

Li Yahsien, a Loyal Courtesan

Po Hsing-chien

776-827

Li Yahsien, the Lady of Chienkuo, was once a courtesan in Changan, but because her loyalty was unique and her conduct noteworthy, I have undertaken to write her story.

During the T'ien Pao period (742-55) there was a certain governor of Changchou whose native place was Jungyang but whose name I shall omit. He was a man of great prestige and wealth. He was about fifty years of age and had a son close on twenty, whom I shall call by the personal name Yuanho. The latter was talented and skilled in literary composition and stood out among his fellows, and was in consequence greatly esteemed by the people of the time. His father was very fond of him and held great hopes for his future. "This," he used to say, "is the thousand-li colt of our family." When Yuanho was about to set out for the examinations, his father provided him with fine clothes and a richly decorated carriage and gave him a generous sum of money for his expenses at the capital, saying, "Judging from your talents, you ought to succeed on the first attempt. However, I am giving you more than enough for two years so that you will be sure to fulfill your aspirations." Yuanho, on his part, was confident and deemed it as simple a matter to pass the examinations as to turn his palm.

He began his journey at Piling and reached Changan a little more than a month later, and there he took up quarters in Pucheng Street. One day, returning from the East Market, he entered the city by the east gate of the Pingkang quarter and was on his way to visit a friend in the southwestern part of the town when, as he passed through Mingko Lane, he saw a house of which the gate

was not particularly spacious but which was neat and attractive in itself and far removed from the street. One leaf of the door was open and at it stood a girl leaning on a young maid servant. She surpassed in beauty and charm anything the world has ever seen, and so impressed was Yuanho that he unconsciously reined in his horse and was for a long time unable to go on. He purposely dropped his whip on the ground and as he waited for his servant to pick it up he kept glancing at the girl. On her part, she returned his glances and seemed to be very well disposed toward him. However, he went on without daring to speak to her.

From that time on he acted like a man lost. Finally he confided the encounter to one of his friends who knew Changan well and asked him about her.

"The house you saw," his friend replied, "is occupied by a woman of ill-repute by the name of Li. The girl's name is Yahsien."

"Is the girl approachable?" Yuanho asked, and his friend answered, "The woman Li is quite well off, for she entertains only men of wealth and rank and is accustomed to receive large sums from them. She will hardly show any interest in you unless you are ready to spend millions of cash."

"My only worry is that she may not receive me," the young man said. "I care not if it does cost me a million."

The next day, dressed in his best clothes and accompanied by a large retinue of servants, he went to Li's house and knocked at the gate. Presently a maid servant came to open the door. "Whose house is this?" Yuanho asked. The maid did not answer but rushed inside shouting, "The young man who dropped his whip the other day is here!" Yahsien was delighted, for she said to the maid, "Make him wait a while. I shall come out after I have done my toilet and changed my clothes."

Yuanho congratulated himself on his good fortune as he followed the maid into the court. There he saw an old woman with gray hair and bent back, whom he took to be Yahsien's mother. He bowed low and spoke thus: "Is it true that you have a compound to spare? If so, I should like to rent it."

"I am afraid," she answered, "that it is entirely too dingy and

small to merit the honor of your presence, even if we dared to offer it to you as a gift, so how dare I say anything about rent?"¹ She then invited Yuanho into the guest hall, which was a very handsome one, and sat down with him saying, "I have a daughter who is still young and immature and but poorly trained in the arts of music and singing. However, she likes to meet visitors and I should like to present her."

Thereupon she called to her daughter to come out. The girl's eyes were bright and her wrist white; her carriage was graceful and bewitching. Yuanho jumped to his feet and was so dazzled by her beauty that he did not dare to raise his eyes to look at her. As he exchanged salutations with her and made remarks about the weather, he observed that everything about her was such as he had never seen before in his life.

