

A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS

Volume II



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TSAO HSUEH-CHIN
and KAO NGO



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS PEKING

红楼梦

(二)

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楊宪益 戴乃迭译
戴敦邦插图

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外文出版社出版(北京)
1978年(28开)第一版
编号: (英)10050-863
00580(布精)
00540(纸精)
10-E-1424 B

A DREAM OF
RED MANSIONS

First Edition 1978

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Printed in the People's Republic of China

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CHAPTER 41

Pao-yu Sips Tea in Green Lattice Nunnery Granny Liu Succumbs to Wine in Happy Red Court

Granny Liu's gestures and response, "A huge pumpkin forms when the flowers fall," caused a fresh gale of mirth. After tossing off the cup of wine, in the hope of raising another laugh she observed:

"To tell the truth, I'm clumsy. And now that I'm tipsy, unless I'm very careful, I may smash this porcelain cup. If you'd given me a wooden one it wouldn't matter even if I dropped it."

Once more everybody laughed.

"If you really prefer wooden cups I'll fetch some," offered Hsi-feng. "But first I must warn you that the wooden cups aren't like porcelain ones; they come in a set, and you must drink from every cup in the set."

The old woman thought: I was only trying to raise a laugh, but it seems they really do have them. When I've dined with the village gentry I've seen plenty of gold and silver cups, never any made of wood. I know! These must be wooden bowls that the children use. She just wants to fool me into drinking more. Never mind, this wine's no stronger than mead anyway, so I needn't be afraid of drinking a bit extra.

So she said, "Fetch them, and we'll see."

Hsi-feng told Feng-erh: "Bring that set of ten cups carved out of bamboo root on the bookshelf in the inner room."

The maid assented, but as she was about to go on this errand Yuan-yang put in with a smile:

"I know that set, it's too small. Besides, you just said wood and it won't look right if now you produce bamboo. Better

fetch from our place that large set of ten cups made out of boxwood roots. Let her drink from those."

Hsi-feng thought this a better idea, so Yuan-yang sent someone to fetch them. These cups when brought filled Granny Liu with amazement and admiration. Amazement because all ten fitted into each other, the largest being the size of a small basin and even the smallest as big as the cup in her hand. Admiration at the fine landscapes, trees and figures carved on them, as well as the seals and inscriptions.

"Just give me that small one," she said hastily. "I can't use so many."

"No, you can't just have one," chuckled Hsi-feng. "None of our family has ever ventured to use this set, not having a big enough capacity for it. As you asked for it, granny, and we went to all the trouble of fetching it, you must drink from each cup in turn."

"I daren't!" exclaimed Granny Liu in consternation. "Dear madam, do let me off."

The Lady Dowager, Aunt Hsueh and Lady Wang, knowing that she was too old to stand this, made haste to intervene.

"She mustn't drink too much," they said. "It'll do if she just empties the biggest cup."

"Amida Buddha!" cried the old woman. "Let me use the small one, and put that big one aside. I'll take it home to drink up little by little."

All Yuan-yang could do was to have one large cup filled, and Granny Liu raised this in both hands to her lips.

"Go easy," warned both the Lady Dowager and Aunt Hsueh. "Mind you don't choke."

Aunt Hsueh urged Hsi-feng to give her some food with the wine.

"What would you like, granny?" Hsi-feng asked. "Just name it and I'll feed you some."

"How can I tell what these dishes are?" said Granny Liu. "They all look good to me."

"Give her some fried egg-plant," proposed the Lady Dowager with a smile.

Hsi-feng did so, picking up the food with her chopsticks and putting it into Granny Liu's mouth.

"You must eat egg-plant every day," she remarked. "Taste this of ours and see how you like it."

"Don't try to fool me," cackled Granny Liu. "If egg-plant tasted like this, we'd stop growing other crops — just stick to egg-plant."

"It really is egg-plant," they assured her. "We're not fooling you."

"Really egg-plant, is it?" marvelled the old woman. "All this time I'd no idea. Give me some more, madam, to chew more carefully."

Hsi-feng accordingly fed her another mouthful.

After savouring it slowly Granny Liu said, "It does taste a little like egg-plant, but still it's quite different. Tell me how you prepared this, so that I can cook some for myself."

"It's quite simple," replied Hsi-feng, twinkling. "Pick some early egg-plant and peel it, keeping only the best part, which must be cut into small pieces and fried with chicken fat. Then get some chicken breast, fresh mushrooms, bamboo shoots, dried mushrooms, spiced dried beancurd and various kinds of preserved fruit. Dice these too and boil them with the egg-plant in chicken soup, then add sesame oil and pickles and store it in a tightly-sealed porcelain jar. That's all."

