

A Katydid on Her Head

By Zhang Kaicheng

About thirty feet apart, Xiu and Cai had almost reached the top of the Nanling Peak. Xiu was leading the way to the township administration for a divorce.

The exhausted Xiu was sweating heavily when she had climbed up the peak. The sun on this clear September day was still very hot. Of course it was. Otherwise, how could the crops ripen? She sat in the shade of an old persimmon tree by the road, drew out a small handkerchief folded into a square, and wiped her sweat. From where she sat, she could see the scenery on both sides of the mountain. In the south was their home Liang'ao Village, and in the north, Nanling Town, the well-known big centre of their township, where the township administration was located. Two years ago, she and Cai had gone through the same route for their marriage certificate, but today, gosh!

In the east was a cotton field. The cotton leaves were still green, but the bolls were already bursting into bloom. The field was dotted with white, looking like there had been a snowfall in between the green leaves. Seeing the fluffy cotton, Xiu's hands itched. She wanted to pick a bunch, but unfortunately it was not their own. The slope in the west was covered with Chinese sorghum—heavy, fire-red sorghum that weighed down the stalks. Nearby were a few patches of corn and soybeans. The soybeans' green leaves, many of which had tiny worm-eaten holes, were turning yellowish. Somehow there were so many katydids in the soybean field. Xiu was really bothered by the contest-like continuous chirping of the katydids that was heard from one

spot before the other had quieted down.

Cai had climbed up as well, but he did not feel tired. Picking up a broken tile, he threw it at a persimmon that looked like a red lantern. How accurate he was! The "red lantern" fell, and he caught it in the air. It was not damaged, so he gave it to Xiu and said, "Here. Quench your thirst. Take a break yourself. I'll go relieve myself over there."

Xiu took a suck on the persimmon. It was very sweet. She wanted to finish it up, but remembering what they had come out for, she simply threw it away.

She was angry with him. After their marriage, he had bought a tractor and started carrying cement from the county town to the village building-supplies factory. He got up early in the morning and did not return home until it was pitch dark. He was so dirty that even the children in the village chanted this doggerel when they saw him: "The tractor chugs by; a grey mouse comes in sight." She was infuriated whenever she heard it.

She told him to change his clothes and wash his hair, but he simply turned a deaf ear to her and countered, "How can a farmer be clean. If you want somebody clean, why didn't you marry a big official in town?" This was too much for her. She admired other young couples in the village who dressed themselves neatly in the latest fashion. The affectionate couples would often go window shopping together in town, or go to the temple fair in their local township. They would chit-chat, whisper and tease each other with loving words, but Cai gave her none of this.

Once, when he was cranking up his engine, the bar slipped, flew out and struck his mouth, knocking out one of his front teeth. She immediately brought over a bowl of water for him to rinse his mouth. "You love the tractor, but it doesn't love you," she said to herself. "Now you've got to rest a day, won't you?" But to her surprise, he just spat out the blood, then jumped onto his tractor again and chugged away without even saying goodbye to her.

Not long ago, she had caught a bad cold. She was running a fever

and was feeling extremely weak. She asked him to cancel one trip so as to take her to the hospital in the township, but he surprised her by saying, "Drink some unhusked-rice water. When you sweat it out, you will be all right. I've got to carry the cement." Then off he went. She slept at home for two days all by herself. Tears welled in her eyes whenever she thought of her life. "What's the point of living with someone like this?"

Suddenly, she felt an itch on her head. She was about to touch it when a katydid suddenly started gurgling on the itchy spot. She looked over her shoulder and saw Cai holding a fresh cornstalk to her, laughing with his mouth wide open, showing his missing tooth.

"Don't move," he said. "If you touch the katydid, it will bite you."

Xiu knew that katydids had two razor-like teeth and that their clips were painful. She was helpless, saying to herself, "Now, you naughty devil! You are finally having fun with me!" Somehow, the originally full balloon in her heart started to deflate as if it had been pricked by a needle.

"Now, naughty devil, get it off my head quickly. I don't want it to soil me."

"No, no, it won't. It's standing on your hairpin now," he continued to laugh. "Don't move. Wait, it'll chirp again."

