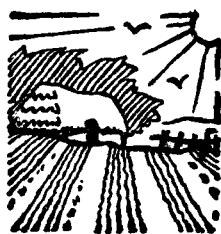


PAVILION OF WOMEN

by Pearl S. Buck



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I

IT WAS her fortieth birthday. Madame Wu sat before the tilted mirror of her toilet case and looked at her own calm face. In her mind she was comparing it with the face she had seen in this same mirror when she was sixteen. On that day she had risen from her marriage bed early, for she had always been an early riser, and putting on her new chamber robe she had come into this same room and had taken her place before the toilet table. She had sat in her quiet fashion, easily motionless, and had gazed at her young face.

"Can it be that I look the same today as yesterday?" she had asked herself on that first morning after her marriage.

She had examined her face minutely, broad low forehead, yesterday stripped of its girlhood fringe, long eyes, delicate nose, the oval of cheeks and chin and the small red mouth, that morning very red. Then Ying, her new maid, had hurried in.

"Oh, Miss— Oh, Madame," she had faltered. "I thought today you would not be so early!" Ying's cheeks had been bright with blushes.

Madame's own cheeks were as pearly pale as usual, above the red mouth. "I like to get up early," she had replied in her usual gentle voice, the voice which in the night the young man whom she had never seen before had told her was like the voice of a singing bird.

At this moment, twenty-four years later, as though she knew what her mistress was remembering, Ying spoke from behind the heavy redwood chair. Her hands were busy with the coils of Madame Wu's shining, straight black hair, but she had now made these coils for so many years that she could lift her eyes from the task and look at the beautiful face in the mirror.

"Lady, you have changed not at all in these twenty-four years," Ying said.

"Are you thinking of that morning, too?" Madame Wu replied. She met Ying's eyes in the mirror with affection. Ying had grown

stout in twenty years of being married to the head cook, but Madame Wu was as slender as ever.

Ying laughed loudly. "I was more shy than you that morning, Lady," she said. "*Ai ya*, how shy I was then—with how little cause, eh, Lady? It's only natural, what goes on between men and women, but then it seemed some sort of magic!"

Madame Wu smiled without reply. She allowed Ying complete freedom in all she said, but when she did not wish to carry on the conversation she made her smile fleeting and kept silence after it. Ying fell silent, too. She pretended dissatisfaction with a coil of the smooth black hair under her fingers, and pursing her lips, she let one strand down and put it up again. When it was finished she put two jade pins into the coil, one on either side, and wetting her hands with an oiled perfume, she smoothed Madame Wu's already sleek head.

"My jade earrings," Madame Wu said in her clear pretty voice. It was a voice so feminine that it concealed everything.

"I knew you would want to wear them today!" Ying exclaimed. "I have them ready."

She opened a small box covered with flowered silk and took out the earrings and fastened them carefully through Madame Wu's little ears. Twenty-four years ago young Mr. Wu had come into this room at the exact moment when she had dressed her mistress freshly in a soft wide-sleeved red satin coat over a pleated black satin skirt whose panels were embroidered, front and back, with birds and flowers. In his hand Mr. Wu had held this box. His handsome eyes were full of sleepy content. He had handed the box to Ying, being too well-mannered to speak to his bride before a servant. "Put these in your mistress's ears," he had said.

Ying had cried out over the flawless clarity of the jade and had held them before the bride's eyes. Those eyes had lifted to her husband for one moment before she dropped the lids with graceful shyness. "Thank you," she had murmured.

He had nodded, and then while the maid fastened them into her ears he had stood watching. Madame Wu had seen his face in this very mirror, the handsome full face of a willful and proud young man.

"*Ai*," he had said, in a sigh of pleasure. Their eyes met in the mirror and each took measure of the other's beauty. "Go and fetch me hot tea," he had said abruptly to Ying, and at the sound of his voice the maid had been startled and scuttled away.

They were alone again, as they had been in the night. He had leaned over her and put his hands on her shoulders. He stared into her face in the mirror.

"If you had been ugly," he said, "I would have killed you last night on the pillow. I hate ugly women."

She had smiled at this, without moving under his hands. "But why have killed me?" she had asked in her pretty voice. "To have sent me home would have been enough."

She had been deeply excited that morning. Would he be intelligent as well as handsome, this husband of hers? That would be perhaps too much to ask. But if he were?

At this moment twenty-four years later, Ying now said, "Jade is as beautiful as ever against your skin. What other woman of forty can say this? It is no wonder that the master has never wanted another wife."