Granny Liu shook her head and stuck out her tongue in amazement.

"Gracious Buddha! No wonder it tastes so good, cooked with a dozen chickens."

While talking she had slowly finished the wine and now she started examining the cup.

"You haven't drunk enough yet," said Hsi-feng. "Have another cupful."

"Not on your life! It would kill me. It's just that I admire pretty things like this. What workmanship!"

"Now that you've finished drinking from it," put in Yuan-yang, "tell us what wood it's made of."

"I'm not surprised you don't know, miss." Granny Liu

smiled. "Living behind golden gates and embroidered screens, what should you know about wood? But we hobnob with wood all day long, sleep on wooden pillows, rest on wooden stools and even eat the bark of trees in time of a famine. Seeing it and hearing and talking about it all the time, I can naturally tell good wood from bad and true from false. Well now, let me see what this is." She was scrutinizing the cup carefully as she spoke. "Such a family as yours would certainly have nothing cheap, nor would you use any wood that's easily come by. Judging by the weight of this, it can't be fir, it must be pine wood."

The whole party had exploded in fits of mirth when a serving-woman came in to tell the old lady:

"The young actresses have all gone to Lotus Fragrance Anchorage and are waiting for Your Ladyship's instructions. Should they start their performance now or wait a while?"

"Yes, we'd forgotten them," chuckled the Lady Dowager. "Tell them to start."

Soon after the serving-woman left on this errand they heard the lilting strains of flutes and pipes. The breeze was light, the air clear, and this music coming through the trees and across the water refreshed and gladdened their hearts. Pao-yu could not resist filling his cup with wine, which he tossed straight off. He had just poured himself another cup when he saw his mother, who also wanted a drink, send for freshly-heated wine. He promptly took his cup over and held it to her lips. She took two sips.

When presently the heated wine arrived, Pao-yu returned to his place while Lady Wang rose from her seat, holding the wine-pot. At this all the rest, including Aunt Hsueh, stood up. At once the Lady Dowager told Li Wan and Hsi-feng to take the pot.

"Make your aunt sit down," she said. "Let's not be so formal."

Lady Wang relinquished the pot then to Hsi-feng and resumed her seat.

"How pleasant it is today," remarked the Lady Dowager

cheerfully. "Let's all have a couple of drinks." Having urged Aunt Hsueh to drink she said to Hsiang-yun and Pao-chai, "You two must drink a cup too. And even though your cousin Tai-yu can't take much, we won't let her off either."

With that she drained her own cup so that Hsiang-yun, Pao-chai and Tai-yu had to follow suit.

Now the music, on top of the wine, set Granny Liu waving her arms and beating time with her feet for sheer delight. Pao-yu slipped across to whisper in Tai-yu's ear:

"Look at Granny Liu!"

"When the sage king of old played music, all the hundred beasts started dancing," quipped Tai-yu. "Today we've just this one cow."

The others tittered.

Presently the music stopped and Aunt Hsueh rising from her seat suggested, "We've all had enough to drink, haven't we? Let's go for a stroll before sitting down again."

As this suited the Lady Dowager, they all got up and she led the way outside. In the hope of some fresh diversion, she took Granny Liu to a grove at the foot of a hill and led her to and fro, telling her the names of the different trees, flowers and rocks.

After digesting all this information the old woman remarked, "Fancy, in town it's not only the people who have class, the birds are high-class too. Why, when they come to this place of yours, they grow so clever they can even talk."

Baffled by this the others asked, "What birds have grown so clever they can talk?"

"I know that green bird with the red beak on the golden perch in the corridor," she said. "He's a parrot. But how come that black crow in the cage has grown a phoenix-like crest and learned to talk too?"

This provoked a fresh burst of laughter.

Soon some maids came to ask if they would take some refreshments.

"After all that wine, we're not hungry," replied the Lady

Dowager. "Still, bring the things here and those who want to can help themselves."

The maids fetched two teapots and also two small hampers. These when opened were seen to contain two different confections each. In one were cakes made of ground lotus-root flavoured with fragrant osmanthus, and pine-kernel and goose-fat rolls. In the other were tiny fried dumplings no more than one inch long.

"What's the stuffing in these?" asked the Lady Dowager.

Some servants told her, "Crab-meat."

The old lady frowned. "Who wants anything so greasy?"

The other confection, small coloured pastries fried with cream, did not appeal to her either. Aunt Hsueh took a roll when she was pressed, but after one bite she handed it to a maid.