He closed his fingers and rubbed his fingernails to make the katydid chirp, and it really did. Xiu could not hold back her laughter. She laughed happily, something she had missed for more than a year.

The moment Cai clapped his hands, the katydid stopped. When he moved the sorghum stalk against Xiu's head, the katydid jumped back to its top. He conveniently tied it there by fastening its neck with some sorghum skin.

"I won't play with you anymore," Cai said. "Let's go. Otherwise, the office will be closed."

Xiu did not move. She was still lost in the chirping of the katydid, in the joy of a happy couple.

"You can't walk anymore? Let me carry you on my back."

"Finally, you care about your wife. Only now do you more or less look like a man."

"What was I like, then?"

"A machine that only knew how to make money."

"Okay, then, I won't be a machine anymore. We won't go now, all right?"

"We'll go." She rose to her feet.

"Still want to go?"

"We'll go have a canine tooth made for you!" she said, poking his forehead with her finger.

Touching the Wrong Chin

By Xu Xijun

Commended by the bureau director, Section Director Lou was overjoyed. Now that he was elated, he wanted his wife to share it with him, so he hurried home as soon as he finished work.

Finding his wife not yet home, the excited Lou decided to do something. He discovered that the garbage can was full and took it out to the garbage station. He met his wife on the stairs when he got to the second floor. Though the dim stairs were not lit, he could still tell that her graceful bearing, enhanced by the smart, long hair that covered her shoulders and by her well-tailored woolen windbreaker, could easily excite any man. Thanks perhaps to his terrific mood, when his wife brushed past him the usually serious Lou surprisingly stretched out, aimed at her chin, and gave her an intimate and romantic flirter's touch. She ignored him, but he still enjoyed the little pleasure. After emptying the garbage, he had a great chat with his neighbors by the roadside.

When he was walking back to the apartment building, Lou bumped into his wife.

"What are you going to do?" he asked her, garbage can in hand.

"I forgot to close the windows when I left the office. I have to go back to close them," she said.

"Were you home just now?"

"I haven't gone upstairs yet."

Lou felt there was something wrong as he walked on. "Since my wife hasn't gone upstairs yet, then who—?" Now he broke out in a cold sweat. All of a sudden, Lou felt terrified and rushed up the stairs.

When he got to the fourth floor, his neighbor, Yun, a woman who worked for him in his office and who lived across the corridor, was coming downstairs. Yun, a good friend of his wife's, wore the same woolen windbreaker and had the same long hair as Lou's wife.

Lou felt an explosion in his head. He staggered into his apartment and collapsed on the sofa, shivering all over.

Upon her return home, his loving wife found him looking queer, so she asked if he was all right. Lou said he had a little chill. Seeing sweat oozing from his forehead, she thought he was ill, so she helped him to bed. The nervous Lou then asked her, "Did I pat your face when I was going upstairs just now?"

"Pat? No." She smiled sweetly.

"It was not you—" Lou was more frightened now, and he started to shiver again, muttering something his wife could not make out.

When he saw Yun at work the next day, Lou blushed like a thief who had been caught red-handed. He dared not look at her. Shivering, he tried to explain to her when nobody was around, "I'm so sorry, Yun. I mistook you for my wife—"

"Mr. Lou, will you please stop it!" she cut him short, as she found his behavior rather weird. But he continued, "I'm really sorry. Last night—"

"What's the matter with you?" said Yun in surprise, running out of the office, terrified.

For two days in a row, the agitated, red-faced Lou would try to apologize to Yun and to ask for her forgiveness whenever they were alone. The more he tried, the more weird he seemed. Thinking he might end up causing trouble, Yun told her good friend, Lou's wife, what had been going on.

So when he returned home, his wife reproached him severely, "What a husband you are, Lou! You are trying to start an affair with someone! She has complained to me about you."

Lou knew he was in trouble, aware that Yun had told her all about it. He felt too ashamed of himself to face anybody. After five

days of mental turmoil, he eventually collapsed. While he was being taken to hospital, he still kept saying, "Sorry, Yun."

