

A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS

Volume III



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TSAO HSUEH-CHIN
and KAO HGO

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CHAPTER 81

Four Beauties Fish in the Pond to Try Their Luck Pao-yu's Father Orders Him Back to the Family School

After Ying-chun's departure, Lady Hsing behaved just as if nothing had happened. Lady Wang, however, who had brought Ying-chun up, was bitterly distressed. She was sighing to herself in her room when Pao-yu came in to pay his respects. Noticing the tear-stains on her cheeks he did not venture to take a seat, simply standing on one side till she urged him to mount the *kang* and sit beside her.

His mother saw from the dazed look on his face that he had something on his mind.

"What's worrying you now?" she asked.

"It's nothing really. But after hearing yesterday what poor Ying-chun has to put up with, I feel it's truly too much for her to bear! I didn't dare tell grandmother, but it kept me from sleeping all night. How can girls from a family like ours stand such cruel treatment? Ying-chun especially, who's always been too timid to answer anyone back. Yet now *she* of all people is up against such an inhuman monster, who has no idea how sensitive a girl is." As he spoke his eyes brimmed with tears.

"There's no help for it," Lady Wang answered. "As the saying goes, 'A married daughter — spilt water.' So what can I do about it?"

"Last night I had an idea. Suppose we talk grandmother into having Cousin Ying-chun fetched back? Then she can go on staying in Purple Caltrop Isle, eating and playing with us just like in the old days, instead of being bullied by that scoundrel Sun. When he sends to fetch her back we won't let her go,

not even if he sends a hundred times! We'll just tell him this is the old lady's decision. Don't you think that's a good plan?"

Both amused and exasperated, his mother exclaimed, "There you go again — talking nonsense! Sooner or later a girl has to leave home, and once she's married off what can her mother's family do for her? If she happens to get a good husband, fine; if not, there's no help for it — that's fate. Surely you know the saying, 'Marry a cock and follow the cock; marry a dog and follow the dog'? How can every girl be like your eldest sister, chosen as an Imperial Consort? Besides, Ying-chun's newly married; her husband's still young. People's temperaments differ, and just at the start she's bound to feel a bit awkward. A few years from now, when they know each other better and have a child or two, things should work out all right.

"Mind you don't breathe a word about this to the old lady. If I find you have, you'll catch it! Go and see to your own affairs now. Don't stay here talking nonsense."

Pao-yu sat there a little longer in subdued silence, then listlessly took his leave. Thoroughly depressed and not knowing how to work off his feelings, he went back to the Garden, straight to Bamboo Lodge. Once inside, he burst out crying.

Tai-yu, who had just finished dressing, was most alarmed to see the state he was in.

"What's happened?" she asked. "Who's been annoying you?"

Although she repeated her questions several times, Pao-yu just went on sobbing, his head bent over the table, unable to speak. She sat on a chair in bewilderment to watch him.

"Has someone else provoked you? Or have *I* offended you?" she asked presently.

"No, neither!" he blurted out with a sweep of one hand.

"Well, what's upset you then?"

"I can't help thinking that the sooner we all die the better! Life is really so meaningless."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, more puzzled than ever. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No, I haven't. If I tell you, it will upset you too. You saw

how wretched Ying-chun looked yesterday, and heard all that she said. Why must a girl get married when she grows up? That's what I'd like to know. Why put up with such bad treatment from her husband? I still remember what fun we had when we started our Begonia Club, making up poems and acting as host in turn. Now Cousin Pao-chai has gone home, even Hsiang-ling can't come here any more; and on top of that, Ying-chun has left us to get married. With these congenial spirits gone, what's to become of us? I wanted to ask grandmother to have Ying-chun fetched back, but mother won't hear of it. She called me silly, said I was talking nonsense, and I dared not argue with her. Such a short time, and just see how the Garden has changed! If this goes on a few years more, goodness knows what it will be like. The more I think about it, the sadder I feel."

Tai-yu, while he was speaking, had gradually lowered her head and withdrawn to the *kang*. Now, without saying a word, she heaved a sigh and lay down with her face to the wall.

Tzu-chuan, who had just brought in tea, was puzzled to find the two of them like this. And now Hsi-jen arrived.

"So here you are, Second Master," she said to Pao-yu. "The old lady's been asking for you, and I guessed you'd be here."

Tai-yu rose at this to offer Hsi-jen a seat. Pao-yu noticed that her eyes were red from weeping.

"Cousin, I was only talking nonsense just now. Don't let it upset you," he pleaded. "Take my advice and look after your health. Have a rest now. I'll be back when I've seen what the old lady wants me for."

After he had gone, Hsi-jen asked what had happened.

"He was upset on account of Cousin Ying-chun," Tai-yu answered. "I was rubbing my eyes because they itched — that's all."

Hsi-jen made no comment but hurried out after Pao-yu, then went on her own way while he proceeded to his grandmother's quarters. As she was already having her siesta, he returned to Happy Red Court.

