

RAISE THE RED LANTERN

When Fourth Mistress, Lotus, was carried into the Chen family garden, she was nineteen; she was carried into the garden through the back gate on the west side at dusk, by four rustic sedan bearers. The servants were washing some old yarn by the side of the well when they saw the sedan chair slip quietly in through the moon gate and a young college girl, dressed in a white blouse and black skirt, step down from it. The servants thought it was the eldest daughter returning from her studies in Beiping; when they rushed forward to welcome her, they realized their mistake: It was a female student, her face covered with dust and looking unbearably exhausted. That year Lotus's hair was cut short, level with her ears, and tied up with a sky-blue scarf. Her face was quite round, she wore no makeup; and she looked a little pale. Lotus climbed out of the sedan chair, stood on the grass, and looked blankly all around; a rattan suitcase was placed horizontally beneath her black skirt. In the autumn sunlight, Lotus's slender figure appeared tenuous and delicate; she looked as dull and lifeless as a paper doll. She raised her hand and wiped the sweat off her face; the servants noticed that she wiped the sweat not with a handkerchief but with her sleeve; this minor detail made a deep impression on them. Lotus walked over to the edge of the well and spoke to Swallow, who was washing yarn. "Let me wash my face. I haven't washed my face in three days."

Swallow drew a pail of water for her and watched her plunge her face into the water; Lotus's arched-over body shook uncontrollably like a waist drum played by some unseen hands. Swallow asked, "Do you want some soap?" Lotus did not speak, and Swallow asked again, "The water's too cold, isn't it?" Lotus still did not speak. Swallow made a face in the direction of the other maidservants standing around the well, covered her mouth, and laughed. The maidservants thought this newly arrived guest was one of the Chen family's poor relations. They could tell the status of nearly all the Chen family's guests. Just then Lotus suddenly turned her head back toward them. Her expression was much more wide-awake after washing her face her eyebrows were very fine and very black, and they gradually knit together. Lotus gave Swallow a sidelong glance and said, "Don't just stand there laughing like a fool; wipe the water off my face!"

Swallow kept on laughing. "Who do you think you are, acting so fierce?"

Lotus pushed Swallow away violently, picked up her rattan suitcase and walked away from the well: she walked away from the well; she walked a few paces, turned to face them and said, "Who am I? You'll all find out, sooner or later."

The following day everyone in the Chen household learned that Old Master Chen Zuqian had taken Lotus as his Fourth Mistress. Lotus would live in the south wing off the back garden, right beside Third Mistress Coral's room. Chen Zuoqian gave Swallow, who had been living in the servants' quarters, to Fourth Mistress as her private bondmaid.

When Swallow went to see Lotus, she was afraid; she lowered her head as she called out, "Fourth Mistress." Lotus had already forgotten Swallow's rudeness, or perhaps she just didn't remember who Swallow was. Lotus changed into a pink silk cheongsam and put on a pair of embroidered slippers; the color had returned overnight to her face, and she looked much more amiable. She pulled Swallow over in front of her, examined her carefully for a minute, and said to Chen Zuoqian, "At least she doesn't look too dreadful." Then she spoke to Swallow. "Squat down: let me look at your hair."

Swallow squatted down and felt Lotus' hands picking through her hair, carefully searching for something; then she heard Lotus say, "You don't have lice, do you? I'm terribly afraid of lice."

Swallow bit her lip and did not speak; she felt Lotus's hands like the ice-cold blade of a knife, cutting into her hair, hurting her slightly. Lotus said, "What's in your hair? Smells terrible;; take some perfumed soap and hurry over and wash your hair."

Swallow stood up; she stood there motionless, with her hands hanging down. Chen Zuoqian glared at her. "Didn't you hear what Fourth Mistress said?"

Swallow said, "I just washed my hair yesterday."

Chen Zuoqian yelled at her, "Don't argue about it; if she tells you to go wash, you go wash. Careful I don't beat you."