Yun came to visit Lou, dressed in the same woolen windbreaker. He saw Yun and his wife, who was caring for him, wore the same clothing, their hair done in exactly the same way as the day he met Yun on the stairs. Hardly able to distinguish one from the other, he suddenly felt guilty, which urged him to repent again. "I'm sorry, Yun. When I was emptying the garbage that day, I mistook you for my wife."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand you!" Yun was at a loss.

"So, it's all for that!" Lou's wife giggled as she joined in. "It was me you touched that day! Aren't you being funny?"

Lou shook his head and frowned, still looking guilty. "You both know I am ill. So you gang up in order to comfort me. But please believe me, Yun. I didn't do it on purpose. I am not that kind of man."

His helpless wife could not but move closer to him and say, "Now, silly old man! Touch me again if you don't believe us!" Lou stretched out to touch her chin and gave it a pinch, his face lighting up instantly. He stared at Yun, then at his wife, before bursting into uncontrollable laughter.

The shine in his eyes that had long been lost started to radiate again. "I have good news for you," he told his wife. "I have been commended by the bureau director!"

Nearly Said

By Gao Weixi

Melancholy emerged in my mind as if it were a ghost. Day after day, I tried to shake it off, but it clung to my heart; I tried to kick it out, yet it lingered in my soul. It seemed as if it would accompany me throughout my life. I was lost in astonishment—what had happened?

In the barracks, men always outnumbered women. Beautiful as a rose, you had a slender figure with a tender temperament, just like a phoenix standing in a flock of chickens—a rare treasure. Many eyes stared at you with admiration. There was that short section director who would stand by you whenever we had to line up, whether it was morning drill, meal time or evening roll call. Everybody felt surprised, but your generosity allowed you to ignore everything, treating him with courtesy.

Perhaps he had somebody bragging to you about him—a tall, big man often came to visit you openly. I did not take it to heart when I first saw you two sitting on a tricycle heading for town, but soon I sensed something wrong there. Some said he exploited the crisis of a relationship; others said you invited a wolf to your house.

By chance I once saw his coquettish look almost sparking a line of self-conceit in you. Then I thought, perhaps you really had made your choice.

You and I were only colleagues in language teaching, that's all. We might have more common conversation topics. We did often have

little disputes over Confucius,* the literary merits and blemishes of Pushkin and Chekhov, and the importance of Sherlock Holmes's detective stories in literary history. But those were just academic issues, weren't they?

At dusk in May, the pomegranate blossoms were bright as fire. I leaned against the tree trunk as you sat on the fork, opened your red lips, and in a low voice began to sing the "Song of Mei Niang." When you finished singing, we were lost in silence. We each embraced the evening wind, and did not want to leave. Then what did I decipher from the dancing freckles of moonlight on your face which crept through the flowers when the moon appeared in the east? It was a poem written without words. It was a three-dimensional picture. It was holy teaching that exposed human secrets. My heart began to tremble.

Then it was another May, when the earth was covered with pomegranate blossoms again. Our old wounds had just healed, but we ran into each other again. You whispered to me when nobody was around, "Everything's been pre-arranged. I never knew I would marry him." Didn't your words spoil the scenery? "What do you mean?" I asked. You looked down, lost in thought for a moment. Instead of answering me, you gave a sad smile and tripped away, leaving behind a lifetime mystery.

Always dim and vague, now visible, now invisible, you never faded in my mind during those long years. In May when petals fell in riotous profusion, I often walked back and forth under the tree, cherishing that little feeling you had left in me, picking up the fallen leaves and chewing on the days that had passed. Using that drifting

* *Translator's note:* Confucius (551-476 BC) was a sage in ancient China, born in the feudal State of Lu, or today's Shandong Province. He advocated a system of morality and statecraft that would preserve peace and afford the people stable and fair government. The influence of his doctrines has spread from generation to generation and far beyond China itself.

train of thought, I tried but never succeeded to draw your clear figure: it was always like one drawn in water—once you wiped it, it was gone. Yet just like a spirit lingering around, momentarily you would appear in my mind again. As our ancestors said, hardly had I closed my eyes when I saw you again.

