Shandong, a dissolute young man whose name was Ximen Qing. He was about twenty-seven years old, and the master of a fine estate. A gay, good-looking fellow, he was, unfortunately, flighty and unstable. His father, Ximen Da, had once travelled through Sichuan and Guangdong dealing in raw medicines, and later he opened a shop near the Town Hall of Qinghe. He lived in a splendid house that had a frontage of five rooms upon the street, and wings that went back even farther. He had a host of servants, and a very considerable number of horses and mules. Though, perhaps, he was not quite a millionaire, he was certainly one of the richest men in the whole district.

Ximen Da and his wife showered affection upon their only child, and allowed him to do exactly as he pleased. While he was still comparatively young, they died. The boy paid scant attention to his studies, idled about, and finally gave himself up entirely to dissipation. Indeed, after his parents' death, he was seldom to be found at home, but spent all his time in the pursuit of forbidden pleasures. He learned to box, to wield the

quarterstaff, and to play a good game of chess. He gambled a great deal, and became so skilled in the game of *pai* that he could distinguish the different pieces by simply touching them. In fact, so far as such accomplishments were concerned, there was very little he did not know.

His friends and acquaintances were wastrels and spongers who spent all their lives in amusing themselves at other people's expense. The chief among them was Ying Bojue, the son of a silk merchant. He had squandered the wealth his father had left him, and had sunk so low that he spent all his time waiting about the Town Hall, ready to go with anyone to the bawdy house, or to dine with the first-comer who would pay for a meal. People nicknamed him Beggar Ying. He was an expert at kickball, backgammon, chess and all sorts of other games.

Then there was Xie Xida. This man's grandfather had been a minor official at Qinghe, and his parents had died while he was still a youth. He wasted his time, and paid no attention to his duties, so he lost his position, and now led a life of leisure. He played the lute.

These two and Ximen Qing were as thick as thieves, and there were several more, of varying degrees of disreputability. One was Zhu Shinian; another Sun Tianhua, also known as Greedy Chops. Then there was Wu Dian'en, who had once been Master of the Yin Yang for the district. He had been dismissed, and now was always to be found hanging about the Town Hall in the hope of finding a job as witness for the officials in their money-lending transactions. In this way he made the acquaintance of Ximen Qing.

Other friends were Yun Lishou, a younger brother of Colonel Yun; Chang Zhijie; Bu Zhidao; and Bai Laiguang, who was also known as Guangtang. When people remarked that this was a strange name, he would become very indignant

and enter upon a long explanation, which, by reference to the *Book of History*, was supposed to show that his tutor, when he had conferred that name upon him, had made an admirable choice. "If there had been anything objectionable about it," he used to say, "I should have changed it long ago, but, obviously, it has important historical associations, and I shall most certainly retain it."

There were, perhaps, ten of them in all, and, when they discovered that Ximen Qing was not only a very rich man, but ready to throw his money about, they led him on to gamble, drink and run after women.

The House of Ximen had fallen upon evil days. It had given to the world an unworthy son, who chose his friends from among those destitute of every virtue. It was inevitably doomed to impoverishment.

Ximen Qing was reckless, but when he took it into his head to bestir himself, he was capable of showing that he was no fool. He lent money to the officials and even had dealings with the four corrupt ministers, Gao, Yang, Tong and Cai. So he came to be mixed up in all kinds of official matters, acting as intervener for people at law, arbitrating in cases of dispute, and, sometimes, acting as stakeholder. The people of Qinghe stood in awe of him and spoke of him as "His Lordship Ximen." His first wife, a Miss Chen, died young, leaving him with a little daughter, and this daughter was now betrothed to Chen Jingji, a relative of Marshal Yang, the Commander of the Imperial Guard at the Eastern Capital.

After the death of his wife, Ximen found himself without a housekeeper, and married the daughter of a certain Captain Wu. This lady was about twenty-five years old. As she was born on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, her parents called her Yueniang ["Moon Lady"], and she was still known by that

name after her marriage to Ximen Qing. She was gentle and quiet, a good wife, and faultlessly obedient to her husband. She had three or four maids and serving women to wait upon her, and Ximen Qing had taken his pleasure with all of them.

As a second wife, he married a girl from the bawdy house, called Li Jiao'er, and as his third, a young woman from South Street, who had been his mistress. She was not very strong, and suffered from so many different illnesses that Ximen Qing again went off to "fly with the wind and sport with the moon!"

One day, when Ximen Qing was at home with nothing to do, he said to his wife:

"It is the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, and on the third of next month, I am supposed to be meeting my friends. I think I will entertain them here, and engage a couple of singing girls, so that we can have our amusement at home without needing to go elsewhere. Will you make the necessary arrangements?"

"I wish you wouldn't mention those horrible creatures to me," Wu Yueniang said. "There isn't a decent fellow among them. Day after day, they come here, like messengers of Hell, putting ideas into your silly mind and making an absolute fool of you. Never, since you've known them, have you spent a whole day in your own house. The Third Lady is anything but well, and I think you might give up these drinking parties, for a while at least."