Swallow poured out a pan of water and washed her hair under the crab apple trees. She felt she'd been horribly wronged; hatred and anger pressed on her heart like an iron weight. The afternoon sun shone down on the two crab apple trees; a clothesline was strung between them, and Fourth Mistress's white blouse and black skirt were waving in the breeze. Swallow looked all around; the back garden was

completely quiet, and no one was there. She walked over to the clothesline, spat right on Lotus's white blouse, then turned and spat again on her black skirt.

Chen Zuoqian was exactly fifty years old that year. When Chen Zuoqian took Lotus as his concubine at the age of fifty, the affair was carried out in a half-secretive manner. Right up until the day before Lotus came through the gate, the First Mistress, his first wife, Joy, still didn't know a thing about it. When Chen Zuoqian took Lotus to meet her, Joy was in the Buddhist chapel counting out her rosary and chanting the sutras. Chen Zuoqian said, "This is my First Mistress."

Just as Lotus was about to step forward and greet her, the string broke on Joy's Buddhist rosary, sending the beads rolling all over the floor; Joy pushed away her amboyna chair and knelt down on the floor to pick up the beads, mumbling all the while, "It's a sin, it's a sin." Lotus went over to help her pick up the beads and was pushed lightly away by Joy, who just repeated, "It's a sin, it's a sin," and never once raised her head to look at Lotus. As Lotus watched Joy's fat body crouching down on the floor to pick up the Buddhist beads, she covered her mouth and laughed silently. She looked at Chen Zuoqian, who said, "All right, we're going."

Lotus stepped over the threshold of the Buddhist chapel, took Chen Zuoqian's arm, and asked, "Is she really a Buddhist? Why's she chanting the sutras at home?"

Chen Zuoqian said, "A Buddhist! Ha! She's just too lazy, hasn't anything to do, so she plays at being a Buddhist, that's all."

Lotus was enthusiastically welcomed into the rooms of Second Mistress, Cloud. Cloud had her maid bring out watermelon, sunflower, and pumpkin seeds, and several kinds of candied fruits for Lotus. The first thing Cloud said after they sat down concerned the melon seeds. "There aren't any good melon seeds around here; I have someone buy all the melon seeds I eat in Suzhou."

Lotus spent some time cracking melon seeds at Cloud's, cracking and eating until she was quite bored; she didn't like snacks like that, but she could hardly show it. Lotus stole a sidelong glance at Chen Zuoqian, hinting she wanted to leave, but he seemed to be intent on staying a little longer at Cloud's and acted as though he didn't see Lotus's expression. Lotus inferred from this that Chen Zuoqian was particularly fond of Cloud; then her gaze couldn't help lingering on Cloud's face and figure. Cloud's facial features had a kind of warmth and delicate grace, even though

she couldn't hide the tiny wrinkles and the somewhat noticeable slackness of her skin; in her movements she had even more the appearance of a cultured, young woman from a good family. Lotus thought a woman like Cloud could easily attract men, and women would not dislike her either. She very quickly addressed Cloud as Elder Sister.

Of the Chen household's three earlier wives, Coral's room was closest to Lotus's, but Coral was the last one Lotus met. Lotus had heard of Coral's extraordinary physical beauty, and she wanted very much to meet her; but Chen Zuoqian refused to take her there. He said, "It's so close, you go on over yourself."

Lotus said, "I've gone over there; the maid said she was sick, blocked the door, and wouldn't let me in."

Chen Zuoqian snorted through his nose. "Huh, whenever she's unhappy she says she's sick." He went on, "She wants to be more important than I am."

"Are you going to let her?"

Chen Zuoqian waved his hand and said, "Don't be ridiculous! Women can never be more important than men."

Lotus walked by the north wing and noticed that Coral's windows were hung with curtains of pink lace drawnwork; a sweet scent of flowers emanated from inside. Lotus stopped in front of the windows for a moment; suddenly unable to control her desire to peek in, she held her breath and gently pulled open the curtains. The shock she received then nearly frightened her to death: Coral was also watching her from behind the curtain. Their eyes met straight on for only a matter of seconds, then Lotus ran away in dismay.

