Riches and rank are like dew on a twig,
Success in the examinations like a bubble on water.
Gold at your girdle and robes of purple—these are as halters for
a horse,
And a rope through your nose won’t be far behind.
The lucky groom’s arrow hits the peacocks on the screen;¹
As he pulls the silk thread, the beauty behind the screen blushes.²
In the nuptial chamber the newlyweds meet in bliss,
But once the play is over, the puppets are just wooden images after all.

At the fifth watch, Tuizhi quickly stirred the pill into pure rootless water and gave it to Xiangzi to drink. It felt like thunder in his stomach, and his throat seemed to become unlocked. Soon he spat out all kinds of unclean matter, then opened his mouth and called out, “Uncle!”

His heart filled with joy, Tuizhi said, “Thanks be to Heaven and Earth—this drug truly is of divine effectiveness!”

However, when Mme. Zheng and Mme. Dou came to question Xiangzi, as before he did not say a word. Tuizhi said, “Stop chattering and worrying! Since he has already spoken once, of course he will speak again. Quick, pack my luggage! I will travel to the capital to seek success in the examinations. If I secure even
the smallest appointment, I will return home to glorify the ancestors and justify the long years I spent studying.”

Then Tuizhi took leave of the whole family. Pressing on relentlessly during an arduous journey, he arrived and sat for the examinations—but unexpectedly he failed. He was ashamed to return home and so remained in the capital, doing all kinds of odd jobs to survive and living on other people’s pity. In the meantime Xiangzi still did not utter a word. There was nothing Mme. Zheng could do about it, but she still hoped that when he had grown up, he would marry and beget a son to continue the Han family line.

When Xiangzi was seven years old, Mme. Zheng fell ill and died. As Mme. Dou took it upon herself to take care of all the funeral arrangements, Xiangzi wept like an adult, deeply aware of the loss he had suffered. In front of Mme. Zheng’s coffin, Mme. Dou prayed, “Brother and Sister-in-law, in life you were humans; in death you have become spirits. The Han family has only one descendant—why is he mute? It cannot be because the ancestors have not accumulated merit. It must be because we have some hidden failings. I pray that your spirits in Heaven may protect Han Xiang, that Heaven may bestow intelligence upon him, that he may daily grow in wisdom, that he may escape all calamities, and that he may overcome all obstacles so that the family line shall be continued.” Having finished praying, she wept again.

At night Mme. Zheng appeared to Mme. Dou and told her, “Although my child Han Xiang can’t speak at present, he will be able to do so when he reaches the age of fourteen. A time will come when our family will depend on him for its deliverance. Please be patient, my sister-in-law.” Mme. Dou awoke with a start, realizing that it had been a dream. She thought to herself, “If my sister-in-law’s spirit is so perspicacious after death, then Han Xiangzi definitely is not an ordinary mortal. Let us raise him carefully, see how he turns out as an adult, and then take it from there.”

Tuizhi was still tarrying in the capital, his purse empty, his clothes worn out. He had received the news of his sister-in-law’s death, but could not return home, though his heart was filled with limitless sorrow. He failed three more times, but then to his joy he passed the provincial examination. After the official celebration banquet, he quickly returned home, pressing on through day and night.

Just as he arrived at the gate of his house, he ran into his mute nephew Xiangzi, who had just turned fourteen. He greeted Tuizhi with the words “Congratulations, Uncle! Congratulations!”

When Tuizhi saw him speaking and making a very courteous bow, he took
him by the hand, and they entered the house together. Mme. Dou came out to welcome him. The greetings over, Tuizhi asked, “When did my nephew begin to talk?”

“From the time you left the house until today, I have never heard him utter a word,” Mme. Dou replied. “Even when his mother died, I only saw him shed tears profusely, but didn’t hear him wail.”

