

THE LOVE LETTERS  
OF A CHINESE LADY



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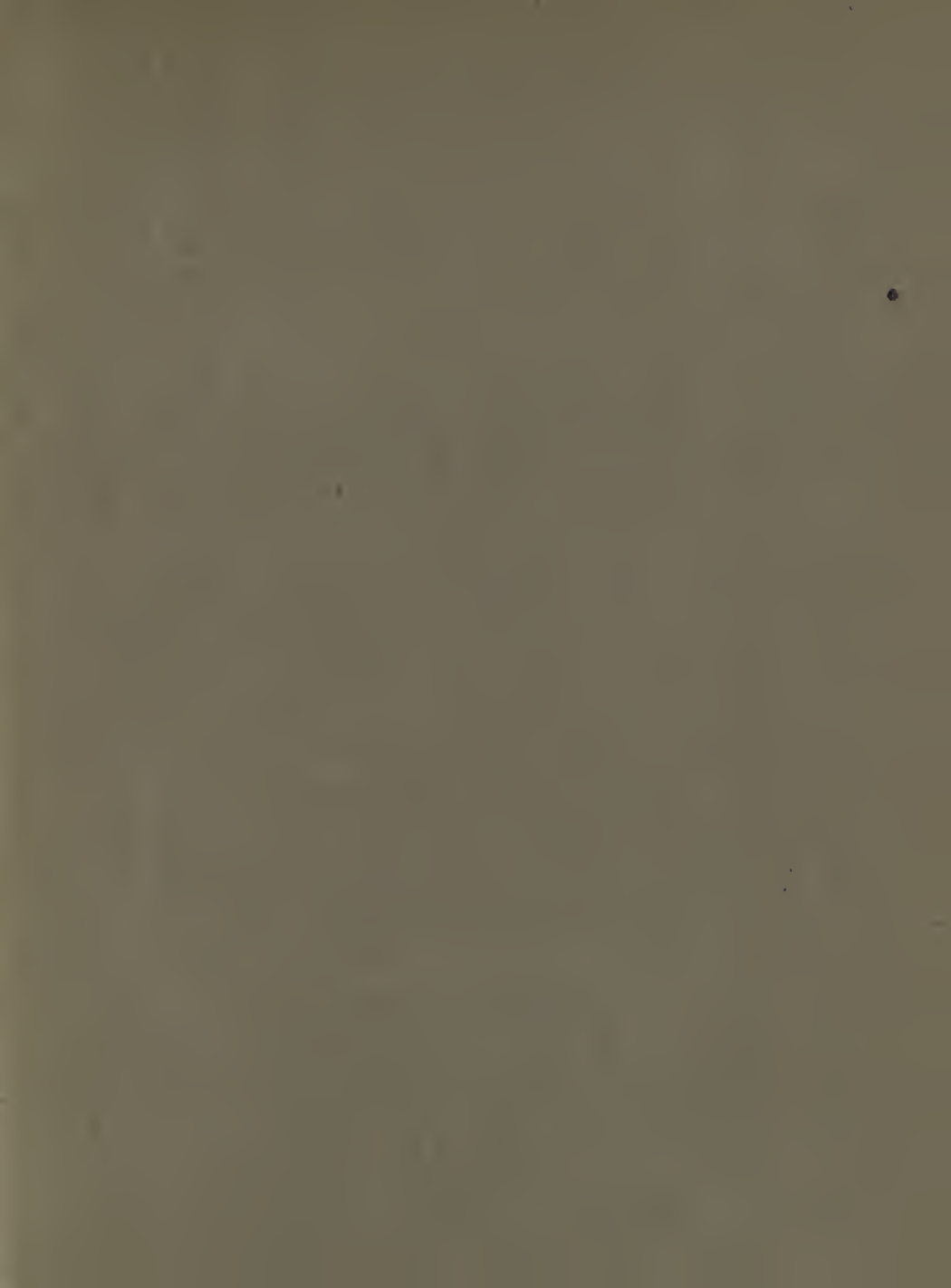


LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY



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CHINESE FAMILY GROUP.



THE LOVE LETTERS  
OF A CHINESE LADY  
BY ELIZABETH COOPER

*"The written word of Kwei-li,  
who sends with each stroke of  
her brush a part of her heart"*



T. N. FOULIS: EDINBURGH & LONDON

*Published in the November of  
Nineteen hundred & nineteen*

*Printed in Scotland by The Edinburgh Press*

*TO MY HUSBAND*

*"What I do  
And what I dream include thee, as the wine  
Must taste of its own grapes"*

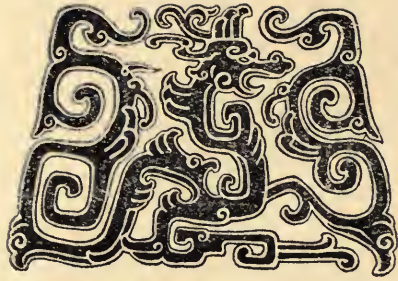
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING



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*Chosen from paintings by old Chinese masters*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN these letters I have drawn quite freely and sometimes literally from the excellent and authoritative translations of Chinese classics by Professor Giles in his "Chinese Literature" and from "The Lute of Jade" and "The Mastersingers of Japan," two books in the "Wisdom of the East" series edited by L. Cranmer-Byng and S. A. Kapadia. These translators have loved the songs of the ancient poets of China and Japan and caught with sympathetic appreciation, in their translations, the spirit of the East.

I wish to thank them for their help in making it possible to render into English the imagery and poetry used by My Lady of the Chinese Courtyard.

ELIZABETH COOPER





# PREFACE

A WRITER on things Chinese was asked why one found so little writing upon the subject of the women of China. He stopped, looked puzzled for a moment, then said, "The women of China! One never hears about them. I believe no one ever thinks about them, except perhaps that they are the mothers of the Chinese men!"

Such is the usual attitude taken in regard to the woman of the flowery Republic. She is practically unknown, she hides herself behind her husband and her sons, yet, because of that filial piety, that almost religious veneration in which all men of Eastern races hold their parents, she really exerts an untold influence upon the deeds of the men of her race.

Less is known about Chinese women than about any other women of Oriental lands. Their home life is a sealed book to the average person visiting China. Books about China deal mainly with the lower-class Chinese, as it is chiefly with that class that the average visitor or missionary comes into contact. The tourists see only the coolie woman bearing burdens in the street, trotting along with a couple of heavy baskets swung from her shoulders, or they stop to stare at the neatly dressed mothers sitting on their low stools in the narrow alleyways, patching clothing or fondling their children. They see and hear the boat-women, the women who have the most freedom of any in all China, as they weave their sampans in and out of the crowded traffic on the canals. These same tourists visit the tea-houses

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and see the gaily dressed "sing-song" girls, or catch a glimpse of a gaudily painted face, as a lady is hurried along in her sedan-chair, carried on the shoulders of her chanting bearers. But the real Chinese woman, with her hopes, her fears, her romances, her children, and her religion, is still undiscovered.

I hope that these letters, which were shown me by the writer's husband many years after they were written, will give a faint idea of the life of a Chinese lady. They were written by Kwei-li, the wife of a very high Chinese official, to her husband when he accompanied his master, Prince Chung, on his trip around the world.

She was the daughter of a viceroy of Chih-li, a man most advanced for his time, who was one of the forerunners of the present educational movement in China, a movement which has caused her youth to rise and demand Western methods and Western enterprise in place of the obsolete traditions and customs of their ancestors. To show his belief in the new spirit that was breaking over his country, he educated his daughter along with his sons. She was given as tutor Ling-Wing-pu, a famous poet of his province, who doubtless taught her the imagery and beauty of expression which is so truly Eastern.