May God be our witness: we never said or did anything that lovers would have done. Perhaps because of this, it invites more guessing and provokes more thinking. And probably because of that, our relationship has reached such a lasting state that it takes shape after our thinking and creates kindred spirits. It was God's will that this piece of blank paper be created, ready for a most beautiful and ingenious human picture to be painted by a clever hand, brushes, paints and ink lying by, ready for use.

The last words I heard from you were forwarded to me by another person: "Tell him I wish him good luck!" You asked someone to forward your message even though today's means of communication are so advanced that nobody really needs anyone's assistance. May I ask, you cunning woman, what are you really up to? What message do you intend to convey?

You wanted to say it, but you did not. You wanted to say it, but you never did! It seems you just wanted to create a broken relationship that is not totally broken. Several decades have flown by. Indeed, it is that "last wish," like gossamer, now drifting away, now clinging around me, that has been resounding in my ears up till today.

I was told that you still live in my remote home city. Human feelings change day in, day out. Time can turn out tragedies, but wonders more so. I sincerely hope that you live better than I do. I am sure you do!

Midsummer Lotus

By Liu Liying

The bright moon appeared in the sky, covering Lotus's courtyard with a layer of frost. It was at this time that Lotus, entering her courtyard, heard a loud cough from Dad.

"Fooling around. You just keep fooling around!" Dad spat heavily on the ground.

"I've been sitting and chatting with Xiu'er at her home. That's all."

"Sitting and chatting." He spat on the ground again. "I've brought you up to such a big girl, and now you just sit and chat!"

"I've carried the water and filled the jar, and I've carried the firewood for the stove, too," said Lotus.

Dad then busied himself smoking his pipe. Having smoked tobacco this way for more than half of his life, he would huff and puff non-stop throughout the winter. It rent one's heart to see his bony chest working like a bellows. Once her mother bought him a carton of cigarettes instead, asking him to stop smoking his pipe. "It's harmful for you," she said. Her father snatched it from her, smashing and trampling the cigarettes until the floor was covered with broken tobacco fragments.

"Bad woman. Bad woman! You could use up a mountain of gold and silver if we had one, you cheap woman! What a great wife you are! You are buying cigarettes for your man. You want me to smoke this family to bankruptcy, huh?"

Lotus's mom remained quiet as a mouse.

"Mom," said Lotus, "sooner or later, you will be beaten to death

by Dad."

"But you must know the husband is as important as Heaven. With your sick father around, we are a complete family with everybody alive."

Tears filled Lotus's eyes. "When I have the money, I'll buy a whole truckload of cigarettes for Dad to tread on. He's got to stop when he's tired out."

"Don't think money is easy to make! It's not free for you to pick up. It's called fate."

In the bright moon, Dad's pipe bowl glowed up and down with sparkles, looking like a small fireball. "Your marriage with the man in Nanling is a done deal."

"Done?" asked Lotus.

"Done," Dad repeated.

Lotus's mother stood in the central room of the house, her hands resting on the door frame with one leg inside the threshold and the other outside. Mom was only forty-something years old, but she had so much grey hair.

"No father-in-law and no mother-in-law; no brother-in-law and no sister-in-law. The day you are married, you'll be the hostess of the family," Dad said. "They have sent over the money this afternoon."

"Really?" said Lotus.

"Really," Dad said.

"I've just talked to Xiu'er," Lotus said. "She said the good thing about this marriage is he is a lazy good-for-nothing, fond of food but not work."

Dad's face suddenly seemed to be covered with frost. "You know it all?"

Lotus glanced at Dad, then Mom.

Then she caught sight of her elder, crippled brother limping in the yard. Whether the moon lit the yard in part or in full did not matter to him. Pushing away his rice bowl, he would drag along his lame leg, limping back and forth in the courtyard. Her brother's

footsteps were rhythmically uneven, with one heavier than the other. They seemed to cut the hearts of the whole family like a huge, dull saw, causing permanent anxiety. At this time Lotus would hear Dad's deep cough. "I know a three-legged toad is nowhere to be found, but I don't believe we can't find him a two-legged woman."