Tuizhi said, “Just now when he saw me, he said, ‘Congratulations, Uncle!’—surely that counts as speaking! Unworthy though I am, I had the good fortune of passing the examinations. It was out of joy that my nephew was able to speak—this is a great blessing for the family. The only sad thing is that my brother and his wife died so early that they could not see me pass the examinations and see Xiangzi grow up.”

“Please do not grieve,” Mme. Dou said.

From the side Xiangzi put in, “Ever since I swallowed the Daoist’s pill, I’ve understood the shrinking and growing of yin and yang, the waxing and waning of sun and moon, the prosperity and decay of ages, the successes and defeats of ancient and present times. The scriptures of the sages and traditions of the worthies are just words floating from the mouth. The canon of the emperors and the counsels of the kings are not the truth I feel in my heart. The whole world is before my eyes; blessed places and grotto-heavens are right in front of me. In my humble opinion, as a human being living in the world, one should aim to transcend the three spheres and rise from this ordinary world to become a divine immortal.”

“Knowledge has limits, but learning is endless,” Tuizhi told him. “These words of yours smack of smugness and self-content, of unwillingness to make an effort to succeed. What can be done about this? We need to invite a tutor to teach you how to study the *Odes* and *Documents* diligently; only then will you succeed in the examinations.”

“There’s a poem I’d like to present to you,” Xiangzi said.

“I do not study the Odes and Documents; I do not seek fame.
My whole mind looks toward the Dao. I delight in the mountain forests.
One day I will master the arts of the divine immortals;
Then you too will believe in the perfection of the numinous elixir.”

“Who taught you to compose poetry?” Tuizhi said.

“If you think you must test me—well, why would I have to ape others?” asked Xiangzi.

“If you are so clever, why do you say you don’t want to study?” Tuizhi said.
“The learned man dresses in a purple gown and a golden girdle, he eats roasted phoenix and boiled dragon, in his hands he holds an ivory tablet, and his feet are shod with black court shoes. He rides in a high chariot pulled by a team of four steeds, and when he rests he enjoys the company of dancing and singing girls. He has only to shout and the waters of the Yellow River will flow upstream. He has only to laugh and the flowers of the imperial gardens will overflow and fill the forests. Look, I am now enjoying prestige and glory, but ten years ago I was just a student admired by no one.”

“I do want to study,” Xiangzi replied. “But in my former existence I didn’t plant the seeds for a body to be girded with gold and clothed in purple, a tongue to taste phoenix and boiled dragon, a spirit to travel in chariots and ride horses, or the skill to dally with courtesans. So I’d better engage in quiet contemplation of a hibiscus in the mountains, or discuss the scriptures under a pine tree while breaking off a dew-covered twig. I have a little lyric to the tune ‘Ascending the Little Tower’—please listen:

“What I love is the calm beauty of mountains and waters.  
What I love is to live in seclusion in a humble cottage.  
What I love is to pass my days quietly in a thatched hut at the end of a winding trail.  
What I love is to joyfully drink a few cups.  
What I love is to snore and slumber and not get up even when the sun is already in the sky.”

“This is all idle and artful talk with no substance to it,” Tuizhi said. “With this attitude, how will you ever amount to anything?”

Xiangzi said, “Please listen to me”:

(To the tune “Nezha”)

“If I were to become a great man,  
I’d be wearing golden fish pendants on my girdle and dress in a purple gown.  
If I were to become a retainer to an important man,  
I’d have to resemble Qin Zhuang in recklessness.  
If I were to study the Three Histories and the Documents,  
I’d have to emulate the labors of Che Yin.  
But if I were to become a Daoist,
I’d be pacing the mists and sleeping on the clouds.
Of these three options, only the Daoist is worth honoring.”

(To the tune “Magpie on a Branch”)

“I just yearn to go and live in the mountain forests,
There to arrange my fishing lines,
Become a Daoist,
And spend some years in a thatched hut.
The villas of the wealthy and
The emblems of high office
Do not equal straw sandals and a black headcloth.”