Within the beautiful ancestral home of her husband, high on the mountain-side outside of the city of Su-Chau, she lived the quiet, sequestered life of the high-class Chinese woman, attending to the household duties, which are not light in these patriarchal homes, where an incredible

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number of people live under the same roof-tree. The sons bring their wives to their father's house instead of establishing separate homes for themselves, and they are all under the watchful eye of the mother, who can make a veritable prison or a palace for her daughters-in-law. In China the mother reigns supreme.

The mother-in-law of Kwei-li was an old-time conservative Chinese lady, the woman who cannot adapt herself to the changing conditions, who resents change of methods, new interpretations and fresh expressions of life. She sees in the new ideas that her sons bring from the foreign schools disturbers only of her life's ideals. She instinctively feels that they are gathering about her retreat, beating at her doors, creeping in at her closely shuttered windows, even winning her sons from her arms. She stands an implacable foe of progress and she will not admit that the world is moving on, broadening its outlook and clothing itself in a new expression. She feels that she is being left behind with her dead gods, and she cries out against the change which is surely but slowly coming to China, and especially to Chinese women, with the advent of education and the knowledge of the outside world.

In a household in China a daughter-in-law is of very little importance until she is the mother of a son. Then, from being practically a servant of her husband's mother, she rises to a place of equality and is looked upon with respect. She has fulfilled her one great duty, the thing for which she was created: she has given her husband a son to worship at

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his grave and at the graves of his ancestors. The great prayer which rises from the heart of all Chinese women, rich and poor, peasant and princess, is to Kwan-yin, for the inestimable blessing of sons. "Sons! Give me sons!" is heard in every temple. To be childless is the greatest sorrow that can come to a Chinese woman, as she fully realises that for this cause her husband is justified in putting her away for another wife, and she may not complain or cry out, except in secret, to her Goddess of Mercy, who has not answered her prayers. Understanding this, we can dimly realise the joy of Kwei-li upon the birth of her son, and her despair upon his death.

At this time, when she was in the very depths of despondency, when she had turned from the gods of her people, when it was feared that in her sorrow, near to madness, she would take the little round ball of sleep—opium—that has brought rest to so many despairing women in China, her servants brought her the Gospel of St John, which they bought of an itinerant colporteur in the market-place, hoping that it might interest her. In the long nights when sleep would not come to her, she read it—and found the peace she sought.

I knew her many years afterward—her husband having been appointed Governor of Kiang-su—when she was the happy mother of sons and daughters. She was a blessing to our province in many ways. Homes for the poor were erected, schools for girls were started, and the generous hands of Kwei-li were ever open to help her people. Although in

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the many charities that were started in the provincial capital her name was never mentioned, yet we who knew realised that it was the wife of the Governor who was the power behind the throne in every question affecting women or the poor and helpless.

She did not openly announce herself a Christian or affiliate with any church, I think because of family influence, but her life and deeds showed plainly that on that lone night upon the mountain-side when in her despair she called for help, she did not call in vain. She found the "unknown God."





# THE LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

I

*My Dear One,*

The house on the mountain-top has lost its soul. It is nothing but a palace with empty windows. I go upon the terrace and look over the valley where the sun sinks a golden-red ball, casting long purple shadows on the plain. Then I remember that thou art not coming from the city to me, and I say to myself that there can be no dawn that I care to see, and no sunset to gladden my eyes, unless I share it with thee.

But do not think I am unhappy. I do everything the same as if thou wert here, and in everything I say, "Would this please my master?" Meh-ki wished to put thy long chair away, as she said it was too big; but I did not permit it. It must rest where I can look at it and imagine I see thee lying in it, smoking thy water pipe; and the small table is always nearby, where thou canst reach out thy hand for thy papers and the drink thou lovest. Meh-ki also brought out the dwarf pine-tree and put it on the terrace, but I remembered thou saidst it looked like an old man who had been beaten in his childhood, and I gave it to her for one of the inner courtyards. She thinks it very beautiful, and so I did once; but I have learned to see with thine eyes, and I know now that a tree made straight and beautiful and tall by the Gods is more to be regarded than one that has been bent and twisted by man.

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## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

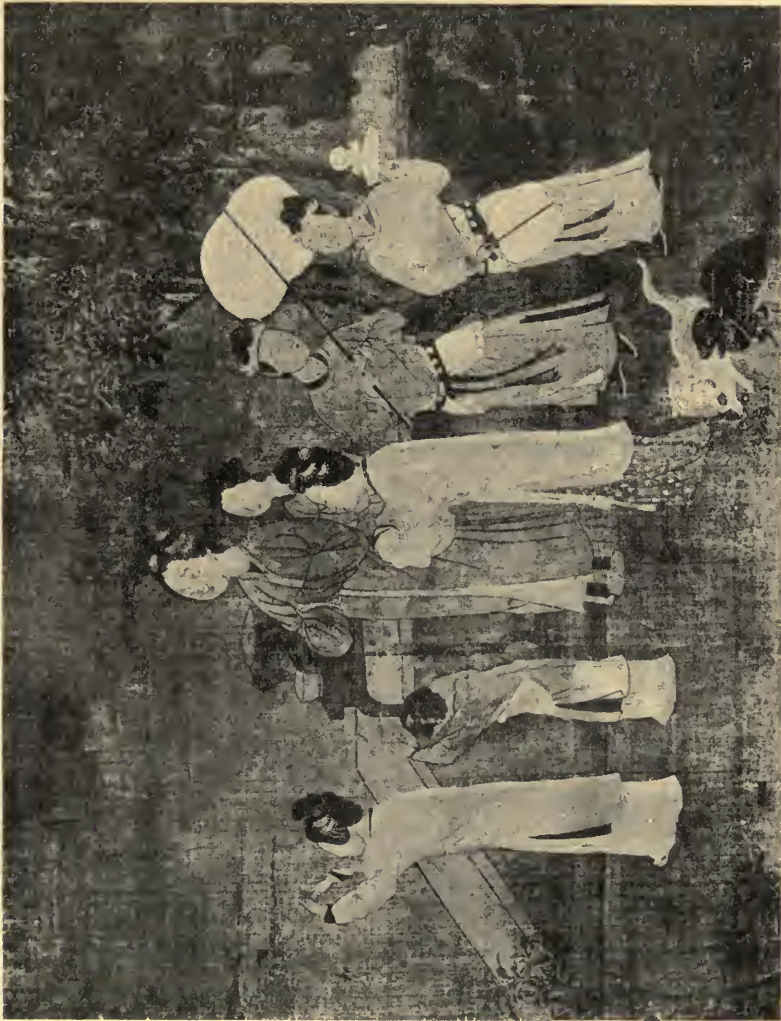
Such a long letter I am writing thee. I am so glad that thou madest me promise to write thee every seventh day, and to tell thee all that passes within my household and my heart. Thine Honourable Mother says it is not seemly to send communication from mine hand to thine. She says it was a thing unheard of in her girlhood, and that we younger generations have passed the limits of all modesty and womanliness. She wishes me to have the writer or thy brother send thee the news of thine household; but that I will not permit. It must come from me, thy wife. Each one of these strokes will come to thee bearing my message. Thou wilt not tear the covering roughly as thou didst those great official letters; nor wilt thou crush the papers quickly in thy hand, because it is the written word of Kwei-li, who sends with each stroke of her brush a part of her heart.