"Do not speak quite so loudly," Madame Wu said. "He is still asleep."

"He should wake early on your fortieth birthday, Madame," Ying replied. She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. After all these years she felt she knew Mr. Wu, and of one thing she was certain: in spite of his fondness, he still did not appreciate enough his beautiful wife whom the whole house loved. Yes, of the sixty-odd souls under this roof, who did not love Madame Wu, from Old Lady down to the smallest grandchild and lowliest servant? If in the servants' quarters a new maid dared to grumble because the mistress saw the dust swept behind a door, Ying jerked her ears.

"This is the house of the Wu family," she said in her loud voice. "This is not a common house like Wang or Hua."

The head cook always grinned at this. All his life as a husband he had known that against the mistress, he was nothing in Ying's eyes. But indeed in this house even the two sons' wives had no evil to speak. Those narrow hands which Madame Wu held so often lightly clasped on her lap, were firm and kind while they ruled.

"I will have my breakfast," Madame Wu now said to Ying. "After I have eaten I will speak with my eldest son. You will dress me for the feast at noon. But keep watch over your master, and when he wakes let me know."

"That I will do, of course, Lady," Ying replied. She stooped to pick up a comb she had let fall. It was made of the fragrant sandalwood which was the scent Madame Wu used for her hair. Ying

plucked a few long hairs from the comb and curled them carefully around her finger and put them in a small blue porcelain jar. She was saving these hairs against the day of her mistress's great old age, when it was possible she might need to thicken even her coil with a switch.

Madame Wu rose from the chair. She was ready for this day. A woman's fortieth birthday in a rich and old-fashioned family was a day of dignity. She remembered very well when her husband's mother had passed such a day, twenty-two years ago. On that day Old Lady had formally given over to her son's wife the management of the big house with its many members. For twenty-two years Madame Wu had held this management in her own hands, skillfully maintaining its outward habits so that Old Lady did not notice changes, and at the same time making many changes. Thus before Madame Wu had decided to do away with the overgrown peony bushes in the eastern garden, just outside these rooms, she had allowed the peonies to die one winter. When their strong red shoots did not push up as usual in the spring she called Old Lady's attention to this and helped her to decide that the peonies must have exhausted the soil and air in this garden, and therefore something else had better be planted here for a generation or two.

"Narcissus?" Madame Wu, then eighteen, had suggested gently. "Orchids? Flowering shrubs? I am only anxious to please you, Mother." But she had put orchids in the middle of the sentence. They were her preference. By putting them in the middle, Old Lady would think she did not care for them.

"Orchids," Old Lady said. She was fond of her daughter-in-law, but she liked to show her own authority.

"Orchids," Madame Wu had agreed. Within five years she had the finest orchid garden in the city. She spent a great deal of time in it. Now, in the early part of the sixth month of the year, the delicate silver-gray blossoms of the first orchids were beginning to bloom. By the eighth month the dark purple ones would be at their height, and by the ninth month the yellow ones.

She went from her own sitting room into this garden and plucked two of the scentless gray flowers and took them back with her into the room, where her breakfast was waiting. It was a slight meal, for she had never been able to eat much in the morning. Tea, rice congee in a small closed bucket of polished wood bound in silver, and two or three little dishes of dried salt meats stood on the square table in

the middle of the room. She sat down and lifted her ivory chopsticks that at the upper end were held together by a thin silver chain.

A maidservant came in smiling. She carried in both hands a plate of long-life steamed rolls of bread, very hot. They were made in the shape of peaches, the symbol of immortality, and each one was sprayed with red dye.

"Long life, long life, Mistress!" the maidservant called in a coarse, hearty voice. "Mistress does not like sweet in the morning, I know, but we who are servants must bring these for good luck. The cook made them himself."

"Thank you," Madame Wu said mildly, "thank you all."

Out of courtesy she took one of the steaming rolls and broke it open. A dark sweet filling was inside, made of crushed beans and red sugar. "It is delicious," she said, and began to eat.

The woman was encouraged and leaned forward. "I ought not to tell you," she said in a loud whisper, "but I do it because I think of the good of the house. That old head cook, he is charging our Mistress three times the price in the fuel grass. Yesterday at the market I heard the price—it is high now, true, because the new grass is not in yet—but eighty cash a catty will buy as good as can be found. Yet he charges two hundred cash! He thinks he can do anything because Ying is your maid."

Madame Wu's clear black eyes took on a look of distance. "When he brings in the accounts, I will remember," she said. Her voice was cool. The woman remained an instant, then went away.