“Though a little child, you are bright and clever. Why should you want to go from door to door and beg for your food?” Tuizhi asked.
Xiangzi replied, “Uncle!

“By regarding me as a prodigy
You actually belittle me!
I see being a child prodigy as child’s play.
I see the great Confucians as vulgar men.
How could a son from a rich family be the equal of me, Han Xiangzi?
You want me to become a high official,
But I fear that one day my fine horses will be dead and my gold used up.”

“I won’t listen to your extravagant talk!” Tuizhi told him. “I want you to study, improve the family’s standing, and give honor to your parents. Then and only then shall I be satisfied.”

“There is no need to be anxious, Uncle,” Xiangzi replied. “Your wishes are easily fulfilled.”

“You will be a blessing to the Han family only if you agree to make an effort to better yourself. I talked with the scholar Lin Gui, while we traveled to the capital together. He has a daughter named Luying, who is only about fifteen years old. Her father has promised her to you as a wife. Right away, I shall choose an auspicious day and hour for you to marry her and bring her to our house. My mind won’t be at ease until you have become husband and wife and have produced offspring.”

“As you wish, Uncle,” Xiangzi consented.
Then Tuizhi called on Zhang Qian to say to the local diviner, “My master wants to complete a marriage agreement with Scholar Lin. May I trouble you to select an auspicious day that will ensure good fortune for many generations to come?” Having received his orders, Zhang Qian went to speak to the diviner.

That master’s name was Yuan Zixu, with the adopted name Ruoyou. In earlier years he had been an idle loafer, sponge, and philanderer, who wore on his head a gaudy cap. One day as he was traveling in some county away from home, he was insulted by an official wearing the square cap of a scholar. Greatly angered, Yuan said, “Anyone would like to wear the scholar’s square cap. I don’t have a square cap like you, but only get to wear a headscarf. Is that a reason to bully me?” At that time he decided to begin studying. He bought some books on astrology, physiognomy, geomancy, and the choosing of auspicious days, and spent day after day at home reading them. He also got hold of a copy of The Annals of All Dynasties, which he recited at home from morning to evening.

Having memorized these books, he began to speak in a grandiose manner in front of others, mixing in classical expressions and peppering his speech with tidbits from his bagful of learning. He boasted that there were no books he had not read, there was nothing he did not know, and that he understood past and present and was well versed in the ways of the world. However, the times were not favorable to him and he never passed an official examination. In fact he was like a three-legged cat—not particularly good at anything. However, the rich and powerful of Changli County lacked cultivation and learning, and usually just relied on their money and power to intimidate others. As soon as they heard Yuan Zixu’s clever speech, they were amazed by it and were hoodwinked into flocking to him. There was none who did not praise him, saying how talented he was, that he had hardly a peer in the world.

Zixu then began to wear a square cap and fashionable clothes. Outside his door he posted a placard saying, “The diviner Ruoyou lives here, who has received his knowledge from an immortal he encountered. He selects auspicious days for weddings so that the husband will achieve fame and the wife prestige. Also skilled in geomancy to help with official careers and financial distress.”

Thereafter everyone in Changli County came to him for their weddings and funerals. When he was lucky, the marriages were successful and the burials proceeded in an auspicious fashion. When he was unlucky, nobody realized how much they were cheated by him. People never blamed him, and even sent him gifts of wine and rice, money, linen and cotton, firewood and coal, household goods, books, and paintings. Some people even presented expensive liquor and delicacies to him. He was a man who could make a living out of thin air with
his bare hands, which explained the good fortune he seemed to enjoy for the time being.

On the day when Zhang Qian sought him out and spoke to him, Yuan Zixu replied, “Having received your master’s command, I will select an extraordinarily good day and will report to his home. I only ask for your master’s deep gratitude for my services.”

“If only you choose well, I will return and talk to the master, and he certainly will not treat you lightly,” Zhang Qian said.