## II

*My Dear One,*

My first letter to thee was full of sadness and longing because thou wert newly gone from me. Now a week has passed, the sadness is still in my heart, but it is buried deep for only me to know. I have my duties which must be done, my daily tasks that only I can do since thine Honourable Mother has handed me the keys of the rice-bin. I realise the great honour she does me, and that at last she trusts me and





WOMEN'S DUTIES—GIRLS THREADING NEEDLES



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

believes me no child as she did when I first entered her household.

Can I ever forget that day when first I came to my husband's people? I had the one great consolation of a bride, my parents had not sent me away empty-handed. The procession was almost a *li* in length and I watched with a swelling heart the many tens of coolies carrying my household goods. There were the silken coverlets for the beds, and they were folded to show their richness and carried on red lacquered tables of great value. There were the household utensils of many kinds, the vegetable dishes, the baskets, the camphor-wood baskets containing my clothing, tens upon tens of them; and I said within my heart as they passed me by, "Enter my new home before me. Help me to find a loving welcome." Then at the end of the chanting procession I came in my red chair of marriage, so closely covered I could barely breathe. My trembling feet could scarce support me as they helped me from the chair, and my hand shook with fear as I was being led into my new household. She stood bravely before you, that little girl dressed in red and gold, her hair twined with pearls and jade, her arms heavy with bracelets and with rings on each tiny finger, but with all her bravery she was frightened—frightened. She was away from her parents for the first time, away from all who loved her, and she knew if she did not meet with approval in her new home her rice-bowl would be full of bitterness for many moons to come.

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

After the obeisance to the ancestral tablet and we had fallen upon our knees before thine Honourable Parent, I then saw for the first time the face of my husband. Dost thou remember when first thou raised my veil and looked long into my eyes? I was thinking, "Will he find me beautiful?" and in fear I could look but for a moment, then my eyes fell and I would not raise them to thine again. But in that moment I saw that thou wert tall and beautiful, that thine eyes were truly almond, that thy skin was clear and thy teeth like pearls. I was secretly glad within my heart, because I have known of brides who, when they saw their husbands for the first time, wished to scream in terror, as they were old or ugly. I thought to myself that I could be happy with this tall, strong young man if I found favour in his sight, and I said a little prayer to Kwan-yin. Because she has answered that prayer, each day I place a candle at her feet to show my gratitude.

I think thine Honourable Mother has passed me the keys of the household to take my mind from my loss. She says a heart that is busy cannot mourn, and my days are full of duties. I arise in the morning early, and after seeing that my hair is tidy, I take a cup of tea to the Aged One and make my obeisance; then I place the rice and water in their dishes before the God of the Kitchen, and light a tiny stick of incense for his altar, so that our day may begin auspiciously. After the morning meal I consult with the cook and steward. The vegetables must be regarded carefully and the fish in-



**“I GO WITH THE GARDENER TO THE TERRACE AND HELP HIM  
ARRANGE THE FLOWERS FOR THE DAY”**



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

spected, and I must ask the price that has been paid, because often a hireling is hurried and forgets that a bargain is not made with a breath.

I carry the great keys and feel much pride when I open the door of the storeroom. Why, I do not know, unless it is because of the realisation that I am the head of this large household. If the servants or their children are ill, they come to me instead of to thine Honourable Mother, as in former times. I settle all difficulties, unless they be too rare or heavy for one of my mind and experience.

Then I go with the gardener to the terrace and help him arrange the flowers for the day. I love the stone-flagged terrace, with its low marble balustrade, resting close against the mountain to which it seems to cling.

I always stop a moment and look over the valley, because it was from here I watched thee when thou went to the city in the morning, and here I waited thy return. Because of my love for it and the rope of remembrance with which it binds me, I keep it beautiful with rugs and flowers.

It speaks to me of happiness and brings back memories of summer days spent idling in a quiet so still that we could hear the rustle of the bamboo grasses on the hillside down below; or, still more dear, the evenings passed close by thy side, watching the lingering moon's soft touch which brightened into jade each door and archway as it passed.

I long for thee, I love thee, I am thine.

*Thy Wife*

# LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

## III

*My Dear One,*

The hours of one day are as like each other as are twin blossoms from the pear-tree. There is no news to tell thee. The mornings are passed in the duties that come to all women who have the care of a household, and the afternoons I am on the terrace with thy sister. But first of all, thine August Mother must be made comfortable for her sleep, and then the peace indeed is wonderful.

Mah-li and I take our embroidery and sit upon the terrace, where we pass long hours watching the people in the valley below. The faint blue smoke curls from a thousand dwellings, and we try to imagine the lives of those who dwell beneath the roof-trees. We see the peasants in their rice-fields; watch them dragging the rich mud from the bottoms of the canal for fertilising; hear the shrill whistle of the duck man as, with long bamboo, he drives the great flock of ducks homeward or sends them over the fields to search for insects. We see the wedding procession far below, and can but faintly follow the great covered chair of the bride and the train of servants carrying the possessions to the new home. Often the wailing of the mourners in a funeral comes to our ears, and we lean far over the balcony to watch the coolies scatter the spirit money that will pay the dead man's way to the land of the Gods. But yesterday we saw the procession carrying the





“MAH-LI AND I TAKE OUR EMBROIDERY”



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

merchant Wong to his resting-place of the dead. There were many thousands of *sycee* spent upon his funeral. Thy brother tells me his sons made great boast that no man has been buried with such pomp in all the province. But it only brings more clearly the remembrance that he began this life a sampan coolie and ended it with many millions. But his millions did not bring him happiness. He laboured without ceasing, and then, without living to enjoy the fruit, worn out, departed, one knows not whither.

Yesterday we heard the clang-clang of a gong and saw the *Taotai* pass by, his men carrying the boards and banners with his official rank and virtues written upon them, and we counted the red umbrellas and wondered if some poor peasant was in deep trouble.

It is beautiful here now. The hillside is purple with the autumn bloom and the air is filled with a golden haze. The red leaves drift slowly down the canal and tell me that soon the winter winds will come. Outside the walls the insects sing sleepily in the grass, seeming to know that their brief life is nearly spent. The wild geese on their southward flight carry my thoughts to thee. All is sad, and sad as the clouded moon my longing face, and my eyes are filled with tears. Not at twilight nor at grey of dawn can I find happiness without thee, my lord, mine own, and "endless are the days as trailing creepers."

*Thy Wife*

# LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

## IV

*My Dear One,*

I have much to tell thee. My last letter was unhappy, and these little slips of paper must bring to thee joy, not sorrow, else why the written word?

First, I must tell thee that thy brother Chih-peh will soon be married. Thou knowest he has long been betrothed to Li-ti, the daughter of the Governor of Chih-li, and soon the bride will be here. We have been arranging her apartments. We do not know how many home servants she will bring, and we are praying the Gods to grant her discretion, because with servants from a different province there are sure to be jealousies and the retailing of small tales that disturb the harmony of a household.

Many tales have been brought us of her great beauty, and we hear she has much education. Thine August Mother is much disturbed over the latter, as she says, and justly too, that over-learning is not good for women. It is not meet to give them books in which to store their embroidery silks. But I—I am secretly delighted, and Mah-li, thy sister, is transported with joy. I think within our hearts, although we would not even whisper it to the night wind, we are glad that there will be three instead of two to bear the burden of the discourses of thine Honourable Mother. Not that she talks too much, thou understandest, nor that her speech is not stored full of wisdom, but—she talks—and we must listen.