They sat down again. Tea was served and wine poured. The vessels used were very elegant. He lingered till the sun was set and the sound of drums heralding the twilight watch² rose from all sides. When the old woman asked Yuanho where he lived, he answered untruthfully, "Several li outside the Yenping gate," in the hope that she would ask him to stay because of the distance. But the old woman said, "The drums have sounded. You had better go right away so that you will not violate the curfew." "I have been so engrossed in the pleasure of your company," the young man said, "that I did not realize that the eve of day is upon us. The journey is long and far away and I have no friends in the city. What shall I do?"

Here the girl said, "Since you have shown a readiness to live here in spite of its dinginess, what harm is there if you stay for the night?" Yuanho looked to the mother for encouragement and when she repeated her daughter's invitation, he summoned one of his servants and commanded him to bring in two rolls of fine silk. These he presented to the woman Li for his food and lodging for

¹ This subterfuge is not only childish and unnecessary but quite improbable. It is as if the author had come across the sentences in a phrase book and had inserted them in here because he liked them so much.

² The night is divided into five watches beginning with the first watch at dusk and ending with the fifth at dawn.

the night. Yehsien, however, would not hear of it, saying, "That is not the way to treat a guest. Tonight you must allow us, poor as we are, to offer you what crude fare we have. You can do your part some other time." Yuanho tried to refuse, but she would not let him.

Presently they all moved into the west hall where the curtains and drapes and screens and couches dazzled the eye with their brightness and where the toilet boxes and the quilts and pillows were all of the most luxurious kind. Candles were lighted and supper served; the food was rich in variety and delicious in flavor.

After supper, the mother withdrew while Yuanho and Yehsien continued their eager conversation, laughing and joking and indulging in all sorts of pleasantries. "When I passed your house the other day," he said, "you happened to be standing at the door. After that I have thought of you all the time; you are always in my heart whether I am eating or sleeping."

"It has been the same with me," Yehsien answered.

"I have come," he went on, "not just to look for a place to live. What I really want is to fulfill the wish of a lifetime. I wonder what will be my fate?"

Before he had finished speaking, the mother came in and asked them what they were saying. When they told her, she said, laughing, "Is it not said that between man and woman there is a great passion? When the feeling is mutual, not even the command of their parents can stop them. However, my daughter is very uncultivated and quite unworthy to share your mat and pillow."

Thereupon Yuanho rose and bowing low to her, said, "I beg you to take me as your slave," and the old woman thereafter treated him as if he were a son-in-law. Then they parted after having drunk to their full.

The next morning Yuanho brought everything he had and settled in the Li household. Henceforward he covered his traces and hid his person and completely cut off his contacts with former friends and relatives. He consorted with such people as actors and courtesans entirely and indulged himself in a perpetual round of feasts and entertainments. When his purse became empty, he sold

his horses and then his servants. In a year's time he had dissipated everything he had. In the meantime the old woman gradually cooled toward him, while Ychsien's love for him grew apace. One day she said to him, "Though it is a year since we have known each other, I am still without child. I have heard that the Spirit of the Bamboo Grove answers a woman's prayers as surely as an echo and should like to make an offering there. Would you go with me?"

Not suspecting a plot,³ Yuanho was delighted with the proposal. He pawned some clothes in order to buy offerings of wine and meat and went to the temple with Ychsien to pray. They stayed one night at the temple and started back the next day, Yuanho riding behind Ychsien's carriage on a donkey. When they reached the north gate of the Pingkang quarter, Ychsien said to him, "In a narrow lane east of here is my aunt's house. Could we stop there and rest a while?" He consented and in about a hundred paces they came to a carriage gate leading into a spacious compound. "This is the place," said Ychsien's maid from the back of the carriage. As Yuanho descended, some one came out of the house and asked who was calling. "Li Ychsien," was the answer. She went in with the message and presently a woman about forty years old came out and greeted Yuanho, saying, "Is my niece here?" When Ychsien descended from the carriage, the aunt greeted her and asked why she had not been to see her for such a long time. Then the two women looked at each other and laughed. After Yuanho had been introduced, they all went into a compound near the west halberd gate.⁴ It was a quiet and secluded place, with many bamboos and shade trees, and ponds and pavilions. "Is this your aunt's own house?" Yuanho asked Ychsien, but she only laughed and spoke of something else.