Madame Wu put down the roll at once and with her chopsticks picked up a bit of salt fish. She resumed her thoughts. She had no intention on this day of resigning her position to Meng, the wife of her eldest son. In the first place, she had four sons, two of whom already had wives. Old Lady had had only the one, and so there had been no question of jealousy between young wives. Her eldest son's wife, moreover, was very young. Liangmo had been married according to old-fashioned ways. She had chosen his wife for him, and this wife had been the daughter of her oldest friend, Madame Kang. It had not been her intention to marry Liangmo so quickly, since he had been only nineteen; but her second son, Tsemo, who had gone to a school in Shanghai, had loved a girl two years older than himself, and had insisted upon marriage at eighteen. This meant that Rulan was older than her sister-in-law, who was nevertheless her superior in the house. Out of this embarrassment, for which Madame Wu

blamed herself in not having kept better watch over Tsemo, her only refuge now was to keep her own place for another few years, during which time anything might happen.

She would therefore announce no changes in the house today. She would accept their gifts and the great feast which was planned. She would be kind to the grandchildren, whom she warmly loved, and in all that was done she would defer to Old Lady, who was getting out of bed at noon especially to be at the feast.

For Madame Wu herself this was a day to which she had long looked forward with a strange mingling of relief and quiet sadness. The first part of her life was over and the second part about to begin. She did not fear age, for age had its honors for her. She would with each year gain in dignity and in the respect of her family and her friends. Nor was she afraid of losing her beauty, for she had allowed it to change with the years so subtly that it was still more apparent than her years. She no longer wore the flowering colors of her youth, but the delicacy of her face and skin were as clear now as ever against the soft silver blues and gray greens of her costumes. The whole effect of age upon her was one of refining and exalting rather than loss. Because she knew herself still beautiful, she was ready to do today what she had planned to do. A woman who had lost her looks might have hesitated through feelings of defeat or even jealousy. But she had no need to be jealous and what she was about to do was of her own clear, calm will.

She finished her breakfast. Everyone else in the family was still sleeping except the grandchildren, whom the amahs would be amusing in some corner of the vast compound until the parents awoke. But the children were never brought to her except when she called them. She was a little surprised, therefore, when in a few moments she perceived something like a commotion in the court just beyond her own. Then she heard a voice.

"It is not every day that my best friend is forty years old! Does it matter if I am too early?"

She recognized at once the voice of Madame Kang, the mother of Meng, her elder daughter-in-law, and she made haste to the door of the court.

"Come, please," she exclaimed, and held out both her hands, in one of them the two silver-gray orchids which she had taken again from the table.

Madame Kang lumbered across the court toward her friend. She had grown fat in the same years during which Madame Wu had remained exquisite, but she was too generous not to love her friend in spite of this.

"Ailien," she exclaimed, "am I the first to wish you long life and immortality?"

"The first," Madame Wu said, smiling. Servants, of course, did not count.

"Then I am not too early," Madame Kang said and looked reproachfully at Ying, who had tried to delay her. It was a rule in the house that no one should disturb Madame Wu while she took her breakfast because at a disturbance she would eat no more. Ying was not abashed. No one was afraid of Madame Kang, and Ying would have defied even the magistrate to gain an hour of peace for her mistress in the morning.

"I had rather see you than anyone," Madame Wu said. She linked her slender fingers into her friend's plump ones and drew her into the orchid garden with her. Under a drooping willow tree two bamboo chairs stood, and toward these the ladies moved. A small oval pool lay at their feet. At its bottom a clump of water lilies was rooted. Two blue lilies floated on the surface. Madame Wu did not care for lotus. The flowers were too coarse and the scent was heavy. Very minute goldfish darted in and out among the blue lilies, and paused, their noses quivering at the surface. When they found no crumbs there, they snatched themselves away and sprang apart, their misty tails waving behind them in long white shadows.

"How is your eldest son's son?" Madame Wu asked her friend. In the years when Madame Wu had borne her four living sons, and three children, who had died, of whom only one was a girl, Madame Kang had borne eleven children, six of whom were girls. There was none of the peace in Madame Kang's house that was here in this court. Around her fat, good-natured person was a continuous uproar of children and bondmaids and servants. Nevertheless, in spite of everything, Madame Wu loved her friend. Their mothers had been friends, and when one went to visit the other, each had taken her small daughter along. While the mothers had gambled all day and late into the night, the two little girls had come to be as close as sisters.