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

We have other news. A new slave-girl has come into our household. As thou knowest, there has been a great famine to the north of us, and the boats, who follow all disaster, have been anchored in our canal. I do not know why the August One desired to add one more to take of rice beneath our roof-tree; but she is here. She was brought before me, a little peasant girl, dressed in faded blue trousers and a jacket that had been many times to the washing pool. Her black hair was coiled in the girlhood knot at the side of the head, and in it she had stuck a pumpkin blossom. She was such a pretty little country flower, and looked so helpless, I drew her to me and questioned her. She told me there were many within their compound wall: grandmother, father, mother, brothers, sisters, uncles and cousins. The rice was gone, the heavy clothing and all of value in the pawn-shop. Death was all around them, and they watched each day as he drew nearer—nearer. Then came the buyers of girls. They had money that would buy rice for the winter and mean life to all. But the mother would not listen. She was told over and over that the price of one would save the many. But she would not sell her daughter. Her nights were spent in weeping and her days in fearful watching. At last, worn out, despairing, she went to a far-off temple to ask Kwan-yin, the Mother of Mercies, for help in her great trouble. While she was gone, Ho-tai was taken to the women in the boat at the water-gate, and many pieces of silver were paid the father. When the stomach is empty, pride is not strong, and there were many small bodies

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crying for rice that could only be bought with the sacrifice of one. That night, as they started down the canal, they saw on the tow-path a peasant woman, her dress open far below her throat, her hair loose and flying, her eyes swollen and dry from over-weeping, moaning pitifully, stumbling on in the darkness, searching for the boat that had been anchored at the water-gate; but it was gone. Poor little Ho-tai! She said, "It was my mother!" and as she told me, her face was wet with bitter rain. I soothed her and told her we would make her happy, and I made a little vow in my heart that I would find that mother and bring peace to her heart again.

The summer wanes and the autumn is upon us with all its mists and shadows of purple and grey. The camphor-trees look from the distance like great balls of fire, and the eucalyptus-tree, in its dress of brilliant yellow, is a gaily painted court lady. If one short glimpse of thee my heart could gladden, then all my soul would be filled with the beauty of this time, these days of red and gold. But now I seek thee the long night through, and turn to make my arm thy pillow—but thou art gone.

I am thy wife who longs for thee.

V

*My Dear One,*

We have a daughter-in-law. Not only have we a daughter-in-law, but we have servants and household furnishings



“THE SUMMER WANES AND AUTUMN IS UPON US”





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and clothing—and clothing—and clothing. I am sure that if her gowns could be laid side by side, they would reach around the world. She is as fair as the spring blossoms, and of as little use. An army encamped upon us could not have soupset our household as the advent of this one maiden. She brought with her rugs to cover the floors, embroideries and hangings for the walls, scrolls and sayings of Confucius and Mencius to hang over the seats of honour—to show us that she is an admirer of the classics—screens for the doorways, even a huge bed all carved and gilded and with hangings and tassels of gay silk.

Thine Honourable Mother, after viewing the goods piled in the courtyards, called her bearers and told us she was taking tea with a friend in the village of Sung-dong. I think she chose this friend because she lives the farthest from our compound walls. I alone was left to direct the placing of this furniture. Li-ti was like a butterfly, flitting hither and thither, doing nothing, talking much. The bed must be so placed that the Spirits of Evil passing over it in the night-time could not take the souls of the sleepers away with them. The screens must stand at the proper angle guarding the doorways from the spirits who, in their straight, swift flight through the air, fall against these screens instead of entering the house. She gravely explained to me that the souls who dwell in darkness like to take up their abode in newly organised households, and many precautions must be made against them. She even seriously considered the roof, to see if all the points curved

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

upward, so that the spirits lighting upon them be carried high above the open courtyards. I do not know what would have happened to thine ancestral roof-tree if it had not met with her approval. I was many heartfuls glad that thine August Mother was taking tea in a far-off village, as Li-tie even wanted to install a new God in the kitchen. This I would not permit. Canst thou imaginethy Mother's face if a God from a stranger family was in the niche above the kitchen stove? Happily all was over when thine Honourable Mother returned. She is not pleased with this, her newest, daughter-in-law, and she talks—and talks—and talks. She says the days will pass most slowly until she sees the father of Li-ti. She yearns to tell him that a man knows how to spend a million pieces of money in marrying off his daughter, but knows not how to spend a hundred thousand in bringing up his child. If this great Governor of Chih-li has much wisdom, he will stay long within his province. I have just heard for the hundredth time the saying of Confucius, "Birth is not a beginning, nor is death an end." In my despair I said deep down within my breast, "I am sure it will not be an end for thee, O Mother-in-law. Thou wilt go to the River of Souls talking, talking, always talking—but the Gods will be good to me. Thou must pass before me, and I will not hasten so as to overtake thee on the way." I beg thy pardon, dear one. I lack respect to thy Most Honourable Parent, but my soul is sore tried and I can find no quiet.

I am

*Thy Wife*

# LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

## VI

*My Dear One,*

“The five worst infirmities that afflict the female are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness. The worst of them all, and the parent of the other four, is silliness.” Does that not sound familiar to thine ears? Life is serious here in thine ancestral home since we have taken to ourselves a daughter-in-law. The written word for trouble is two women beneath one roof-tree, and I greatly fear that the wise man who invented writing had knowledge that cost him dear. Perhaps he, too, had a daughter-in-law.

Yet, with it all, Li-ti is such a child. Ah, I see thee smile. Thou sayest she is only three years less in age than I; yet, thou seest, I have had the honour of living a year by the side of thy Most August Mother and have acquired much knowledge from the very fountain-head of wisdom. Perchance Li-ti also will become a sage, if—she be not gathered to her ancestors before her allotted time, which depends upon the strength of body and of mind which they may have willed her.

To me she is the light of this old palace. She is the true spirit of laughter, and, “When the happy laugh, the Gods rejoice.” She is continually in disgrace with thine Honourable Mother, and now the Elder One has decided that both she and Mah-li, thy sister, shall learn a text from the sage Confucius each day for penance. They are now in the inner court-

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

yard, studying the six shadows which attend the six virtues. I can hear them saying over and over to each other, "Love of goodness without the will to learn casts the shadow called foolishness"—now a laugh—then again they begin, "Love of knowledge without the will to learn casts the shadow called instability"—giggle and much talking. I am afraid they will never arrive at the shadow cast by the love of truth, and after I have written thee I will go in and help them, that they may not be reprimanded.

Li-ti takes her duties now most seriously, these same duties consisting of dressing for the day. In the morning she seats herself before her mirror, and two maids attend her, one to hold the great brass bowl of water, the other to hand her the implements of her toilet. While the face is warm she covers it with honey mixed with perfume, and applies the rice-powder until her face is as white as the rice itself. Then the cheeks are rouged, the touch of red is placed upon the lower lip, the eyebrows are shaped like the true willow leaf, and the hair is dressed. Her hair is wonderful (but I say within my heart, not so long or so thick as mine), and she adorns it with many jewels of jade and pearls. Over her soft clothing of fine linen she draws the rich embroidered robes of silk and satin. Then her jewels, earrings, beads, bracelets, rings, the tiny mirror in the embroidered case, the bag with its rouge and powder fastened to her side by long red tassels. When all things are in place, she rises a being glorified, a thing of beauty from her glossy hair to the toe of her tiny embroidered shoe. I



“THE RAINS HAVE COME”



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

watch her with a little envy, because when thou wast here I did the same. Now that my husband is away, it is not meet that I make myself too seemly for other eyes. The rouge brush and the powder have not been near my face, and I have searched my clothing chests to find gowns fitting for a woman who is alone.