Presently tea and refreshments of rare quality were served but

³ Note that a few lines back the girl's love is said to have grown apace. This inconsistency seems to have jarred even Chinese readers, for in later versions of this theme the writers always take pains to point out that the faithful courtesan is not party to the plot.

⁴ In T'ang times officials of the third rank or higher were permitted to display halberds at the gate of their private residences.

before long a man bathed in sweat came galloping up on a horse and announced that Ychsien's mother had suddenly been taken ill and had practically lost her consciousness, and that they had better come back as quickly as possible.

"My heart is confused," Ychsien said to her aunt. "I shall ride on first and send the carriage back for you and my husband." Yuanho proposed to go with her but the aunt, after some whispered words with Ychsien's maid, stopped him, saying, "My sister will undoubtedly die soon. You should stay and advise me what to do about the funeral and other urgent matters instead of running off with my niece." He stayed, therefore, and figured the expenses for the funeral and the services. By the end of the day, the carriage had not yet come back.

"Why is it that no word has come from my niece?" the aunt said. "Why don't you go and see what has happened? I shall come soon myself."

Accordingly, Yuanho went. When he arrived at the Li house he was astonished to find it securely locked and sealed with clay. He inquired of a neighbor and received this reply: "The Lis had rented this house. The lease has recently expired and the owner has again taken possession. The Lis moved away yesterday." "Where have they moved to?" he asked, and the neighbor answered that he did not know.

Yuanho was about to hurry back to Hsuanyang and question the aunt, but he soon realized that the day was too far gone to undertake the journey. He pawned some of his clothes and bought himself supper and hired a bed. But he was so angry and outraged that he did not once close his eyes from dusk till dawn. As soon as day broke, he mounted his donkey and set out for the aunt's house. Arriving there, he knocked on the door repeatedly but for the space of a meal no one answered it. Then he shouted at the top of his voice several times and it was not until then that a servant came slowly out. "Is the aunt in?" Yuanho asked impatiently. "There is no such person here," was the answer. "But she was here yesterday," Yuanho said. "Why does she avoid me?" When he asked whose house it was, the man answered, "This is

the house of President Tsui. Yesterday some people came and rented one of the compounds to entertain, so they said, a cousin arriving from some distant point. They went away before nightfall."

Yuanho was so perplexed that he almost went mad. Not knowing what else to do he went to his old quarters on Pucheng street, where his old landlord took compassion upon him and gave him food. But he was too upset to eat. For three days he touched nothing, and then fell seriously ill. After about ten days his condition became so critical that his landlord gave up hope for his recovery and, fearful of the complications that might arise from his death, moved him to a funeral establishment. There in a short time he won the sympathy of everyone, who took turns in feeding him. After a while he improved and was able to get up with the aid of a stick. The shop hired him to hold the funeral curtain and with his wages for this he was enabled to support himself.

After a month or two he regained his strength but whenever he heard mourners' songs, in which the living professed envy for the kinder lot of the dead, he would burst into sobs and tears in spite of himself. Then when he went home he would imitate their mournful songs. Being clever and quick to learn, he soon mastered all their tricks and became the best mourner in Changan.

Now there were two funeral shops that had been for a long time rivals. The shop to the east excelled in the quality of its hearses and biers but was somewhat inferior in the skill of its mourners. Having heard of the surpassing art of Yuanho, the owner of the shop offered him twenty thousand cash for his services, and had his veteran mourners each teach Yuanho his particular forte. Thus the young man learned many new songs, which he practiced to the accompaniment of his fellow mourners. This went on for more than a month without anyone knowing anything about it.

Then the owners of the two rival shops said to each other: "Let us hold an exhibition on the Street of Heaven's Gate of all the paraphernalia that we have for hire, so that we can determine who has the better equipment. The loser will forfeit fifty thousand cash to pay for wine and refreshments." An agreement was drawn up and signed by guarantors before the competition.