Granny Liu was struck by the daintiness and variety of the small pastries. Selecting one shaped like a peony she said:

"The cleverest girls in our village couldn't make scissor-cuts as good as this. I'm longing to try one, but it seems a shame to eat them. It would be nice to take some back as patterns for the folk at home."

Everyone laughed.

"When you go," promised the Lady Dowager, "I'll give you a jarful to take back with you. First try some while they're hot."

The others simply picked out one or two titbits which took their fancy, but Granny Liu had never tasted anything of the sort before. It hardly seemed possible that these small dainty objects could be very filling, and so she and Pan-erh sampled some of each until presently half were gone. Hsi-feng had the remainder put on two plates and sent in a hamper to the actresses.

Now Ta-chieh's nurse brought her along and they played with her for a while. The child was amusing herself with a pomelo when she noticed Pan-erh's Buddha's-hand and wanted it. Although the maids promised to fetch her one too, she was unwilling to wait and burst into tears. At once they gave the pomelo to Pan-erh and induced him to part with his Buddha's-

hand. He had played with it long enough by then and now had both hands full with the cakes he was eating; besides, this fragrant round pomelo seemed more amusing; so, kicking it about like a ball, he cheerfully relinquished the Buddha's-hand.

As soon as they had finished this collation the Lady Dowager took Granny Liu to Green Lattice Nunnery. Miao-yu promptly ushered them into the courtyard, luxuriant with trees and flowers.

"It's those who live the ascetic life, after all, who have time to improve their grounds," observed the Lady Dowager. "These look better-kept than other places."

As she spoke, they were walking towards the hall for meditation on the east side, and Miao-yu invited them to go in.

"We've just been having wine and meat," said the old lady. "As you've an image of Buddha inside, it would be sacrilege. We'll just sit in the outside room for a while and have a cup of your good tea."

Miao-yu at once went to make tea.

Pao-yu watched the proceedings carefully. He saw Miao-yu bring out in her own hands a carved lacquer tea-tray in the shape of crab-apple blossom, inlaid with a golden design of the "cloud dragon offering longevity." On this was a covered gilded polychrome bowl made in the Cheng Hua period,¹ which she offered to the Lady Dowager.

"I don't drink Liuan tea," said the old lady.

"I know," replied Miao-yu smiling. "This is Patriarch's Eyebrows."

"What water have you used?"

"Rain-water saved from last year."

The Lady Dowager drank half the bowl and passed the rest with a twinkle to Granny Liu, urging her to taste the tea. The old woman drank it straight off.

"Quite good, but a bit on the weak side," was her verdict, which made everyone laugh. "It should have been left to draw a little longer."

¹ 1465-1487.

All the others had melon-green covered bowls with golden designs of new Imperial kiln porcelain.

Having served tea, Miao-yu plucked at the lapels of Pao-chai's and Tai-yu's clothes and they went out with her, followed surreptitiously by Pao-yu. She invited the two girls into a side room, where Pao-chai sat on a couch and Tai-yu on Miao-yu's hassock, while the nun herself fanned the stove and when the water boiled brewed some fresh tea. Pao-yu slipped in then and accused them teasingly:

"So you're having a treat here in secret!"

The three girls laughed.

"What are *you* doing here? There's nothing here for you."

Miao-yu was just looking for cups when an old nun came in bringing the used bowls.

"Don't put away that Cheng Hua bowl," cried Miao-yu hastily. "Leave it outside."

Pao-yu knew that because Granny Liu had used it, she thought it too dirty to keep. Then he saw Miao-yu produce two cups, one with a handle and the name in uncial characters: Calabash Cup. In smaller characters it bore the inscriptions "Treasured by Wang Kai of the Tsin Dynasty" and "In the fourth month of the fifth year of the Yuan Feng period¹ of the Sung Dynasty, Su Shih of Meishan saw this cup in the Imperial Secretariat." Miao-yu filled this cup and handed it to Pao-chai. The other, shaped like a small alms-bowl, bore the name in the curly seal script: "Rhinoceros Cup." Having filled this for Tai-yu, she offered Pao-yu the green jade beaker that she normally drank from herself.

"I thought that according to Buddhist law all men should be treated alike," said Pao-yu with a grin. "Why give me this vulgar object when they get such priceless antiques?"

"Vulgar object!" retorted Miao-yu. "I doubt if your family could produce anything half as good, and that's not boasting either."

"As people say, 'Other countries, other ways.' Here with a

¹ 1082.