Thy Mother says poor Li-ti is o'ervain, and repeats to her the saying, "More precious in a woman is a virtuous heart than a face of beauty." But I say she is our butterfly, she brings the joys of summer. One must not expect a lace kerchief to hold tears, and she fulfils her woman's destiny. Chih-peh, thy brother, is inexpressibly happy. He adores his pretty blossom. He follows her with eyes that worship, and when she is in disgrace with thine August Mother, he is desolate. When needs be she is sent to her apartment, he wanders round and round the courtyards until the Honourable One has retired from sight, then he hurriedly goes to his beloved. Soon I hear them laughing gaily, and know the storm is over.

The rains have come and we cannot pass long days upon the terrace. The whole valley is shrouded in grey mists and the peasants have gone from the fields. The path down the mountain-side is empty, except for the men with the great umbrella hats and capes of straw, bringing the vegetables to the monastery below. The old abbot of the monastery is in great trouble. Some men have come and wish to erect long poles with wires on them. It is feared it will interrupt the

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

*feng-shui* of the temple. The good spirits of the air cannot pass, and will rest upon these ugly poles instead of coming to the temple roof-tree. The abbot has wailed and gone to the magistrate; but he will not interfere, as the men have many tens of thousands of *sycee* and quite likely will work their will.

Such foolish letters as I write thee! They are filled with the little life that passes within the women's courtyard. It is all the life I know. My world is bounded by these walls, and I ask no more.

I am thy loving wife

## VII

*My Dear One,*

All thy women-folk have been shopping! A most unheard-of event for us. We have Li-ti to thank for this great pleasure, because, but for her, the merchants would have brought their goods to the courtyard for us to make our choice. Li-ti would not hear of that; she wanted to see the city, and she wanted to finger the pretty goods within the shops. She knew exactly what she wished, and life was made uncomfortable for us all until thy Mother ordered the chairs and we went into the city. We were a long procession. First, the August One with her four-bearer chair; then your most humble wife, who has only two bearers—as yet; then Li-ti; and after her Mah-li, followed by the chairs of the servants who came to carry back our purchases.



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It was most exciting for us all, as we go rarely within the city gate. It was market day and the streets were made more narrow by the baskets of fish and vegetables which lined the way. The flat stones of the pavements were slippery and it seemed our bearers could not find a way amongst the crowd of riders on horses and small donkeys, the coolies with their buckets of hot water swinging from their shoulders, the sweetmeat sellers, the men with bundles, and the women with small baskets. They all stepped to one side at the sound of the *Ah-yo* of our leader, except a band of coolies carrying the monstrous trunk of a pine-tree, chanting as they swung the mast between them, and keeping step with the chant. It seemed a solemn dirge, as if some great giant were being carried to the resting-place of the dead.

But sadness could not come to us when shopping, and our eager eyes looked long at the signs above the open shopways. There were long black signs of lacquer with letters of raised gold, or red ones with the characters carved and gilded. Above a shoe-shop was a boot made for the King of the Mountains, and in front of a pipe-shop was a water-pipe fit for his mate. From the fan-shop hung delicate, gilded fans; and framing the silk-shop windows gaily coloured silk was draped in rich festoons that nearly swept the pathway.

We bought silks and satins and gay brocades, we chatted and we bargained and we shopped. We handled jade and pearls and ornaments of twisted gold, and we priced amulets and incense pots and gods. We filled our eyes with luxury

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

and our *amahs'* chairs with packages, and returned home three happy, tired, hungry women, thinking with longing of the hissing tea-urn upon the charcoal brazier.

That crowded, bustling, threatening city seems another world from this, our quiet, walled-in dwelling. I feel that here we are protected, cared for, guarded, and life's hurry and distress will only pass us by, not touch us. Yet—we like to see it all, and know that we are part of that great wonder-thing, the world.

I am thy happy, tired

*Wife*

### VIII

*My Dear One,*

I am carrying a burden for another that is causing me much sorrow. Dost thou remember Chen-peh, who is from my province and who married Ling Peh-yu about two moons after I came to thy household? She came to me yesterday in dire distress. She is being returned to her home by her husband's people, and, as thou knowest, if a woman is divorced shame covers her until her latest hour. I am inexpressibly saddened, as I do not know what can be done. The trouble is with his mother and, I fear, her own pride of family. She cannot forget that she comes from a great house, and she is filled with pride at the recollection of her home. I have told her that the father and mother of one's husband should be honoured beyond her own. I can see that she has failed

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

in respect; and thus she merits condemnation. We have all learned as babes that "respect" is the first word in the book of wisdom. I know it is hard at times to still the tongue, but all paths that lead to peace are hard.

She will remain with me two nights. Last night she lay wide-eyed, staring into the darkness, with I know not what within her soul. I begged her to think wisely, to talk frankly with her husband and his mother, to whom she owes obedience. There should be no pride where love is. She must think upon the winter of her days, when she will be alone, without husband and without children, eating bitter rice of charity, though 'tis given by her people. I put her in remembrance of that saying of the poet:

"Rudely torn may be a cotton mantle, yet a skilful hand may join it;  
Snapped may be the string where pearls are threaded, yet the thread  
all swiftly knotted;  
But a husband and his wife, once parted, never more may meet."

I must not bring thee the sorrows of another. Oh, dear one, there will never come 'twixt thee and me the least small river of distrust. I will bear to thee no double heart, and thou wilt cherish me and love me alway.

*Thy Wife*

## IX

*My Dear One,*

I cannot wait until the seventh day to write thee again, as my letter to thee yestereve was full of sadness and longing.

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

Now I have slept, and troubles from a distance do not seem so grave.

Thine Honourable Mother has chided me gravely, but to my mind unjustly, and, as thou knowest, I could not answer her words, though they pierced me "like arrows from the strings of white-winged bows." Poor Li-ti is in trouble again, and this time she has brought it upon herself, yet she cannot be blamed. I, as the head of the household, as thine Honourable Mother has told me, should have protected her. I told thee that she brought servants from her old home, and amongst them her childhood's nurse, who, I am sure, loves Li-ti dearly; but, as many women who have little to occupy their hands, she loves to sit in the women's courtyard and gossip. If it had stopped within the servants' courtyard all would have been well; but at the time of Li-ti's dressing all the small goods she had gathered during the day were emptied into the lap of Li-ti, who is too young to know that "as poison that reaches the blood spreads through the body, so does the love of gossip spread through the soul of woman." I do not know how it came about, but comparisons were made between the households, that of her home and that of her husband, and news was carried back to the servants' quarters until at last our household was in a state of unrest that stopped all work and made living quite impossible.

It seems small, but it is the retailing of little calumnies that disturbs the harmony of kinsmen and ruins the peace of families. Finally I found it necessary to talk to Li-ti's nurse, and

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

I told her many things it were good for her to know. I warned her that if she did not wish to revisit her home province she must still her tongue. Things were better for a time, but they commenced again, and I called her to my courtyard and said to her, "The sheaves of rice have been beaten across the wood for the last time. You must go." Li-ti was inconsolable, but I was firm. Such quarrels are not becoming when we are so many beneath one roof-tree.

The servant went away, but she claimed her servant's right of reviling us within our gate. She lay beneath our outer archway for three long hours and called down curses upon the Liu family. One could not get away from the sound of the enumeration of the faults and vices of thy illustrious ancestors even behind closed doors. I did not know, my husband, that history claimed so many men of action by the name of Liu. It pleased me to think thou mayest claim so long a lineage, as she went back to the dynasty of Ming and brought forth from his grave each poor man and woman and told us of—*not* his virtues. I should have been more indignant, perhaps, if I had not heard o'er much of the wonders of thy family tree. I was impressed by the amount of knowledge acquired by the family of Li-ti. They must have searched the chronicles which evidently recorded only the unworthy acts of thy menfolk in the past. I hope that I will forget what I have heard, as some time when I am trying to escape from thine ancestors the tongue *might* become unruly.