The crowd that gathered to watch the spectacle numbered tens of thousands. Even the governor of the Metropolitan District became aware of the proceedings, having heard about it from the chief of police, who had in turn got it from the constable of the quarter. People poured into the thoroughfare from all directions so that the streets of Changan became empty. From morning till noon each shop paraded in turn their coaches and hearses and other funeral trappings and in all these things the shop to the west came out the loser, much to the humiliation of its owner. Then he had a platform set up in the southern corner of the square. A man with a long beard now came forward carrying a handbell and attended by several assistants. As he mounted the platform he tilted up his chin, raised his eyebrows, and clasped his right wrist with his left hand by way of defiance. Then he cleared his throat and began to sing "The Dirge of the White Horse." Confident because of his former victories, he glared to his right and left as if to defy anyone that dared to dispute the supremacy of his art. He was applauded on all sides.

Then the owner of the shop to the east set up a platform to the north of the square and a young man in a black hat came forward, accompanied by five or six attendants and holding a hearse plume in his hand. It was Yuanho himself. As he adjusted his clothes and trilled a few preliminary notes he manifested an air of diffidence as if unequal to the task, but when he proceeded to sing "The Dew on the Garlic" his voice was pure and shrill and shook the forest trees, so that before the end of his song the entire audience was sobbing and wiping away their tears.

The owner of the shop to the west was now greeted with boos and taunts. His humiliation was so great that he quietly placed his forfeit before the other owner and then slipped away unseen. The spectators were amazed at the unexpected turn and could not imagine where the owner of the shop to the east had procured so remarkable a singer.

Now it happened that the Emperor had recently issued an edict commanding the provincial governors to come to the capital once a year to confer on government policy. Because of this, Yuanho's

father was in Changan at the time. Hearing of the competition, he and some of his colleagues changed their official robes and went to see the proceedings. With him was an old servant, the husband of Yuanho's nurse. When he saw Yuanho's gestures and heard his voice, he recognized them to be those of his young master, but the circumstances made him doubt his own senses and he did not dare to accost the young man though he was several times on the point of doing so. However, he could not suppress the tears that this reminder of his young master had prompted, and Yuanho's father, seeing him weep, asked him what was the cause. "The singer," he said, "looks very much like your lost son." "How could that be," Yuanho's father answered, "since my son was murdered by robbers because he had too much money with him?" He too began to weep.

Afterwards the old servant went to the funeral shop and inquired among the members of the troupe. "Who was that singer?" he asked them. "How wonderful he is." They told him the young man's name, but it meant nothing to the old servant as Yuanho had changed it. The servant, however, was still not satisfied and decided to have a closer look at the young man. When Yuanho saw his old servant, he winced and turned away to hide himself among the crowd, but the old servant caught him by the sleeves and asked him if he was not his young master. Thereupon they embraced and wept, and then went back together to his father's lodging. There his father berated him, saying, "Your conduct has disgraced the family. How could you have the brazenness to show your face again?" Then he took him on foot to a secluded spot west of Chuchiang and east of the Apricot Gardens, and there he stripped him naked and thrashed him with his horsewhip till Yuanho, unable to stand the pain, apparently died. The father then left him and went away.

Fortunately Yuanho's singing master had told some of the young man's friends to follow him. When the scout returned and told the troupe what had happened, they were all greatly distressed and delegated two of their number to go back to the spot with a reed mat and bury the body. Arriving there, however, they found that he was still warm under the heart. They raised him and after a

long while he began to breathe weakly. They carried him back and fed him liquid through a reed pipe. After a night he regained consciousness, but for more than a month he could not move his arms or legs. The cuts left by the whip festered and broke and made him a most revolting object. At last his friends could endure the distressing sight no longer and one night they carried him out and abandoned him by the side of the road. The passers-by all took pity on him and many gave their left-over food to him. Thus he was able to sustain himself until about three months later he was able to get about with a stick. Clad in a cloth coat patched in a hundred different places and tattered like a quail's tail, and carrying a broken bowl in his hand, he began to tramp the streets of Changan as a beggar.