Lotus knew what was in Dad's mind—he was waiting for her nod so that he could pick a date for her wedding and start to buy material to make her new clothes, but Lotus just would not open her mouth. She said to herself, "I don't have to read the looks on your face like Mom. You won't knead me as you like."

At this moment, her mother tumbled out of the door, throwing herself on her knees in front of Lotus. "My good child," she said, "here I am, kneeling before you. Mom will tell you the truth. They have sent over a big stack of bills, enough for your brother to find a wife and build a new house. But I know you'll suffer from this marriage, my poor child. Mom has let you down."

No sooner had Lotus's father's flying foot landed on her mother's face than blood started oozing from her mouth. "A high mountain cannot cover the sun. She fed on your milk. How could you kneel before her!" said Dad.

"If you ever dare to touch my mom again, I'll go straight to Nanling to tell them I have broken off the engagement!" The blood from Mom's mouth dyed red a large spot on her bluish-white flat-collared blouse. The blouse had been given to Lotus's family when the county government had been helping the needy last spring. In the spring, her mom did not really want to wear it, lest people feel jealous of her. Only later on when she found everybody in the neighborhood wearing clothes given by the government—some even made of better materials than hers—did she dare to wear it out.

"Mom, I'll take it," said Lotus. "I'll take it. That's all." With this, Lotus kicked the folding stool her father had just sat on in the courtyard, and it flew out of the front entrance.

One day, when Lotus was a small child, she went to cut grass on

the slopes with her brother, but on their way home, they encountered two dogs engaged in a fierce fight. The sickle she was holding provoked them. The dogs thought she was going to harm them, so they turned about to attack Lotus. Her desperate brother stopped them by throwing his basket at them. The dogs then started to come back at him. His sickle was in the basket, so he shouted, "Lotus, cut the dogs. Quick! Cut the dogs. Quick!" Lotus quickly went to his rescue, but she missed the dogs. Instead, she cut her brother on the leg. Blood was gushing out of his leg. She tried to stop it with several handfuls of soil, but it kept gushing out. Later on, one of her brother's legs became lame.

In the summer of the following year, Lotus was married to the man in Nanling. After marriage Lotus seldom visited her parents.

Once when Xiu'er was visiting her parents in Nanling, she saw a noticeable scar the size of a red date right on the cheekbone of Lotus's face. When Xiu'er enquired about it, Lotus said her husband had hit her with a brick. One year later, when Xiu'er went to visit her again at home, she was told that Lotus had become the head of a fruit-processing factory in the town and that she was now busy from morning till night.

"Is her husband still hitting her?" Xiu'er asked.

"He's now one of her employees," the villagers told her. "Everybody knows he's a violent man, but in the end, he has to listen to Lotus. It's called brine touching bean curd: everything has its vanquisher."

Xiu'er breathed a deep sigh.

"Croak, croak, croak." Xiu'er heard the clear croaking of frogs, as she saw the lovely lotus flowers in full bloom on the lake in front of the village.

The Noble Lady

By Shen Zulian

Her husband had left her a house, a large sum of money and a car before fleeing China with his young secretary. The wife found little to regret—what did she have to regret, anyway? He had owed more debts than he could ever pay, but he had had more money than he could ever spend. Naturally, fleeing the country was the best choice for him. As for her, though she had lost her husband, she had gained the custody of three sons, living an easy life. In the world she knew, there weren't that many women who were blessed with three sons.

Accordingly, she started to consider herself a noble lady. Just look at her: she visited the beauty parlor once a day; her hair was worn in a bun at the back and a high curve in the front; her ring, necklace, bracelet and earrings were all made of pure gold. Wearing a pair of noisy high-heeled shoes, she looked like an out-and-out arrogant and overbearing woman, as her breathing could almost be heard from heaven, her airs filling the sky. As one could expect, she could not get along with her relatives; nor could she share conversational topics with her friends. And since she did not like playing mahjong, she ended up being a loner, accompanied only by her shadow. Every day she would watch TV and play with her little dog. Luckily, she had a peculiar habit of sightseeing, so when she grew tired at home she would go out to enjoy the scenery. Outdoor activities were easy for her because she owned a car. The moment she gestured, her chauffeur was at her service.