At the end of three hours the woman was faint and very ill.

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

I had one of the servants take her down to the boat, and sent a man home with her, bearing a letter saying she was sickening for home faces. She is old, and I did not want her to end her days in disgrace and shame.

But thine Honourable Mother! Thine Honourable Mother! Art thou not glad that thou art in a far-off country? She went from courtyard to courtyard, and for a time I fully expected she would send to the *Yamen* for the soldiers; then she realised the woman was within her right, and so restrained herself. It nearly caused her death, as thou knowest thine Honourable Mother has not long practised the virtue of restraint, especially of the tongue. She was finally overcome and taken to her chamber, and we brought her tea and heated wine, and tried in all our ways to make her forget the great humiliation. As she became no better, we sent for the man of medicine from the Eastern Gate, and he wished to burn her shoulders with a heated *cash* to remove the heat within her. To this she objected so strongly that he hastily gathered his utensils and departed, looking fearfully over his shoulder from time to time as he passed quickly down the hillside.

Then I thought of her favourite priest from the monastery down below, and sent for him. He came with candle and incense and, I *think*, some rose wine for which the monastery is justly famous; and he chanted prayers, striking from time to time a little gong, until peace was restored and sleep came to her eyelids.

In the morning she wished to talk to Li-ti; but I feared for

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

her, and I said, "You cannot speak of the ocean to a well-frog, nor sing of ice to a summer insect. She will not understand." She said Li-ti was without brains, a senseless thing of paint and powder. I said, "We will form her, we will make of her a wise woman in good time." She replied with bitterness, "Rotten wood cannot be carved nor walls of dirt be plastered." I could not answer, but I sent Li-ti to pass the day with Chih-peh at the Goldfish Temple, and when she returned the time was not so stormy.

All this made me unhappy, and the cares of this great household pressed heavily upon my shoulders. Please do not think the cares too heavy, nor that I do not crave the work. I know all labour is done for the sake of happiness, whether the happiness comes or no; and if I find not happiness, I find less time to dream and mourn and long for thee, my husband.

*Thy Wife*

### X

*My Dear One,*

We have been to a great festival at the Temple of the Goddess of a Thousand Hands. Thine Honourable Mother decided that we should go by boat part of the way, so the chairs were told to meet us at the Western Village Rest-house.

We hired from the city one of those great pleasure-boats, but it was not too great for us all. There was the August One, and four of her friends, then Li-ti, Mah-li and myself. We took the cook, the steward and three *amahs*, and it was indeed

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

a time of feasting. It was the first time I had been upon the canal, and it was different from seeing it from the terrace. As we passed slowly along we could watch the life of the water people. On the banks were the great water-wheels turned by the village buffalo. In the deserted districts women were gathering reeds to make the sleeping mats and boat covers. The villages with their blue-grey houses and thatched roofs nestling among the groves of bamboos looked like chicklets sheltering under the outstretched wings of the mother hen.

We pushed our way through the crowded water-ways of the cities, where we could catch glimpses of the guests in the tea-houses or the keepers of the shops, or could watch the children leaning over the balconies. On the steps between the houses which led to the waterside women were washing clothes, or the dyers were cleansing the extra dye from the blue cotton which clothes all China's poor. We caught small bits of gossip and heard the laughter of all these people, who seemed happy at their work.

When we could again pass to the open canal we would watch the boats. I did not know there were so many boats in all the world. They floated slowly past us—big boats, little boats, those that went by sail, and those that went by oar. There were the boats of mandarins and merchants, those for passengers, and great unwieldy boats for rice. We saw the fishing-boats with their hungry, fierce-eyed cormorants sitting quietly in their places, waiting for the master to send them diving in the water for the fish they may not eat.





CORMORANTS



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

The canal was a great broad highway. Even the tow-paths had their patrons. Travellers on wheelbarrows, rich men in sedan-chairs, soldiers, coolies, chanting as they swung along with their burdens swinging from the bamboo on their shoulders, all going to or coming from the great city to which we drew nearer with each stroke.

At the rest-house the bearers were awaiting us, and we were carried up the long paved roadway to the temple. It seemed as if all the world had turned to praying—all the women world, that is. They were here, rich and poor, peasant and official's wife, but in the temple all of a sisterhood. We descended from our chairs in the courtyard and put our spirit money in the great burner, where it ascended in tiny flames side by side with that of the beggar woman, to the great God in the Heavens. We entered the temple, placed our candles, and lighted our incense. We made our obeisance to the Many-handed Goddess and asked her blessing on our household for the year to come. Then I went to the Mother of Mercies, Kwan-yin, and made my deepest reverence, because for her my heart is full of love and gratitude. The other Gods I respect and make them all due worship, but I feel they are far away from me. Kwan-yin is the woman's God, and I feel her love for me. She shapes my way, and I know it is to her I owe it that my life flows on as a gentle stream, and I know that she cares for me and guards me now that thou art away and I have no one on whom to lean. When I go before her all fire of passion is extinguished in my heart, and my troubles and cares

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

pass away and become small in the distance, even as the light of the morning stars pales and wanes at the coming of the sun. My heart is full of love for her, of a love that I cannot express. She has heard my prayers and answered them. She is my Kwan-yin, *my* Mother of Mercy, and each day I do some little deed for her, some little thing to show remembrance, so she will know the hours are not too full nor the days too short for me to place my offering on an altar built of love.

As we turned to leave the temple I glanced back at the great dark chamber and I saw the God of Light, the Buddha, sitting there so calm upon his throne, with the light of many candles before him and clouds of incense that floated to the roof. I thought, "He is all-powerful. I only prayed to him from out my lips, not with my heart. Perhaps—" So I returned. I prayed the mighty God with humble prayer to bring my loved one swiftly home to me; and then we left the temple. We walked slowly through the courtyards, looking at the great trees that stood like tall, grim sentinels guarding the place of prayer. Then we were taken by our bearers to the Goldfish Monastery in the hills. Dost thou remember it? Thou and I were there once in the spring-time.

We bought the small round cakes from the priests and fed the greedy fish. They swarmed over the pool, pushing, nudging, fighting one another to get the morsels we threw them. Tiring of that, we had tea and sweetmeats served upon the terrace; then, after chatting for a time, we left for the boat. We drifted slowly homeward. Thy Mother and her friends



**KWAN-YIN, THE GODDESS OF MERCY**

**WORSHIPPED IN CHINA BEFORE THE ADVENT OF BUDDHISM AND AFTERWARDS  
ADOPTED AS THE FEMALE INCARNATION OF AVALOKITESVARA**



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

discussed the earth, the moon, the sun and stars, as well as smaller matters, such as children, husbands, servants, schools—and upon the last thy Mother waxed most eloquent; as thou knowest, it is a sore subject with her, this matter of the new education. I heard her say: “All my sons have book knowledge. Of what use is it in the end? The cock crows and the dog barks. We know that, but the wisest of my sons cannot say why one crows and the other barks, nor why they crow or bark at all.” Canst thou hear her, and see her shake her head dolefully over the dismal fact that thou hast left the narrow way of Confucius and the classics?

We came to the pathway just at sunset, and as I looked up at the old palace a little hurt came to my heart that thou wert not close by my side. It lay so peaceful there and quiet, the curving roofs like flights of doves who had settled down with their wings not yet quite folded. It brought remembrance that for me it was an empty palace. I will see no one—as Li-ti will—within the archway.