Thus through the autumn and into the winter he crawled in caves and dung piles to sleep at night and frequented the market places by day. One day it snowed, but driven by hunger, Yuanho had to go out and brave the snow. His cries were so pitiful that none who heard him could remain unmoved. But the snow was heavy and few houses had their outer gates open. Finally near the east gate of the Anyi quarter, about seven or eight houses along the north side of the wall to the quarter, he came to a gate that was half open. It was, in fact, where Yawsien was now living but he did not know it and began to cry out his woes in an intolerably sad voice. When Yawsien heard it in her room, she said to her maid, "That must be Yuanho. I recognize his voice." She hastened out and there she saw her old lover standing at the door, so emaciated by hunger and disfigured by sores and scabs that he hardly seemed human. She was deeply moved and said to him, "Are you not Yuanho?" But he was so overcome with shame and anger that he collapsed and was, for a while, unable to speak. He only nodded.

Yawsien rushed up to him and threw her arms around his neck. Then, wrapping her embroidered jacket around him, she helped him into the western chamber. There she wailed, "It is my fault that you have come to this," and then swooned. Her mother was by her side when she regained consciousness. "What does this

mean?" the old woman asked and when Yahsien pointed to Yuanho, she said, "You should have driven him away instead of bringing him in here."

Yahsien, however, looked at her steadily and said: "Not so! He is the son of a good family. He came to us in a splendid carriage carrying with him quantities of gold. When in a short time he had squandered everything, we plotted against him and abandoned him to his fate. It was hardly human. We are responsible for ruining his career and bringing upon him the contempt of his own kind. It was because of us that his father suppressed his natural feelings for him and abandoned him after almost beating him to death. Every one knows that it was because of me that he has come to this pass. He has influential connections at court. Should they one day learn all the circumstances, disaster will be upon us. Moreover, such conduct as ours is against the laws both of heaven and of men and will not be countenanced by the gods. Let us not bring further retribution upon ourselves.

"Now I have been your daughter for twenty years. During this time I must have made for you more than a thousand pieces of gold,⁵ which is ample to provide for your remaining years. However, to buy my freedom I shall give you another sum of money, enough to cover what I might have cost you in food and clothing. I shall then find another place to live with this young man. We shall live not far away, so that we can call to pay our respects to you morning and evening."

From the way the girl spoke the old woman realized that she could not be shaken in her determination and agreed, therefore, to her proposal. After paying for her freedom, Yahsien still had a hundred pieces of gold left. She rented a house a few doors north. Here she had her lover bathed and put on him a new suit of clothes. First she fed him with soups to condition his stomach and then sour cream to purify his intestines. It was not until some days later that she began to set before him all the delicacies of land and sea. She also provided him with hats, shoes, and stockings of the

⁵ Not to be taken literally.

finest quality. In a few months Yuanho had taken on some flesh; by the end of the year he had completely recovered.

One day Yahsien said to her lover: "Your body is now strong and your spirit firm. Now ponder well and see how much you can remember of your old literary studies." After he thought a while, he answered, "I can only remember two or three parts out of ten." Then she ordered her carriage and drove to a bookshop by the south side-gate near the Flag Tower followed by Yuanho on horseback. Here she had him pick out all the books he needed, costing a hundred pieces of gold. They put the books in the carriage and drove home. She made him banish all other thoughts from his mind and concentrate on his studies night and day. She would sit up with him and they never went to bed until far past midnight. When he was tired from his studies, she would have him compose verses for relaxation.

In two years he had mastered his subjects and read all the books then extant in the land. "Now I am ready to try the examinations!" he said to Yahsien, but the latter answered, "Not yet!" You must acquire even more proficiency before you enter the lists." Another year went by before Yahsien said to him, "Now you can try!"

And indeed he came out in the front rank at the first attempt. So great was his fame that he overshadowed all the other candidates, and when his compositions fell under the scrutiny of his seniors, even they were filled with admiration and respect and all sought his friendship.

Yahsien, however, would not let him relax in his efforts. "You must not," she said to him, "fall into the folly of young students of the time. The minute they pass their examinations, they begin to think that high court posts are within their grasp and worldwide reputations already established. Moreover, you cannot compare yourself to other candidates because of your disreputable past. You must, therefore, apply yourself even more diligently to your studies in order to prepare for the next ordeal. Only then can you hope to compete with the other scholars and establish your supremacy among them."

