

CHINESE CLASSICS

THE DREAM OF RED CHAMBER

Cao Xueqin © Retold by Wang Guozhen



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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CHAPTER 1

Jia Yucun finds that poverty is not
incompatible with romance

This is the first chapter. Subsequent to the visions of a dream which he had, on some previous occasion, experienced, the writer personally relates that he deliberately concealed the true circumstances, and borrowed attributes of perception and spirituality to relate this story of the *Record of the Stone*.

Do you know, Worthy Readers, where this book comes from? The answer may sound fantastic, yet carefully considered it is of great interest. Let me explain, so that there will be no doubt left in your minds.

Long ago, when the goddess Nu-wa was repairing the sky, she melted down a great quantity of rock and, on the Incredible Craggs of the Great Fable Mountains, molded the amalgam into thirty-six thousand, five hundred and one large building blocks. She used thirty-six thousand five hundred of these blocks in the course of her building operations, leaving just a single odd block unused, which lay, all on its own, at the foot of Greensickness Peak in the aforementioned mountains. Now this block of stone, having undergone melting and molding at the hands of a goddess, possessed magical powers. Observing that all the other blocks had been used for celestial repair work and that it was the only one to have been rejected as unworthy for the task, it became filled with shame and resentment and passed its days in sorrow and lamentation.

One day, in the midst of its misery, it saw a monk and a Taoist approaching from a great distance. When they arrived at the foot of Greensickness Peak, they sat down on the ground and began to talk. The monk, catching sight of the lustrous, translucence of the rejected building block, slipped the stone into his sleeve and set off again at great speed with the Taoist. But where they both went to I have no idea. Countless eons went by and a certain Taoist

called Vanitas in quest of the secret of immortality by chance was passing below that same Greensickness Peak in the Incredible Crag of the Great Fable Mountains when he caught sight of a large stone standing there, on which the characters of an ancient inscription were still clearly discernible.

Long, long ago the World was tilted downwards towards the southeast; and in that low-lying southeasterly part of the earth there was a city called Soochow; and in Soochow the district around the Chang-men Gate was reckoned to be one of the very wealthiest and most fashionable quarters in the world of men. There was an old temple in the district which, because of the way it was located inside a narrow cul-de-sac, was referred to locally as Bottle-gourd Temple. Next door to Bottle-gourd Temple lived a gentleman of means called Zhen Shi-yin. Once, Shi-yin was dozing. While in this drowsy state he found himself unconsciously drifting off to some place he could not identify, where he became aware of a monk and a Taoist walking along and talking. The monk said with a laugh, "By the Rock of Rebirth on the banks of the Magic River, there was a beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower, watered with sweet dew by the Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting in the Court of Sunset Glow, an honorary title given to the stone by the fairy, Disenchantment. Thanks to the vitalizing effect of the sweet dew, she was able to shed her vegetable shape and assume the form of a girl. She said the only way in which she could perhaps repay the stone would be with the tears shed during the whole of a mortal lifetime if he and she were ever to be reborn as humans in the world below." Shi-yin heard all this conversation quite clearly, and curiosity impelled him to go forward and greet the two reverend gentlemen. The monk took an object from his sleeve and handed it to Shi-yin. Shi-yin took it from him and saw that it was a piece of clear, beautiful jade.

Jia Yucun, a poor student was lodging at the Bottle-gourd Temple. He was flicking through some books of poetry in order to pass the time, when he heard a woman's cough outside the window. Immediately he jumped up and peered out to see who it was. The cough appeared to have come from a young maiden. She was an unusually good-looking girl with a rather refined face: not a great beauty, by any means, but undoubtedly there was something striking about her. Yucun gazed at her spellbound. The maiden hastened to remove herself from this male presence but could not stop herself from turning back for another peek at the young man. Yucun saw her turn back and, at once assumed that she had taken a fancy to him.

One day Yucun chanced to be staying in the Yangchow area when he heard that the Salt Commissioner for that year was a certain Lin Ru-hai. Lin Ru-hai was however, to his sorrow, a member of a family whose numbers were dwindling. His chief wife, who had been a Miss Jia, had given him a daughter called Daiyu. A year or more passed uneventfully and then, quite unexpectedly, Lin Ru-hai's wife took ill and died.

One day a desire to savor country sights and sounds led Yucun outside the city walls. Yucun thought that in order to get the full rural flavor on his outing he would treat himself to a few cups of wine in a little country inn. He had scarcely set foot inside the door of the village inn when one of the men drinking at another table stood up and advanced to meet him with a broad smile on his face. It was an antique dealer called Leng Zi-xing whom Yu-cun had got to know some years previously when he was staying in the capital. The two men then proceeded, between leisurely sips of wine, to catch up with what each had been doing in the years that had elapsed since their last meeting. "I can't think of anything particularly deserving of mention," said Zi-xing.

"Except, perhaps, for a very small but very unusual event that took place in your own clan there." Yucun asked him what family he could be referring to. "The Jias of the Rongguo Mansion." Zixing said. "Nowadays the houses of both the Rong and Ning are in a greatly reduced state. Both masters and servants lead lives of luxury and magnificence. And they still have plenty of plans and projects under way. There's something much more seriously wrong with them than that. They are unable to produce healthy sons. The males in the family get more and more degenerate from one generation to the next."

"The Duke of Ningguo and the Duke of Rongguo were two brothers by the same mother. When the old Duke of Rongguo died, his eldest son, Jia Dai-shan, inherited his father's positions and salaries. He married a girl from a very old Nanking family, the daughter of Marquis Shi, who bore him two sons, Jia She and Jia Zheng. Dai-shan has been dead for many a year, but the old lady was still alive. The elder son, Jia She, inherited. The second son, Jia

Zheng, rose to the post of Under Secretary. Sir Zheng's lady was formerly a Miss Wang. Her first child was a boy. The second child she bore him was a little girl. Then after an interval of twelve years or more she suddenly had another son. He was a remarkable child not just for that reason though, because he was born with a piece of beautiful,



clear, colored jade in his mouth. The jade had a lot of writing on it. Sir Jia Zheng's eldest girl, Yuanchun, was a girl of exceptional virtue and cleverness and so was chosen to be a Lady Secretary in the Imperial Palace. The next in age after her and the eldest of the three still at home was called Yingchun. After her came another daughter of Sir Zheng's, called Tan-chun. The youngest, Xi-chun, was sister to Mr. Jia Zhen of the Ningguo Mansion."

"Sir She has a son too, called Jia Lian. He married his own kin, the niece of his Uncle Zheng's wife, Lady Wang, called Wang Xifeng. Having bought the rank of a Sub-prefect, he stays at home with his Uncle Zheng and helps him manage the family's affairs. However, ever since he married this young lady I mentioned, every-one high and low has done nothing but praise her. She is not only a very handsome young woman; she is also very eloquent and highly intelligent—she is more than a match for most men, I can tell you."