The chauffeur was a tall, strong and simple man who loved his job more than his life. Since he was hired to drive her around, he

would follow his lady's lead all day long. Whenever he saw her step out of her house, dressed up with her jewelry on, he would immediately walk over to the car, opening the door with one hand and covering the entrance overhead with the other. Only when his lady had taken her seat would he get in through his own door, start the engine and ask, "Ma'am, where are we going?"

Only then would she tell him where she was going. Usually she uttered only one or two syllables, for example, "Fangcheng," "Beihai," or "Nanning," never telling him one extra word. In the car, she would also say two words only—"Let's go" and "Stop now"—or just one—"Go" and "Stop." When she got to the destination, she would get out of her car without saying anything to him. Her smart driver, though, would wait for her patiently, even if it meant waiting from morning till afternoon. During her absence he would busy himself polishing the car until it was shiny, without a speck of dust. When she got back to the car, he would again open the door for her and protect her head as she got in. Then he would sit still behind the wheel, usually silent. He would start the engine only when she said, "Go." After they returned, he would see her to the mansion, and only when all was safe and sound would he drive the car into the garage then go home himself.

She had given him a pager and would call him whenever she needed him. That is the way the boss used her employee, and nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened between them.

Then there was a morning when the chauffeur, after she got into the car, noticed from his rear-view mirror a faint smile on her face which was a little rosy.

The chauffeur again asked her where she was going.

"Where do you want to go?" she said. "Any place is fine with me. I just feel so bored at home."

"Asking me? Has the sun risen from the west today?" The chauffeur smiled to himself. "How about Dongxing then?" he suggested.

"Up to you." The chauffeur found his lady clearly more talkative than before. When they got to Dongxing, she told him that the border was a bewildering place, so she wanted him to accompany her. Having had a great time, on their way home she also broke the rule by sitting in the front seat next to the chauffeur. Smiling, she would look at his hands on the wheel from time to time, or watch him step on the gas pedal, or stare at his eyes that looked into the distance.

"*Shifu*,* is it difficult to learn to drive?"

"What? You want to drive yourself?"

"Yes. I want to learn. Could you teach me?"

"Doesn't that mean I will lose my job?"

"Take it easy. I've never said I don't want you. You are such a good driver. I'll have you for the rest of my life."

"For the rest of your life!" His jitters made the car shake, causing her to fall onto his right arm.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I didn't do that purposely."

"Does it matter even if you did?" She gazed at him with wide-open eyes. How beautiful her eyes were, the surprised chauffeur found!

"I really didn't mean to do it."

Only then did she reluctantly sit up straight.

When she returned home, in the same way, the chauffeur opened the door for her and saw to it that she got out safely. When he was about to drive the car into the garage, she suddenly said, "Could you stay for dinner with me tonight?" She sounded as docile as a domestic cat.

"How could I say no when my lady says yes, but—"

"But what? Can't you just call home and tell them you are still in Dongxing and won't be home tonight?"

Thus, for the first time, he entered her magnificent dining room. When he wanted to go home after dinner, she stopped him by saying,

* *Translator's note: Shifu* is a polite term for "driver" in the Chinese language.

"Didn't you say on the phone that you are in Dongxing tonight? Also, I have some more work for you to do."

"Whatever you want me to do, please just tell me."

"I have something to move around in my room. You are strong, so I want you to help me."

"You just need my strength? That's easy." So he followed her into her bedroom. Inside, his eyes popped at the furniture. What a bedroom—he could never have imagined it! The walls, the floor, the bed and the other furniture—everything dazzled his eyes as if he had entered a royal palace. His lady was smiling at him.

"What should I move?"

"This," she pointed at herself. "Come over here."

Understanding what she meant, he shuddered. "Ma'am, you are such a noble lady. I'm just a driver, I dare not."

"What's wrong with being a noble lady? Isn't a noble lady a woman too? You don't like me—" She began to sob. "You don't know how miserable I am."

An impulse backed by bravery that he had never had emboldened him to stride toward her and hold her up in his arms tightly.