When night came, Chen Zuoqian came to Lotus's room to spend the night. Lotus helped him take his clothes off and handed him some nightclothes, but Chen Zuoqian said, "I don't wear anything. I like to sleep naked. Lotus just looked the other way and said, "Suit yourself, but it's better to wear something, otherwise you'll catch a chill."

Chen Zuoqian started to laugh. "You're not afraid I'll catch a chill, you're afraid of seeing me naked."

Lotus said, "I am not afraid." But as she turned away, her cheeks were already crimson. This was the first time she had a clear look at Chen Zuoqian's body. Chen Zuoqian had a body like a red-crowned Manchurian crane, bony and skinny, and his penis was as taut as a well-drawn bow. Lotus felt a little out of breath, and she asked, "Why're you so skinny?"

Chen Zuoqian climbed onto the bed, crawled under the quilt, and answered, "They've worn me out."

When Lotus rolled over on her side to put out the lamp, Chen Zuoqian held her back. "Don't put it out. I want to see you. . Put out the lamp and you can't see anything."

Lotus touched his cheek and said, "Suit yourself. I don't know anything about it anyway, so I'll follow you."

Lotus seemed to fall from a high place into a dark valley where pain and dizziness were accompanied by a feeling of lightness. The strangest thing was that Coral's face continually intruded into her consciousness; that most beautiful face was also hidden in the darkness. Lotus said, "She's really strange."

"Who?"

"Third Mistress. She was behind the curtain watching me."

Chen Zuoqian's hand moved from Lotus's breast to her mouth. "Don't talk. Don't talk now."

Just at that moment someone knocked lightly on the bedroom door. The two of them were startled; Chen Zuoqian looked at Lotus and shook his head, then put out the lamp. In a little while the knocking started again. Chen Zuoqian jumped up and shouted angrily, "Who's that knocking?"

A timid girlish voice came from outside the door. "Third Mistress is sick; she's calling for the Master."

Chen Zuoqian said, "She's lying, lying again. Go back and tell her I've already gone to bed."

The girl outside the door said, "Third Mistress is very sick; she says you have to come. She says she's about to die."

Chen Zuoqian sat on the bed and thought for a minute, mumbling to himself, "What's she up to this time?" Lotus watched his uneasiness, then pushed him. "You better go. It would be terrible if she really died."

Chen Zuoqian did not return that night. Lotus listened carefully to hear what transpired in the north wing, but nothing at all seemed to be happening. Only a robin in the pomegranate tree called out a few times, leaving a clear and mournful sound lingering in the distance. Lotus drifted between disappointment and sorrow, and could not sleep. Very early the next morning, when she got up to put on her makeup, she saw that her face had undergone some sort of profound transformation; the rims of her eyes were dark black. Lotus already knew what Coral was up to, but

the next day, when she saw Chen Zuoqian emerge from her north wing room, she went up to him anyway and inquired about Coral's illness.

"Did you call a doctor for Third Mistress?"

Chen Zuoqian shook his head in embarrassment. He looked completely exhausted and was too enervated to speak; he merely took hold of Lotus's hand and gave it a long, soft squeeze.

The reason Lotus was married to Chen Zuoqian after already spending one year in college was very simple: Her father's tea factory went broke, and he could not afford her tuition. The third day after Lotus had quit school and returned home, she heard members of her family shouting wildly in the kitchen; she ran in and saw her father propped against the side of the sink; the sink was full of fresh bubbling blood. Her father had slashed his wrists open and gone effortlessly down to the Yellow Springs of the Dead. Lotus remembered the feeling of despair she had at that time. When she held up her father's icy cold corpse, she felt even colder all over than his body did.

When this misfortune occurred, she couldn't even cry. No one else used that sink for many days after, but Lotus still washed her hair in it. She did not feel the nameless fear and trembling that most young women would. She was very practical. As soon as her father died, she had to be responsible for herself. Lotus stood beside that sink washing and combing her hair out over and over again; it was her way of calmly planning for her future. Thus when her stepmother came right to the point and asked her to choose between going to work and getting married, she answered dryly, "I'll get married, of course."