"He is no better," Madame Kang said. Her round red face which had been beaming like a lit lantern was suddenly woeful. "I am con-

sidering whether I should take him to the foreign hospital. What do you think?"

"Is it a matter of life and death?" Madame Wu asked, considering the matter.

"It may be, within a few days," Madame Kang replied. "But they say that the foreign doctor does not know how to tell what a sickness is without cutting people open to see. And Little Happiness is so small—only five, you know, Sister. I think his life is still too tender for him to be cut open."

"At least wait until tomorrow," Madame Wu said. "Let us not spoil today." Then, fearing lest she were selfish, she added, "Meanwhile I will send Ying with a bowl of broth made after an old recipe of my great-grandmother for just such a cough as he has. I have used it often on my first and third sons and more than once on their father. You know he has been troubled with a cough for the last two winters."

"Ailien, you are always kind," Madame Kang said gratefully. It was early and the garden was cool but she took a small fan from her sleeve and began to use it, laughing while she did so. "I am hot as soon as the snow is gone," she said.

They sat for a moment in silence. Madame Kang looked at her friend lovingly and without jealousy. "Ailien, I did not know what to bring you for a birthday gift. So I brought you this—"

She reached into the loose bosom of her wide blue satin robe and brought out a little box. This she handed to her friend.

Madame Wu recognized the box as she took it. "Ah, Meichen, do you really want to give me your pearls?"

"Yes, I do." Across Madame Kang's plain good face a flicker passed as of pain.

"Why?" Madame Wu asked, perceiving it.

Madame Kang hesitated, but only for a moment. "The last time I wore them, my sons' father said they looked like dewdrops on a melon." Madame Kang smiled. Then tears came to her eyes. She paid no heed to them, and they rolled slowly down her cheeks and splashed on the thick satin over her bosom without penetrating it.

Madame Wu saw them without appearing to do so. She did not move in her chair. In her hands she held the box of pearls. She had often let Madame Kang talk of her difficulties with Mr. Kang. Neither of them had ever talked of Mr. Wu, beyond a word or two put in by Madame Kang.

"Ah, Ailien," she would say, "your sons' father is so little trouble to you. So far I have never heard of his even entering a house of flowers. But my man—well, he is good, too. Yes, only—"

At this point Madame Kang always paused and sighed.

"Meichen," Madame Wu had once said many years ago, "why not allow him to enjoy himself so long as he always comes home before morning?" She had never forgotten the look of shame that came into her friend's honest eyes. "I am jealous," Madame Kang had declared. "I am so jealous that my blood turns to fire."

Madame Wu, who had never known what jealousy was, became silent. This was something in her friend which she could not understand. She could understand it less when she remembered Mr. Kang, who was an ordinary wealthy merchant and not even handsome. He was shrewd but not intelligent. She could not imagine any pleasure in being married to him.

"I have been wanting for a long time to tell you something," she said now after a moment. "At first, when I began thinking about it I thought I would ask your advice. But—I have not. Now I think it is beyond advice. It has already become certainty."

Madame Kang sat waiting while she fanned herself. The slight breeze from the fan dried her tears. She wept and laughed easily out of the very excess of her goodness. In this friendship she knew humbly that she took the second place. It was not only that she was not beautiful, but in her own mind she did nothing so well as Madame Wu. Thus with all her efforts her house, though as large and as handsome as this one, was seldom clean and never ordered. In spite of her every endeavor, the servants took charge of it, and convenience rather than good manners had become the habit. When she came here she felt this, although living in her house she did not see it. But she often told herself that anyone who came into Madame Wu's presence grew better for it, and this was perhaps the chief reason why she continued to come ten times to this house to Madame Wu's one visit to her own house.

"Whatever you want to tell me," she now said.

Madame Wu lifted her eyes. They were long and large, and the black irises were very distinct against the white, and this gave them their look of ageless youth. She spoke with cool clarity. "Ailien, I have decided that today I shall ask my sons' father to take a concubine."

Madame Kang's round mouth dropped ajar. Her white small teeth,

which were her one beauty, showed between her full lips. "Has—he—has he, too—" she gasped.

"He has not," Madame Wu said. "No, it is nothing like that. Of course, I have never asked what he does at his men's feasts. That has nothing to do with me or our home. No, it is only for his own sake—and mine."

"But how—for you?" Madame Kang asked. She felt at this moment suddenly superior in her own relationship to Mr. Kang. Such a step would never have occurred to her, nor, she was sure, to him. A concubine always in the house, a member of the family, her children fighting with the other children, she contending with the first wife for the man—all this would be worse than flower houses.