Because of this wise counsel, Yuanho became even more indus-

trious and as a result enhanced his fame. It happened that the triennial examinations fell within that year and an imperial edict was issued summoning qualified candidates for the test. Yuanho entered the section for "straight advice and extreme remonstrance." He came out the first on the roster of successful candidates, and was appointed military counselor to the governor of Chengtu. He numbered among his friends the highest officials at court, from the three chief ministers down.

When Yuanho was about to set out for his post, Yawsien said to him: "By helping you to restore yourself to your proper place in life, I have redeemed the wrong I have done you. I want now to spend the remaining years of my life taking care of my foster mother. For yourself, you must marry the daughter of a noble family, who will be worthy to prepare the sacrificial dishes. You must not burden yourself with an unworthy person like myself. Take good care of yourself! I must now leave you!"

"I shall kill myself if you leave me now," Yuanho said, but in spite of his threat she would not change her resolve. He continued to implore her to go with him, and to placate him, she said, "I shall cross the river and go with you as far as Chienmen. There you must let me go."

Yuanho agreed and in a little over a month they had reached Chienmen. There before he started out again, the report of promotions arrived and he found that his father had been, after an audience at the capital, appointed governor of Chengtu and concurrently intendant of Chiennan Circuit. The next morning his father arrived and Yuanho sent in his card and waited upon him at the posting station. His father did not recognize him at first but when he saw on his card the names of his father and grandfather, he was astonished. He bade his son mount the steps and putting his hand on his son's back he wept as he said, "From now on we are father and son as before." Then he asked his son how it had all happened and when he heard everything he was greatly impressed and asked where Yawsien was. "She has accompanied me here," his son answered, "but she is going back." At this the father said that they must not let her go.

The next day he ordered carriages and went to Chengtu with his son, after having set Yawsien up in suitable quarters at Chienmen. As soon as he had attended to his most pressing duties at his new post he sent a matchmaker to Chienmen with a formal proposal for uniting the two families through marriage ties. The wedding soon followed with all the appropriate rites.

In the years following the marriage, Yawsien showed herself a most dutiful daughter-in-law and was very capable in the management of the household. She was greatly beloved by her parents-in-law.

Some years later when Yuanho's parents died, he was so pious in his mourning observances that the sacred fungus grew on the roof of his mourning hut, each stem bearing three heads, and more than a score white swallows made their nests in the rafters. These auspicious omens were duly reported by the provincial authorities to the Emperor, who was greatly impressed and conferred upon Yuanho special favors and honors. After his mourning period was over, he was successively appointed to distinguished posts and in the course of ten years was governor of several provinces. Yawsien was given the title of Lady of Chienkuo. They had four sons, all of whom rose to high offices, even the lowest being the prefect of Taiyuan. The sons all married into great families so that Yuanho was without equal in the number of distinguished relations.

How remarkable that a woman of the courtesan class should manifest a degree of loyalty and constancy such as is rarely exceeded by the heroines of antiquity! How can such a story fail to provoke sighs of admiration!

My great-uncle was once governor of Chinchou, then a vice-president of the Board of Revenue and later a commissioner of grain transportation. In all these three posts he had Yuanho as his predecessor and was consequently familiar with the story of his past. In the Cheng Yuan period (785-804) I was one day talking with Kung-tso^o of Lunghsi about women of notable virtue and told him the story of the Lady of Chienkuo. With his hands clasped, Kung-tso listened with rapt attention, and when I finished he asked

^o Li Kung-tso, author of "Hsieh Hsiaowo."

me to write down her story. So I took up my brush and dipped it in ink and wrote this sketch of her life. This happened in the eighth month of the twelfth year of the cycle,⁷ the narrator being Po Hsing-chien of Taiyuan.

⁷ In this instance, A.D. 795. The sixty-year "cycle of Cathay" is supposed to have been instituted in 2637 B.C. See note on chronology.

Traditional Chinese Tales

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