Her stepmother asked further, "You want to marry into an ordinary family or a rich family?"

Lotus answered, "A rich family, naturally; do you have to ask?"

Her stepmother said, "It's not the same. If you go to a rich family, you'll be small."

"What does it mean: 'be small'?" Lotus asked.

Her stepmother thought for a moment and said, "It means to be a concubine; your status will be a little lower."

Lotus laughed coldly. "What is status? Is status something people like me can be concerned about? No matter what, I've been given to you to sell; if you have any consideration for my father's affections, then sell me to a good master."

The first time Chen Zuoqian went to call on her, Lotus barred the door and refused to see him; "Meet me at the Restaurant Occidental," she said from inside the door. Chen Zuoqian thought to himself that since she was a college student she would naturally be different from most vulgar young women. He reserved a table for two at the Restaurant Occidental and waited for Lotus to show up. It was raining that day and as Chen Zuoqian waited and looked through the window at the street made misty by the rain, his emotions were unusually warm and sweet; feelings he had never experienced before in his first three marriages. Lotus came walking slowly along, carrying a delicate little flower-patterned silk umbrella. Chen Zuoqian smiled happily. Lotus was just as pure and pretty as he had imagined, and just as young. Chen Zuoqian remembered that Lotus sat down opposite him and pulled a big handful of little candles out of her purse. She whispered to Chen Zuoqian, "Order me a cake, all right?"

Chen Zuoqian had the waiter bring them a cake; then he watched Lotus stick the candles one by one into the cake until she had put in a total of nineteen candles; she put the remaining candles back into her bag. Chen Zuoqian said, "What's all this; is this your birthday?"

Lotus only smiled. She lit the candles and watched them burn with nineteen bright little flames. In the light of the candles Lotus's expression grew exquisitely beautiful; she said, "Look how lovely the flames are."

"They are lovely," Chen Zuoqian agreed.

After she finished talking, Lotus took a long deep breath and blew out all of the candles at once. Chen Zuoqian heard her say, "Let's celebrate my birthday early; nineteen years have gone by."

Chen Zuoqian felt that there was something to think about in what Lotus said. Much later he still often recalled that scene of Lotus blowing out those candles; it made him feel that Lotus possessed a kind of elusive yet beguiling power. As a man with an abundance of sexual experience, Chen Zuoqian was even more obsessed with Lotus's skill and passion in bed. He seemed to envision many kinds of ecstasy the first time he met her, and later on they all came to be confirmed in practice. It is difficult to judge whether Lotus was like that by nature or was reshaping her own disposition in order to please him, but Chen Zuoqian was very satisfied; the way he doted on Lotus was noticed by everyone high and low in the Chen household.

In the corner of the back garden wall there was a wisteria vine; from summer to fall the wisteria flowers weighed heavily on the branches. From her window, day after day,

Lotus saw only those fluffy clumps of purple flowers delicately swaying in the autumn breeze. She noticed there was a well beneath the wisteria vine and there was also a stone table and stone benches. It was a very quiet, comfortable place, but no one was ever there, and the path leading to there was overgrown with weeds. Butterflies flew by and cicadas sang on the wisteria leaves; Lotus remembered that last year at that time she was sitting under the wisteria at school studying-it all seemed like suddenly waking from a dream. Lotus walked slowly over to the vine, carefully pulling up her skirt so as not to let the weeds and the insects rub against it; slowly she pulled back a few branches of wisteria, and saw that the stone tables and benches were covered with a thick layer of dust. The walls of the well were covered with moss. Lotus bent over and looked down into the well; the water was a bluish-black color, and there were some ancient dry leaves floating on the surface. Lotus saw the broken reflection of her face in the water and heard the sound of her breathing being sucked down into the well and amplified, weak yet oppressively deep and low. A gust of wind rushed up; Lotus's skirt billowed out like a bird taking flight, and at that instant she felt a coldness as hard as stone rubbing slowly up against her body. She started back, walking very quickly now, and when she reached the hallway of the south-side wing, she heaved a long sigh. Just as she looked back at the wisteria vine, two or three clumps of flowers suddenly dropped off; they tumbled down quite abruptly, and Lotus felt it was awfully strange.