*Thy Wife Who Loves Thee*

### XI

*My Dear One,*

Thy letter and the photographs received. Thou sayest it is a “flashlight” of a reception to thy Master, the Prince. I do not know exactly what that means, but there seem to be many people and—ladies. I have not shown thine Honour-

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

able Mother the picture, as she might ask thee to return at once. I do not criticise thy friends, nor could our Prince go to a place not fitting to his dignity, but—the ladies seem in my poor judgment most lightly clad.

The papers here are full of thy reception in that foreign land and of the honour that is paid the embassy. Thy brother read to all within the courtyard of the feasts that are given in honour of His Highness, and we were full proud, knowing well thou stoodst close by him at the time. Thy letters are a joy to me. We read them many times, and then I read those of Chih-peh, which talk of things I do not understand. Thou must not give the foolish boy ideas, as he prates most glibly of “republics” and “government of the people by the people,” after he has received thy letters. That is for men of wisdom like thee, but not for foolish boys to carry with them to the tea-house.

*Kwèi-li*

## XII

*My Dear One,*

Thou askest me if I still care for thee, if the remembrance of thy face has grown less dear with the passing of the days. Dear one, thou knowest we Chinese women are not supposed to know of love, much less to speak of it. We read of it, we know it is the song of all the world, but it comes not to us unless by chance. We go to you as strangers, we have no choice, and





CHILDREN AT PLAY



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

if the Gods withhold their greatest gift, the gift of love, then life is grey and wan as the twilight of a hopeless day. Few women have the joy I feel when I look into my loved one's face and know that I am his and he is mine, and that our lives are twined together for all the days to come.

Do I love thee? I cannot tell. I think of thee by day and I dream of thee by night. I never want to hurt thee nor cause thee a moment's sorrow. I would fill my hands with happiness to lay down at thy feet. Thou art my life, my love, my all, and I am thine to hold through all the years.

### XIII

*My Dear One,*

It is the time of school, and now all the day from the servants' courtyard I hear their droning voices chanting the sayings of Confucius. I did not know we had so many young lives within our compound until I saw them seated at their tables. I go at times and tell them tales which they much prefer to lessons, but of which thine Honourable Mother does not approve. I told them the other day of Pwan-ku. Dost thou remember him? How at the beginning of Time the great God Pwan-ku with hammer and chisel formed the earth. He toiled and he worked for eighteen thousand years, and each day increased in stature six feet, and, to give him room, the Heavens rose and the earth became larger and larger. When

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

the Heavens were round and the earth all smooth, he died. His head became mountains, his breath the wind and the clouds, his voice the thunder. His arms and legs were the four poles, his veins the rivers, his muscles the hills and his flesh the fields. His eyes became the stars, his skin and hair the herbs and the trees, and the insects which touched him became people. Does not that make thee think of thy childhood's days?

They crowd around me and say, "Tell us more," just as I did with my old *amah* when she stilled me with the tales of the Gods. Yesterday, one small boy, the son of the chief steward, begged for a story of the sun. I had to tell him that my wisdom did not touch the sun, although I, in my foolish heart, think it a great God because it gives us warmth and we can feel its kindly rays. I said, "Thou hast seen the coolies tracking on the tow-path with their heavy wadded clothing wet with rain. If it were not for the kindly sun which dries them, how could they toil and work and drag the great rice-boats up to the water-gate? Is he not a God to them?"

I told them also of Chang-ngo, the great, great beauty who drank the cup of life eternal. She went to the moon, where the jealous Gods turned her into a great black toad. She is there, forever thinking, mourning over her lost beauty, and when we see the soft haze come over the face of the moon, we know that she is weeping and filling the space with her tears.

I perhaps am wrong to tell the foolish tales to the children, but they grow so tired of the hard benches and Chang-tai,



WINTER SCENE



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

the teacher, who glares at them so fiercely when they speak not quickly enough to please him.

There has been much gossip from the valley over the mountain-side. It seems an iron bridge is being put across the river, and strange men come and peer at the countryside through witch glasses. It has made the good spirits of the air to draw apart from the valley, and the cattle have died and the rice not ripened, and much sorrow has gone broadcast. The river overflowed, because they desecrated the Dragon's back by digging down into the earth that was sacred. I know nothing except what is brought from the market-place, and, as it does not concern us here on the mountain-side, I listen only with my ears, not with my mind.

The nights are long and cold. The moon casts silver shimmering lights over the valley below. We cannot stand long on the terrace but must stay close within our rooms near to the charcoal braziers. The wind sweeps o'er the roof-tree with the wailing voice of a woman.

Oh, Soul of Mine, with weary heart the creeping days I'm counting.

*Thy Wife*

### XIV

*My Dear One,*

We have had a serious sickness come to all the countryside; rich and poor, peasant and merchant have suffered from

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

a fever that will not abate. It raged for more than a moon before it was known the cause thereof. Dost thou remember the Kwan-lin Pagoda? Its ruin has long been a standing shame to the people of the province, and finally the Gods have resented their neglect and sent them this great illness. Over all the city the yellow edicts of the priests have been placed so as to meet the eye of all who travel. They are in the market-places, at the entrance of the tea-houses, standing on great boards at the doorways of the temples, in front of the water-gates, and at each city postern. They state that the Gods are angry and send to each man or household that will not give three days' work upon the Pagoda the fever that leaves him weak and ailing. They demand the labour of the city; and if it is not given freely, toil is sent the people in their sleep and they waken weary, and must so remain until the work is finished.

We did not hearken to the summons until Chih-peh, thy brother, fell ill with the sickness. He grew worse each day, until Li-ti and thine Honourable Mother were panic-stricken. At last the chairs were ordered, and thy Mother and I went to the monastery on the hillside to consult with the old abbot, who is most full of wisdom. Thine Honourable Mother told him of the illness which had assailed her son, and begged him to tell her if it were the illness of the Pagoda. He meditated long and seriously, then he said, "My daughter, the Gods are no respecter of persons; they wish the service of your son." "But," thine Honourable Mother objected,



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

"he is no workman. He cannot labour upon the Pagoda." The abbot said, "There are more ways of giving service than the labour of the hands. The Gods will allow him to contribute of his wealth and buy the toil of other men, and thus he may cancel his obligation." The August One satisfied the greedy heart of the priest, and then he told her to go and make her obeisance to the God of Light, the great Buddha, and see what message he had for her.

She took the hollow bamboo filled with the numbered slices of wood and, prostrating herself three times before the Great One, shook it slowly until one detached itself from its brothers and fell to the floor. The abbot then handed her a slip of paper which read :

"Wisdom sits by the Western Gate  
And gives health and happiness to those who wait."

These words meant nothing to thine Honourable Mother ; and after giving the abbot more silver, he said, "Beside the Western Gate sits the owl of wisdom, the great doctor Chow-fong. His father and his father's father were wise ; their study was mankind, and to him has come all their stores of knowledge. He has books of wonderful age, that tell him the secret of the world. Go to him ; he will give you the plan of healing."

We started for the Western Gate, and I, in my wicked heart, spoke thoughts that should have been closely locked within my breast. I said, "Perhaps the doctor and the priest have formed a combination most profitable to the two. If we had gone to the doctor first, we might have been sent to the

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

abbot." It was a great mistake to mention such a dreadful thing, and I realised it instantly; as thou knowest, the Elder One has a tongue of eloquence, and I was indeed glad that her bearers carried her at least ten paces from my bearers—and the way was long.