That afternoon when Pao-yu got up from his nap, feeling

thoroughly bored he picked up a book at random. Hsi-jen seeing this went out to brew him some tea. The book he had happened to take was an anthology of ancient songs, and leafing through it he came upon Tsao Tsao's verse:

Facing the wine let us sing,
For life is short.

In dismay, he put it down and picked up a collection of Tsin Dynasty prose. After turning a few pages only, however, he closed the book abruptly and rested his chin on his hands, lost in thought. This was how Hsi-jen discovered him when she brought in the tea.

"Why have you stopped reading?" she asked.

Instead of answering, he merely took the bowl from her, putting it down again after one sip. Hsi-jen stood beside him watching in mystification till he suddenly stood up.

"'Transported beyond the earthly form' — fine!" he muttered.

Hsi-jen was amused but afraid to ask what he meant.

"If you don't enjoy reading these books, why not take a stroll in the Garden?" she suggested. "Don't make yourself unwell by moping."

Pao-yu agreed to this and walked out, still deep in thought. Soon he reached Sleeping Fragrance Pavilion, but found it looking desolate and deserted. Going on to Alpinia Court, he was even more dismayed to see its plants as luxuriant as before but the doors and windows closed. Turning past Scented Lotus Pavilion, he saw a few girls in the distance who were leaning over the railings at Smartweed Bank. On the ground beside them several young maids were squatting down as if to search for something. He tiptoed behind a rockery to hear what they were saying.

"Let's see whether it rises to the bait," said one girl — it sounded like Li Wen.

"Good, it's gone!" laughed Tan-chun. "I knew it wouldn't rise."

"That's right, cousin. Don't move, just wait, and it's bound to surface."

"Here it comes!"

The last two speakers were Li Chi and Hsing Hsiu-yen.

Pao-yu could not resist picking up a stone and tossing it into the pool. The splash it made startled the four girls.

"Who's this practical joker?" they cried. "Giving us such a fright!"

He bounded out laughingly then from behind the rockery.

"You're having such a good time — why didn't you let me know?"

"I knew it couldn't be anyone else," said Tan-chun. "Only Second Brother would play such a trick. All right, to make up for that you must catch us some fish. One was rising to the bait just now, but before we could hook it you frightened it away."

"You enjoy yourselves here, leaving me out," he chuckled.

"By rights I should penalize *you*!"

They all laughed at that.

"Let's all fish to try our luck," proposed Pao-yu. "Whoever catches a fish will have good luck this year. Whoever doesn't will have bad luck. Who'll start?"

Tan-chun urged Li Wen to take the lead, but she declined.

"In that case I'll start off," Tan-chun turned to Pao-yu. "If you drive away my fish again, Second Brother, I shan't let you off!"

"I was trying to scare you for fun just then. But you can go ahead now," he assured her.

Tan-chun cast the line and, in less time than it takes to say ten sentences, a minnow swallowed the bait and the float bobbed down. With a swing of the rod she landed the little fish alive and thrashing. Tai-shu grabbed for it on the ground, then with both hands dropped it into a small porcelain jar filled with clear water.

Tan-chun passed the rod to Li Wen, who cast in turn. When the line twitched she raised the rod, but there was nothing on the hook. She cast again, but when presently the line tautened again and she pulled it in she once more drew a blank. She examined the hook then, and found it was bent inwards.

"No wonder I caught nothing," she said with a smile, then told Su-yun to adjust the hook and bait it with another worm on which a reed had been fixed. Not long after she cast, the reed submerged, and she hastily landed a tiny carp two inches long.

"Now it's your turn, Cousin Pao-yu," she said with a smile.

"Let the other two girls try first," he urged.

Hsiu-yen said nothing, but Li Chi demurred, "No, Cousin Pao, you try first."

"Stop deferring to each other!" cried Tan-chun, who had just seen a bubble on the water. "Look, the fish have all gone over to your side. Go on!"

Li Chi took the rod then and very soon made a catch. When Hsiu-yen had followed suit and returned the rod to Tan-chun, she handed it to Pao-yu.

"I'm going to fish like Chiang Tai Kung,"¹ he announced as he walked down the stone steps and sat down by the pool. But his reflection frightened the fish away. Though he waited there a long time holding the rod, the line still did not move. And when bubbles rose from one side of the pool, he swung his rod there so fast that the fish made off quickly.

"I'm impatient but they're slow coaches! What shall I do? Good fish, come quick to my rescue!" he exclaimed so frantically that the four girls laughed.

While Pao-yu was still talking, the line twitched. In delight, he yanked so hard that the rod knocked against a rock and broke into two. The line snapped as well, so that the hook was lost. A roar of laughter went up.

"I've never seen anyone so clumsy!" teased Tan-chun.

Just then Sheh-yueh hurried towards them, in a great fluster.

"The old lady's woken, Master Pao," she cried. "She wants you to go there at once."

This startled all five of them.

¹ Chiang Shang of the eleventh century B.C. was said to fish by the Weishui River (present-day Shensi) holding a line, with no hook or bait, three feet above the water, and saying at the same time: "Whoever is ordained, come and take the bait."