Cloud was sitting in her room waiting for Lotus. She immediately noticed that Lotus looked very troubled; she stood up and patted her on the shoulder: "What's wrong with you?"

Lotus answered, "What's wrong with me? I was walking around outside."

Cloud said, "Your complexion looks awful."

Lotus laughed and said that she had just got her period.

Cloud laughed too and said, "I wondered why in the world you came over to see me again." She opened a parcel and took out a roll of silk: "Real Suzhou silk; it's for you to make a dress with."

Lotus pushed back Cloud's hands. "No, no, no-how could I accept gifts from you? I should be giving you gifts."

"Shush," said Cloud. "What do you mean by that? When I saw how very likable you are, I immediately thought about this piece of silk; if it were that woman next door, I wouldn't give it to her if she tried to pay me; that's just the way I am."

Lotus took the silk, put it in her lap, and ran her hands over it. Then she said, "Third Mistress's a little strange. But she's very good looking."

"Good looking? If you scraped Coral's face, a pound of makeup would come off."

Lotus laughed again and changed the subject. "I was just walking around by the wisteria vine. I really like that place."

"You went to the Well of Death?" Cloud shrieked. "Don't go there, that place is bad luck."

"Why do you call it the Well of Death?" Lotus asked in alarm.

Cloud answered, "No wonder you looked so bad when you came in here. Three people have died in that well."

Lotus stood up, leaned against the window frame, and looked over at the wisteria vine. "What sort of people died in the well?"

Cloud said, "They were all family members from earlier generations, all women."

Lotus still wanted to ask more, but Cloud could not tell any more; she only knew that much. She said everybody high and low in the Chen family avoids the subject; everybody's lips are sealed tight as a jar. Lotus stood there puzzled for a moment, then said, "Things like that, I guess it's just as well not to know about them anyway."

The young masters and young ladies of the Chen family all lived in the central compound. Lotus once saw the two sisters Yi and Yiyun digging for worms in the muddy ditch; from their radiantly cheerful faces, so natural and innocent, Lotus could tell at a glance that they were Cloud's children. She stood to one side, quietly observing them. The two sisters noticed Lotus, but went on stuffing the worms into a little bamboo container as if no one were there. Lotus asked, "What are you digging worms for?"

Yirong answered, "To go fishing," but Yiyun stared rudely at Lotus and said, "None of your business."

Lotus felt unpleasantly awkward; walking on a few steps, she heard the two girls whisper, "She's a concubine, too, just like mom." Lotus was suddenly stunned;

she looked back and stared angrily at them. Yirong giggled out loud, but Yiyun stared back at her with unyielding contempt and whispered something else. Lotus thought, "It's terrible for them to be so young and already saying such nasty things. Heaven knows what sort of education Cloud is giving those girls."

The next time Lotus ran into Cloud, she could not help telling her what Yirong had said. Cloud said, "That child just can't hold her tongue. When I get home, I'll pinch her lips good." After Cloud apologized, she went on. "Actually those two girls of mine are still pretty easy to handle. You've never seen the Little Master from next door. He's just like a dog, biting and spitting on anyone he runs into. Hasn't he ever bitten you?"

Lotus shook her head. She recalled the little boy next door, Feilan, standing on the porch eating a piece of bread and peering over at her, his oily hair combed back and shiny, with a pair of little leather shoes on his feet. Sometimes Lotus could catch a glimpse of something like Chen Zuoqian's expression on Feilan's face. Probably she was more disposed to accept Feilan because she hoped to give Chen Zuoqian another son

"A boy is better than a girl," thought Lotus. "Who cares if he bites people or not."