"I wish for it," Madame Wu said. She was gazing now into the depths of the clear little pool. The orchids she had plucked an hour ago lay on her knee, still fresh. So quiet was she that in her presence flowers lived many hours without fading.

"But will he consent?" Madame Kang asked gravely. "He has always loved you."

"He will not consent at first," Madame Wu said tranquilly.

Now that she had received this news, Madame Kang was full of questions. They poured out of her, and the fan dropped from her hand. "But will you choose the girl—or he? And, Ailien, if she has children, can you bear it? Oh, me, is there not always trouble in a house where two women are under one man's roof?"

"I cannot complain of it if at my wish he takes her," Madame Wu said.

"Ailien, you would not compel him?" Madame Kang asked with pleading.

"I have never compelled him to do anything," Madame Wu replied.

Someone coughed, and both ladies looked up. Ying stood in the doorway. On her round cheerful face was a mischievous look which Madame Wu at once recognized.

"Do not tell me that on this day of all days Little Sister Hsia is here!" she exclaimed. Her lovely voice was tinged with rueful mirth.

"It is she," Ying said. She stopped to laugh and then covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, heaven, she will hear me," she whispered. "But Lady, I swear she does not understand a no. I told her you were having guests—"

"Not that it was my birthday!" Madame Wu exclaimed. "I do not want to have to invite her."

"I am not so stupid as that," Ying replied. "But I told her that Madame Kang was here."

"I am going," Madame Kang said with haste. "I have no time to listen to foreign gospel today. Indeed, Ailien, I came here when I should have been directing the affairs of the house, only to give you my gift."

But Madame Wu put out her slender hand. "Meichen, you may not go. You must sit here with me, and together we will be kind to her and listen to her. If she does not leave at the end of a half an hour, then you may rise and say farewell."

Madame Kang yielded, as she always did, being unable to refuse anything to one she loved. She sat down again in great good nature, and Ying went away and came back bringing with her a foreigner, a woman.

"Little Sister Hsia!" she announced.

"Oh, Madame Wu—oh, Madame Kang!" Little Sister Hsia cried. She was a tall, thin, pale woman, now nearly middle-aged, whose birthplace was England. The scanty hair on her head was the color of sand, and she had fish eyes. Her nose was thin and high, and her lips were blue. In her Western dress of striped gray cotton she looked older than she was, but even at her best she could never have been pretty. Long ago the two Chinese ladies had come to this conclusion. But they liked her for her goodness and pitied her for her lonely life in the city where there were so few of her kind. They did not, as some of their friends did, put her off with excuses when she came to see them. Indeed, in this both Madame Wu and Madame Kang were much too kind. But since Little Sister Hsia was a virgin, there could be no talk in her presence of concubines.

"Please sit down, Little Sister," Madame Wu said in her pretty voice. "Have you eaten your breakfast?"

Little Sister Hsia laughed. She had never, in spite of many years of living in the city, learned to be wholly at ease with the ladies. She laughed incessantly while she talked. "Oh . . . I get up to box farmers," she said. She studied Chinese faithfully every day, but since she had a dull ear she still spoke as a Westerner. Now she confused the sounds of two words. The two ladies looked at each other with a faint bewilderment, although they were accustomed to Little Sister's confusions.

"Box farmers?" Madame Kang repeated.

"Resemble farmers," Madame Wu murmured. "The two words are much alike, it is true."

"Oh, did I say that?" Little Sister cried, laughing. "Oh, please, I am too stupid!"

But Madame Wu saw the red rush up from her neck and spot her pale skin, and she understood the tumult in this uneasy foreign heart.

"Ying, bring some tea and some little cakes," she said. "Bring some of the long-life cakes," she added, and relented. "Why should I not tell my foreign friend that it is my birthday?"

"Oh, your birthday!" Little Sister Hsia cried. "Oh, I didn't know—"

"Why should you know?" Madame Wu asked. "I am forty years old today."

Little Sister Hsia gazed at her with eyes that were wistful. "Forty?" she repeated. She fluttered her hands and laughed her meaningless shy laughter. "Why," she stammered, "why, Madame Wu, you look twenty."

"How old are you, Little Sister?" Madame Kang asked politely.

Madame Wu looked at her with gentle reproach. "Meichen, I have never told you, but it is not polite, according to the Western custom, to ask a woman's age. My second son's wife, who has lived in Shanghai and knows foreigners, told me so."

"Not polite?" Madame Kang repeated. Her round black eyes looked blank. "Why not?"