“Friend Zhang, if you put in a word for me, I will give you a portion of the gains,” Yuan Zixu promised. Zhang Qian assented, took his leave, and departed.

Yuan Zixu went into his house and said gleefully, “Han Tuizhi is a man who knows tact and recognizes a worthy person, quite unlike these commoners around here. Now that he has retained me for the selection of the wedding day, I must exert myself to pick a particularly good day for him. That way I can milk him for at least three to five ounces of silver. However, it’s easier said than done. I am not sure what the best thing to do is, as lucky and unlucky elements are changing all the time. Let’s get out all the almanacs and carefully choose a day for him, making sure that I don’t ruin my reputation.”

Yuan Zixu indeed took out many almanacs and spread them out on the table. What kinds of books were these?

There were *Shortcuts to the Almanac*, *Encyclopedia for Choosing Days*, *Marriage Charts of the Nine Heavens*, and *Universal Marriage Calendar*. Lined up in front and back were *Yin-Yang Charts* and *Exposé of the Hidden Jia*. To the right and left were placed *Scripture of Marriage* and *Yellow Register Liturgy*. Turning the pages, one finds that each author’s opinions are different. Looking through them, it turns out that the views of each book are unlike those of the others. Although the diviner piled up the books and went over them again and again, he could not merge these divergent opinions into a date that would yield good fortune for many generations.

Yuan Zixu browsed back and forth, but could not find a good day. Eventually he sighed, “Although the thirteenth day of the second month is a Divine Immortal Day, it clashes with the Lodge of the Widowed Simurgh. On the other hand, it harmonizes with the Hall of Zhou. Let’s write it down and give it to Han, but make sure that he himself endorses it.” Quickly he took out a card of costly Nanjing Double Red paper and wrote, “The wuzi hour of the bingchen day, in the yimao
month of the *jiashen* year. The joy of Heaven will arrive at the gate, and a precious star will illumine the household. Prospects for official honors and the blessed virtue of the Purple Empyrean all come together on this day. After the completion of this wedding, your son will certainly be adorned with the precious jade ornaments of officialdom, ascend the phoenix pavilions and dragon towers of the high ministers, amass riches greater than mountains of copper and seas of pearls. Not for several decades will you find another such day."

When Tuizhi saw this message, his heart was filled with joy. Right away, he gave Yuan Zixu three ounces of silver. Having received the money, Yuan returned home very happy. From the sum he gave six cash to Zhang Qian as a sign of his gratitude, whereupon Zhang Qian too brightened right up. Tuizhi called Zhang Qian and ordered him to prepare soup and fruit for the betrothal ceremony, and then discussed the arrangements with Mme. Dou. They prepared hairpins and earrings, satin and cloth, and had the matchmaker Xu go to the house of Scholar Lin to tell him that they wanted to send the chest of betrothal gifts and arrange a wedding.

Scholar Lin raised no objections whatsoever. On the auspicious day, they invited all the relatives to open the chest and view the sumptuous presents:

The flower clasps to bind the hair were all made of rhinoceros horn, pearls, and precious stones, their golden flowers and five-fold stamens tinkling with a clear sound. The inlaid bracelets and hairpins were all of white and red jade, complemented by dark jades with a flashing raven-black sheen. There were hairpins to encircle the face like flying dragons, phoenixes hovering over jade trees with a tinkling sound. Precious hats spewed flames, golden fish inhaled billows, azure leaves greeted the wind. Sixteen kinds of broth, sixteen kinds of fruit, all elegantly arranged in bowls. A hundred feet of satin, a thousand ounces of silver, all laid out in profusion inside the chest. Up front went bearers of golden drums and flags, striking up a great noise. Held high above was a yellow silk umbrella. It was an impressive scene, arranged in perfection to the last detail.

When Scholar Lin saw these many gifts, his joy was limitless. He rewarded the messengers and sent back an acceptance notice, while preparing the trousseau to give his daughter Luying in marriage to the Han family, and have her become Xiangzi’s wife.