After a long time only Joy's son and daughter remained unseen by Lotus. From this it was easy to discern their high status in the Chen household. Lotus regularly heard discussions concerning the son Feipu and the daughter Yihui. Feipu was always out collecting rents and carrying on real estate transactions, while Yihui was studying at a women's college in Beijing. Lotus casually asked her maid Swallow about Feipu, and she said, "Our Eldest Young Master is very resourceful."

Lotus asked, "How is he resourceful?"

Swallow answered, "Well, anyway, he is resourceful; the whole Chen household depends on him now."

Lotus further asked Swallow, "What's the Eldest Young Mistress like?"

Swallow replied, "Our Eldest Young Mistress is pretty and demure; she's going to marry a rich man someday."

Lotus laughed to herself. The tone of Swallow's praise for those two implied a criticism of her, and Lotus found it quite irritating. Taking out her anger on the Persian cat curled up at her feet, she kicked it away and cursed, "Stop licking your ass over here, you little tramp!"

Lotus became increasingly annoyed with Swallow; mostly because, whenever she had nothing to do, she would run over to Coral's room. But also because every

time Lotus gave her a chemise and underpants to be washed, her face would take on a sullen expression. Sometimes Lotus would scold her. "Who are you trying to impress frowning like that? If you don't like being with me, you can go back to the servants' quarters, or even go next door, it's all right."

Swallow would defend herself. "I'm not. I wouldn't dare frown; I was born with this face."

Lotus would grab a hair brush and throw it at her, and Swallow would shut up. Lotus guessed that Swallow slandered her quite a bit throughout the rest of the house. But she could not treat her too harshly because she had once seen ChenZuoqian come into her room and take the opportunity to fondle Swallow's breasts. Although it was a fleeting and altogether natural thing, Lotus had to control herself somewhat; if it were not for her master's fondling, Swallow would not dare act so insolently toward her. Lotus reflected, "Even a common servant girl also understands how to rely on a little fondling to build up her courage. A woman is just that sort of creature."

On the eighth day of the ninth lunar month, one day before the Double Ninth Festival, the Eldest Young Master, Feipu, returned home.

Lotus was in the central courtyard admiring the chrysanthemums when she saw Joy and the servants crowding around a group of men; one in the middle, dressed in white, was very young and, viewed from behind and far away, looked quite tall. Lotus guessed that he must be Feipu. She watched as the servants carried a whole cartload of luggage to the back court yard, running round and round like colorful carrousel animals.

Gradually everyone went inside, but Lotus was still embarrassed to go in. She picked some chrysanthemums and walked slowly toward the back garden; on the way she spied Cloud and Coral coming her way with their children in tow. Cloud grabbed her arm and said, "Eldest Young Master has come home, aren't you going to go meet him?"

Lotus answered, "I go to meet him? He should come to meet me, shouldn't he?"

Cloud said, "That's right, he should be the one to come to meet you first."

Standing to one side, Coral impatiently pushed Feilan on the back of the head. "Hurry up, hurry up."

It was at the dinner table that Lotus actually met Feipu. That evening Chen Zuoqian had the cooks prepare a banquet to welcome Feipu back home. The table was covered with sumptuous and exquisitely prepared delicacies; Lotus looked at the

food and could not help thinking that the welcoming banquet on the day she first entered the Chen household was not nearly as grand as this one. She felt a little hurt, but her attention very quickly shifted to Feipu himself. Feipu was sitting next to Joy; Joy said something to him, and then he leaned over toward Lotus, smiled, and nodded his head. Lotus smiled and nodded back at him. Her first impression of Feipu was that he was unexpectedly young and handsome; her second impression was that he was very thoughtful. Lotus always liked to evaluate people's character on meeting them.

The next day was the Double Ninth Festival. The gardeners brought all of the chrysanthemum pots in the garden together in one place and arranged them in various colors to form the characters for "good fortune, prosperity, longevity, and happiness." Lotus got up very early and walked all around, by herself, looking at the chrysanthemums. There was a chilly morning breeze, and she was wearing only a sleeveless woolen sweater; she just folded her arms across her chest, held her shoulders, and walked around, looking at the flowers. A long way off she saw Feipu coming out of the central courtyard and walking her way.