"Oh, ha, ha!" Little Sister Hsia laughed. "It doesn't matter—I have been here so long, I am so used—"

Madame Kang looked at her with mild interest. "Then how old are you?" she asked again.

Little Sister Hsia was suddenly solemn. "Oh—thirtyish," she said in a low quick voice.

Madame Kang did not understand her. "Thirty-six," she repeated amiably.

"No, no, not thirty-six, not so much," Little Sister Hsia was laughing again, but there was protest in the laughter.

Madame Wu heard this protest. "Come," she said, "what does age matter? It is a good thing to live life year by year, enjoying each year." She understood, by her gift of divining others, that the matter of age touched this Western woman because she was still a virgin. An old virgin! She had once seen this before in her own mother's family. Her mother's mother's youngest sister had remained an old

virgin, because the man she had been about to marry had died. The family had admired her and at the same time had been irritated daily by an elderly unmarried woman withering under their roof. At last, for her own peace, she had become a nun. In a fashion this Western woman was also perhaps a nun.

In her great kindness Madame Wu now said, "I have guests coming in a short time, Little Sister, but before they come preach a little gospel to us." She knew that nothing pleased the foreign woman so much as to preach.

Little Sister Hsia looked at her with gratitude and reached her hand into a deep black bag she carried with her always. Out of this she brought a thick book with a worn leather cover and a black spectacle case. She took out the spectacles and put them on her high nose and opened the book.

"I was guided today, dear Madame Wu," she said in an earnest and touching voice, "to tell you the story of the man who built his house on sand."

Madame Kang rose. "Excuse me," she said in her loud somewhat flat voice. "I left my family affairs unsettled."

She bowed and walked out of the court with her heavy solid footsteps.

Madame Wu, who had risen, sat down again as soon as she was gone, and calling Ying to her side she gave direction that the broth she had promised was to be sent after Madame Kang for her grandson. Then she smiled faintly at Little Sister Hsia. "Tell me what your lord said to this man who built his house on sand," she said courteously.

"Dear Madame Wu, he is your Lord, too," Little Sister Hsia breathed. "You have only to accept Him."

Madame Wu smiled. "It is very kind of him, and you must tell him so," she said, still courteously. "Now proceed, my friend."

There was something so unapproachable in Madame Wu's dignity as she said this that Little Sister Hsia began to read nervously. Her broken accent made the story difficult to follow, but Madame Wu listened gravely, her eyes fixed on the darting goldfish. Twice Ying came to the door of the court and made signs over Little Sister's bent head, but Madame Wu shook her head slightly. As soon as Little Sister Hsia was finished, however, she rose. "Thank you, Little Sister," she said. "That was a pleasant story. Please come again when I have time."

But Little Sister Hsia, who had also been planning a prayer, rose unwillingly, fumbling with her bag and her spectacles and the heavy book.

"Shall we not have a little prayer?" Her mistaken accent really said "cake" instead of "prayer," and for a moment Madame Wu was confused. They had had cakes, had they not? Then she understood and in kindness did not smile.

"You pray for me at home, Little Sister," she said. "Just now I have other duties."

She began walking toward the door of the court as she spoke, and Ying suddenly appeared and took over Little Sister Hsia, and Madame Wu was alone again. She returned to the pool and stood looking down in it, her slender figure reflected in it quite clearly from head to foot. The orchids, she discovered, were still in her hand, and she lifted that hand and let the flowers fall into the water. A swarm of goldfish darted up and nibbled at the orchids and swerved away again.

"Nothing but flowers," she said, and laughed a little at them. They were always hungry! A house built on sand? But she could never be so foolish. This house in which she lived had already stood for hundreds of years. Twenty generations of the Wu family had lived and died here.

"Mother, I should have come before to wish you long life." She heard her eldest son's voice from the door. She turned.

"Come in, my son," she said.

"Long life, Mother!" Liangmo said with affection. He had bowed before his mother half playfully when he came in. The Wu family was not quite old-fashioned enough to keep the ancient custom of kneeling obeisance to elders on birthdays, but the bow was in memory of that old custom.

Madame Wu accepted his greeting with a graceful receiving bow. "Thank you, my son," she said. "Now sit down. I want to talk to you."

She sat down again in one of the bamboo chairs and motioned him to the other, and he sat down on the edge of it in deference to her.

"How well you look, son," she said, examining his handsome young face. He was, if possible, more handsome than his father had been at the same age, for she had given him something of her own delicacy, too.

He wore this morning a long robe of summer silk, the color of