"What does she want him for?" Tan-chun inquired.

"I don't know," the maid answered. "I heard say some scandal's come to light and she wants to ask Pao-yu about it. She's going to question Madam Lien as well."

Pao-yu was petrified.

"Which maid is going to catch it this time?" he wondered.

"We've no idea what it's all about," said Tan-chun. "You'd better go immediately, Second Brother. If there's any news, send Shih-yueh to let us know."

Then the four girls went off.

When Pao-yu entered the Lady Dowager's room, he was relieved to find her playing cards there with his mother as if nothing were amiss.

At sight of him she said, "The year before last when you fell ill you were cured by a crazy monk and a lame Taoist. When you had that fit, how did you feel?"

Pao-yu cast his mind back.

"I remember standing up feeling quite all right before the fit came on. Then it seemed as if someone had clubbed my head from behind, and it hurt so badly that everything went black. Still, I saw green-faced, long-fanged devils all over the place, who were swinging swords and clubs. When I lay down on the *kang*, my head felt as if clamped in a vice. I passed out from the pain. When I came round, I remember seeing a shaft of golden light in the hall which shone on to my bed. All the devils ran away from it and vanished. My head stopped aching too and my mind cleared."

"That sounds like it," observed the old lady to Lady Wang.

At this point Hsi-feng came in and paid her respects to both her seniors in turn.

"What did you want to know, Old Ancestress?" she asked.

"Do you still remember what it was like when you were seized by that fit of madness that year?"

"I can't remember too clearly," was Hsi-feng's answer. "But I felt I couldn't control myself, as if someone was pushing and tugging me to kill people. I tried to seize every weapon I

could lay hands on and kill everyone I saw. Even when I was exhausted, I couldn't stop."

"And when you got better?" prompted the old lady.

"I thought I heard a voice in the air — just what it said I can't remember."

"Judging by this, it was her all right," said the Lady Dowager. "The way they felt during their fits coincides with what we've just heard. How could that old witch be so vicious! And to think that we chose her to be Pao-yu's godmother! It was that monk and priest — Buddha be praised! — who saved his life, yet we never thanked them for it."

"Why are you interested in our illnesses, madam?" Hsi-feng wanted to know.

"Ask your aunt. I'm too tired to tell you."

Then Lady Wang explained, "Just now the master was here. He told us that Pao-yu's godmother was actually a witch who practised black magic. Now that her secret's out, she's been arrested by the police and taken to prison to be put to death.

"A few days ago some fellow — Pan San-pao I think his name was — brought evidence against her. He sold a house to the pawnshop across the street for several times what it was worth, but still wanted more. The pawnbroker naturally refused this demand. Then Pan bribed that old witch, as she was for ever calling in at the pawnshop and knew everybody there, to cast a spell so that all their women fell ill and their homes were topsy-turvy. Thereupon she went there claiming that she could cure them, and burnt paper offerings which proved efficacious. She got several dozen taels from them as well.

"But all-seeing Buddha meted out retribution. She left in such a hurry that day that she let fall a silk bundle, which the shop assistants picked up. On opening it, they found inside a whole lot of paper figures as well as four pills with a pungent smell. They were wondering what these could be when the old witch went back for them, and they caught and searched her. They found on her a box with two carved ivory naked devils inside, one male and one female, besides seven red

embroidery needles. At once she was haled to the police court, where she disclosed many secret affairs of ladies in big official families. This being reported to the garrison, a search was made of her house and a whole lot of clay devils were brought to light together with some boxes of knockout scent. In addition, in an unoccupied room behind her *kang* hung a seven-star lamp, and under it were straw effigies — some with iron bands round their heads, some with nails stuck in their chests, some fastened with locks. In the cupboard was a great stack of paper figures. And below were account books listing the families which had employed her and the amounts of silver due to her. She had also collected a good deal of money as donations for oil and incense."

"Yes, she must have been our jinx!" Hsi-feng exclaimed. "After we got well, I remember, that old witch called several times to ask Concubine Chao for money. When she saw me, she changed colour and her eyes blazed. I couldn't guess the reason at the time. Now it's clear what they were up to! In my case, of course, running the household I'm bound to get myself hated by certain people, and it's not to be wondered at if they try to kill me. But what reason has anyone to hate Pao-yu? How could they be so vicious?"

"I suppose it's because I prefer Pao-yu to Huan," said the old lady. "That sowed the seeds of hatred."

"The old creature's already been sentenced," observed Lady Wang, "so we can hardly bring her here as a witness. But without her evidence, how are we to get Concubine Chao to confess? And if such a scandal got out, our reputation would suffer. We'd better give her rope to hang herself — she's bound to give herself away one of these days."

"You're right," agreed the Lady Dowager. "A case of this kind can't be proved without a witness. But Lord Buddha is all-seeing! Haven't Hsi-feng and Pao-yu recovered? Never mind, Hsi-feng, let's forget about the past. You and your aunt must have dinner here before you go." She told Yuan-yang and Hu-po to serve the meal.