

Childless

By P'ou Song-lin

In the city of The-Great-name lived a rich idler named Tuan Correct-happiness. He had then attained the age of forty and still he had no son. His wife, Peaceful-union, was extremely jealous, so that he dared not openly buy a concubine, as law authorised him, to continue his lineage.

When he saw that, at forty, he had no son, he secretly bought a young girl, whom he carefully left outside his own house.

A woman is not easily deceived—a jealous woman especially; Peaceful-union soon discovered the whole truth. She had the girl brought before her and took advantage of an impertinent answer to have her beaten a hundred blows; after that, she turned on her husband and drove him nearly mad with reproaches. What could the poor man do? He sold his concubine to a neighbouring family named Liu, and peace was restored in the house.

The days and years passed on without any change in the situation; the nephews of Correct-happiness, seeing that he was old already and had no son, began to fawn upon him, each of them trying to be the one that would be elected as an adopted son to continue the family cult, as is the custom.

Peaceful-union at last began to see her error and regretted bitterly what she had done.

“You are only sixty years old,” said she to her husband. “Is it too late? Let us buy two chosen girls who will be your second wives; maybe one of them will give you a son.”

The old man smiled sadly; he did not entertain any great hope; nevertheless, the concubines were bought. After a year, to the great surprise and joy of everybody, both gave birth—one to a girl, the other to a boy. But both children died a few months after.

Correct-happiness, when winter set in, caught a cold and was soon in a desperate state of health. His nephews were always beside him; but, seeing he would adopt neither of them, they began looting the house; they found at last the treasure and took it away openly.

The moribund was too ill even to know what they did. Peaceful-union tried in vain to stop them.

“Will you leave me to die of hunger? I am the wife of your uncle. I am entitled to a part of his riches.”

But they would not hear her.

“If you had borne a son to our uncle, or if he had adopted one of us, we would not have touched a single copper cash of his treasure; but, through your own fault, he has nobody to maintain his rights; we take what is our own.”

When the day ended, the widow found herself alone in the deserted and emptied house, crying over the body of her dead husband.

Suddenly she heard steps outside the door; a young man appeared on the threshold, his eyes full of tears, covered with the white dress of mourning. He entered, kneeled beside the corpse, and, knocking the ground with his forehead, he began the ritual lamentations.

Peaceful-union stopped crying and looked at him with astonishment; she did not know him.

“May I ask your noble name? Who are you to cry over my husband’s death?”

“I am the deceased’s only son.”

The widow started with surprise and a pang of her old jealousy; would her husband have had a son without her knowing it?

But the next words of the young man explained everything.

Twenty years ago, when she had beaten and sold away the first concubine of her husband, she did not know the girl bore already the fruit of this short union. Six months later she had a son, to whom she gave the name of Correct-sadness; but, bearing in mind the bad treatment she had received, she asked the Liu family to keep the child as one of their own. They consented and sent the boy to school with their children.

When Correct-sadness was eighteen, the chief of the Liu family died; the family dispersed, and only a small legacy was left to the young man. Believing he was a member of the family, he could not understand what happened, and asked his mother; she told him the truth. Resenting the hard treatment inflicted on his mother, he awaited the death of his father to make his own identity known.

Peaceful-union was very happy to hear this story.

"I am no more without a son," said she. "All that my nephews have taken away, treasure and furniture, they must bring back again. If not, the magistrate will send them to die in jail."

In fact, the nephews refused to give back anything. The widow began a lawsuit; everything at last was restored to the legal heir.

Peaceful-union hastened to choose him a wife, and as soon as the matrimonial festivities were ended she told her daughter-in-law:

"My dear child, if I were you, I would ask Correct-sadness to buy immediately one or two good concubines; if you have a son and they have also, so much the better, but you can't realise how difficult to bear it is to be childless."