"Generally," Ximen Qing said, "I find your conversation delightful, but today your remarks are a little wearying. To hear you talk, all my friends might be beyond the pale. I don't mind so much what you say about the others, but surely Brother Ying is an honest, entertaining fellow. If we ask him to do anything for us, he never raises any objection, and what he does, he does well. Then Xie Xida is clever as well

as conscientious. But there is this much to be said. So long as our meetings are irregular and uncertain, we can never develop our friendship on the proper lines. The next time we all come together, the best thing we can do will be to form a brotherhood, and ever afterwards we shall be able to count upon receiving assistance, if we need any."

"I have nothing against this brotherhood idea," Yueniang said, "though I have no doubt whatever that the others will get more assistance out of you than you are ever likely to get out of them. They will be as much use to you as dancing dolls, and not half so lively."

Ximen Qing laughed. "If I find, by experience, that they are to be trusted, why shouldn't I trust them? As a matter of fact, I'm expecting Brother Ying any moment. When he comes, I'll see what he thinks of the idea."

At that moment an intelligent-looking boy with delicate eyebrows and charming eyes came in. This was Daian, Ximen Qing's body servant. "Uncle Ying and Uncle Xie are outside," he said. "They would like to speak to you."

"I was just talking about them," Ximen said. He hastened to the hall. Ying Bojue was dressed in a new black hat and a shabby blue silk gown. He was sitting in the place of honour with Xie Xida opposite. When Ximen Qing came in, they both jumped up and saluted him with great deference. "We are glad to find you at home, Brother," they said. "We have not seen you for some time." Ximen asked them to sit down, and called for tea.

"You are a nice pair," he told them. "I have had a very anxious time lately. I could not leave the house, but I haven't seen even so much as your shadows."

"What did I say?" Bojue cried. "I knew our brother would be annoyed!" Then he turned to Ximen Qing. "I am not surprised that you are angry with us, but, really, I have been so busy that

I haven't known what to do. It is all very well for you to give your orders, but it is not so easy for me to carry them out."

"Where have you been, these last few days?" Ximen asked them.

"Yesterday, I went to the Li's to see a young lady called Li Guijie. She is Li Guiqing's younger sister, a niece of your Second Lady. I hadn't seen her for some time, and I must say she has become a very pretty girl. There's no telling what she will be like in the future. Her mother urged me to find a handsome young man to make a woman of her. Really, you yourself would not find her too bad."

"If she is so attractive," Ximen said, "I must go and have a look at her."

"Brother," said Xie Xida, "if you don't trust him, you can at least take my word for it."

"Well," said Ximen, "that accounts for yesterday, but what about the day before?"

"A little time ago, our friend Bu Zhidao died, and I have had to spend several days at his house in connection with the funeral arrangements. His wife asked me to tell you how grateful she is for the incense and things you sent her. Her place is so small and the only entertainment she can offer so unworthy, that she did not venture to invite you to the funeral."

"Alas!" Ximen Qing said, "it seems only a few days since I first heard he was ill. I never thought he would die so soon. He once made me a present of a gilded fan, and I was thinking of giving him something in return. Then I heard of his death."

Xie Xida sighed. "Once there were ten of us, now one has gone. By the way, the third of next month is the day for our meeting. We shall be troubling His Lordship to spend some small sum on the day's amusement."

"I have just been telling my wife," Ximen said, "that these meetings, at which we do nothing but eat and drink, do not

represent the essential element in our friendship. We ought to decide upon some temple, have an appropriate document drawn up, and band ourselves into a definite brotherhood. Then we shall be pledged to help one another ever afterwards. When the day comes, I will buy the three offerings needed for the sacrifice. I presume you will all be ready to give something towards the expenses, each according to his means. I do not insist on this, but it seems to me that, since we are forming a brotherhood, it will be much more satisfactory if every brother makes some little contribution."

"Certainly, Brother," Ying Bojue said hastily. "A man who never says his own prayers cannot expect to get credit for the incense his wife burns. We must all do something to show that we are in earnest, but I'm afraid we're rather like the warts on a rat's tail, there is not much to be got out of us."

"Oh, you funny dog," Ximen said, laughing. "Nobody expects you to give very much."

"If the brotherhood is to be complete," Xie Xida said, "there should be ten of us. Brother Bu Zhidao is dead. Whom can we find to take his place?"

Ximen Qing thought for a while. Then he said: "My neighbour, Brother Hua, the nephew of Eunuch Hua, is the very man. He spends his money without stint, and goes regularly to the bawdy house. He lives next door, and we are very good friends. I will send a boy to invite him to join us."

Bojue clapped his hands. "Do you mean Hua Zixu, who keeps a girl called Wu Yin'er?"

"That is the man," Ximen Qing said.

"Ask him by all means," Bojue said. "If I can only make friends with him, it will mean another house of call for me."

"You silly rascal," Ximen said, laughing. "To hear you talk about eating, one would imagine you were always on the point of starvation."