What did Luying look like?
Straight eyes bright like autumn floods, 
a brow light in outline like a distant mountain.

Straight eyes bright like autumn floods, resembling Guanyin gazing 
at the moon’s reflection in the water. A brow light in outline like a 
distant mountain, just like Maid Mao of the Han palace. She was 
dressed in a gown delicately traced and embroidered with a hundred 
flowers. Her feet were shod with slippers adorned with flying and 
dancing pairs of phoenixes. She walked slowly in her fine skirt, her 
silken stockings suspended low. The variegated sleeves swayed gently, 
her rainbow garments floating gracefully. She really was a shining 
beauty, with a face whose loveliness was staggering. She was of a 
warm and yielding nature, possessing the virtue of complete submis-
sion to her husband.

When Tuizhi brought Luying into the house, he was overjoyed, because now 
Xiangzi’s drifting nature would be steadied and the Han family could hope for 
descendants. He expected that Xiangzi’s dreams of Daoist cultivation would sink 
away like a stone in water. However, when the banquet was over and the newly-
wed couple had retreated to their room, Luying removed her make-up and sat 
facing the wall, but Xiangzi would not take off his clothes. He lay down on a bench 
and slept there, and so the night passed without anything happening between 
them.

The two feasts of the third day and the first full month after the wedding went 
by, and Luying in accordance with custom returned for a visit to her father’s home. 
One day Mme. Dou said to Xiangzi, “It is already many days since Luying 
returned to her family. You should go and call on her.”

Xiangzi retorted, “Luying and Xiangzi are two separate persons. We are not 
pair-eyed fish or trees whose branches interlock. What good would it do if I went 
to visit her?”

“The relationship of husband and wife is a constant part of the human way,” 
Mme. Dou said. “One leads, the other follows. It is the highest realization of human 
sentiment. Even mandarin ducks sleep with their necks entwined, while the jian 
birds combine their wings to fly. If even birds have the sentiment of marriage, 
can humans be inferior?”

“Aunt, you only know that animals feel the love that makes them entwine their 
necks and combine their wings, but you don’t know the sorrow of fleeting time 
and approaching death,” Xiangzi responded. “Please listen to me:
Xiangzi drinks the wedding cup in the nuptial chamber.
“Geese and ducks come and go in swarms.  
The purple mandarin duck has to find a partner.  
But why should humans follow the example of animals?  
Husband and wife are originally birds of the same forest,  
But when death catches up with them,  
They will suffer deep distress and anxiety.  
As their voices become silent and their vital energy ceases,  
The two become separated.  
Marriage thus seems short-lived like a bubble on water or frost on the grass,  
And you will look back on it in loneliness.”

Mme. Dou said, “Since ancient times there has never been one who did not die—what remains is the historian’s record of one’s sincere heart. What is there to fear in death? When your parents died when you were young, I took you into my care, raised you, and found a wife for you. My only hope is that you will have many blessings and many sons who will continue the Han family line, worshipping at and sweeping the ancestors’ graves. How can you now utter such words, fit to kill me?”

“Do not grieve, Aunt, I will do as you command,” Xiangzi said.

“If you will do as I bid, then you are a filial and obedient child,” Mme. Dou said. “You are certain to pass the examinations soon, giving your wife a title and extending privilege to your sons. This way you won’t have been given life in vain by my brother and sister-in-law. However, if you do not listen to me, but cultivate yourself and debate the Dao, then you are just an unfilial son. And I am afraid there are no unfilial immortals in Heaven. Since ancient times it has been put very well:

“He who is filial begets filial children;  
Unfilial wretches beget unfilial sons.  
If you can be filial and brotherly, as well as loyal and trustworthy,  
What need is there to pace the Jasper Pool up in Heaven?”

Did Xiangzi agree in the end to call on Luying? To find out, listen to the next chapter.