Even thine Honourable Mother was awed at the solemn looks of this great man of medicine who, in his dim room with dried bats hanging from the ceiling beams and a dragon's egg close by his hand, glared at her through his great goggles like a wise old owl. She apologised for disturbing so great a man at his studies, but she was the bearer of a message from the abbot. He read it carefully, then took down a monstrous book entitled "The Golden Mirror of Medical Practice," and solemnly pored over its pages. At last he wrote upon a paper, then chanted :

" In a building tall, by the city wall,  
In the street of the Tower of Gold,  
Is the plant of health, long life and wealth,  
In the claws of the Dragon bold."

The August One took the paper, laid some silver upon the table, and we hurried from his doorway, glad to be free from his fearful presence. When we entered the chairs and looked to the paper for directions to give the bearers, the characters were meaningless to us. I repeated his chant, and the head bearer said, "There is a shop of drugs in the street of the Tower of Gold, and the sign of the place is a Golden Dragon's Claw."

We soon were there, and waited in our chairs while the

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

bearer took the paper into the maker of medicines. We waited long, and thine Honourable Mother would have been impatient if sleep had not kindly made her forget the waiting hours. I, sitting in my chair, could look through the archways into the big covered courtyards where blind men were grinding herbs. They were harnessed to great stones, and went round and round all day, like buffalo at the water-wheel. I wondered why the Gods had put them at this service. What sins they had committed in their other life, to be compelled to work like beasts, grinding the herbs that would bring health and life to others, while they lived on in darkness. Often I would hear the soft call of the deer as they moved restlessly in their tiny cells. I know their horns, when powdered fine with beetles' wings, is the cure for fevers and all ailments of the blood, but why could not the wise ones of the earth have found some herb or weed to take their place and give these wild ones of the woods their freedom? Finally, the bearer came with a tiny jar, too small, it seemed, to take such time in mixing, and we returned to the waiting Li-ti.

The medicine was black and nasty and smelled not sweetly, which proved its strength. Chih-peh got slowly better, and the world again looked fair to Li-ti, and the song came to her lips. The flowers were put in the hair, the gay dresses were brought out of their boxes, and she was, as of old, our butterfly.

We laughed at her for her fright, but I thought, if it had been thou who wast ill, and I did not know the cure! Oh, dear

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

one, dost thou understand that, to a woman who loves, her husband is more than Heaven, more than herself? All that she is not, all that she lacks, all that she desires to be, is her beloved. His breath alone can bring peace to her heart, and it is he alone who teaches her the depth of passionate joy there is in love and life and all things beautiful.

I am thy wife

XV

*My Dear One,*

Thine Honourable Mother is beset by the desire of marrying. No, do not start; it is not of herself she is thinking. She will go to the River of Souls mourning thine Honourable Father, and a *pailo* will be erected in her honour. It is of her household she is thinking. She says our roof-tree is too small to shelter four women, three of whom have little brains—and that includes thy humble, loving wife—but why she should wish to exchange Mah-li, whom she knows, for a strange woman whom she does not know, passes my understanding. She seems not overfond of daughters-in-law, if one judge from chance remarks.

First, before I speak of Mah-li, I must tell thee of thy brother. Thine Honourable Mother is right—it were better that he marry and have a heel rope that leads him homewards. He is unruly and passes over much time at the Golden Lotus Tea-house. He is not bad or wicked. He lives but for the moment, and the moment is often wine-flushed. He

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

will not work or study, and many times at night I send away the gate-keeper and leave my *amah* at the outer archway, so thy Mother will not know the hour he enters. He is young, and has chosen friends not equal to himself, and they have set his feet in the pathway that slopes downwards.

He does not wish to marry. We have told him that marriage is a will of the Gods and must be obeyed. "Man does not attain by himself, nor Woman by herself, but like the one-winged birds of our childhood's tale, they must rise together." It is useless to talk to him. A spark of fire will not kindle wood that is still too green, and I fear he is in love with life, and youth, and freedom.

I do not wish to doubt the wisdom of the August One, but I think she made a mistake in her choice of a bride for Chih-mo. She chose Tai-lo, the daughter of the Prefect of Chih-li. The arrangements were nearly made, the dowry even was discussed, but when the astrologer cast their horoscopes to see if they could pass their life in peace together, it was found that the ruler of Chih-mo's life was a lion, and that of the bride's, a swallow, so it was clearly seen they could not share one roof-tree. I fear (I would not have this come to the ears of thine Honourable Mother) that some silver was left upon the doorstep of the astrologer. Chih-mo asked of me the loan of an hundred *taels*, and I saw the wife of the reader of the stars pass by with a new gown of red and gold brocade.

I think Chih-mo had seen Tai-lo. Report gives her small beauty. Yet, as the Elder One says, "Musk is known by its

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perfume, and not by the druggist's label." Quite likely she would have made a good wife; and—we have one beauty in the household—it is enough.

There is much wailing in the courtyards. The gardener and the bearer and the watchman are having bound the feet of their small daughters. The saying, "For every pair of golden lilies there is a *kang* of tears," is true. I am so sorry for them. Just when they want to run and play, they must sit all day with aching feet. My *amah* wished to put on the heavy bindings, but I would not permit it. I said, "Do you want little eyes to fill with tears each time they see you coming across the courtyard? If their grandmothers do not come, let some old women from the village do the cruel thing."

The happy rains of the spring are here. It is not the cold, drear rain of autumn, but dancing, laughing rain that comes sweeping across the valley, touching the rice-fields lovingly, and bringing forth the young green leaves of the mulberry. I hear it patter upon the roof at night-time, and in the morning all the earth seems cleansed and new; fresh colours greet mine eye when I throw back my casement.

When wilt thou come to me, thou keeper of my heart?

*Thy Wife*

### XVI

*Dear One,*

"He whose faults are never told him  
Doubtless deems the angels mould him."

That cannot be said of three women of thy household. It is Mah-li this time on whom the wrath descends. She

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and Li-ti were broidering in the western room, where they could get the last rays of the sun. Perhaps they were speaking on forbidden subjects—I do not know; but thine Honourable Mother entered quietly and reproved them, and (even when I write it I blush for her) Mah-li said to her Honourable Mother, “Only cats and cranes and thieves walk silently.” Thy Mother was speechless with anger, and justly so, and now it is decided that Mah-li must be married. She needs a stronger hand than a woman’s. Is it not ridiculous, little Mah-li needing a strong hand?

At first the August One considered Meng-wheh, the prefect at Sung-dong. He is old and cross, but when I remonstrated, I was told that he was rich. His many tens of thousands of *sycee* are supposed to weigh more than youth and love. I said, “Though he bar with gold his silver door,” a man cannot keep the wife who loves him not. Thine Honourable Mother thought more wisely, and after many days of consideration entered into consultation with the family of Sheng Ta-jen in regard to his son. It seems Mah-li is doomed to marriage soon, and she does not know whether she is happy or sorrowful. She is turned this way and that, as the seed of the cotton-tree is swayed by the coming and going of the wind. To-day she laughs, to-morrow she weeps. Thy Mother has lost all patience with her, and, as she always does when her own words fail her, I heard her quoting the Sage: “Just as ducks’ legs though short cannot be lengthened without pain, nor cranes’ legs though long be short-

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ened without misery to the crane, neither can sense be added to a silly woman's head."

I feel that thine Honourable Mother is unkind to Mah-li. She is a flower, a flower that has her place in life the same as the morning-glory, which is loved just as fondly by the Gods as the pine-tree which stands so stately upon the hillside. She is light and pure and dainty as the fragrance of perfumed air, and I do not want to see her go to a family who will not understand her youth and love of play.

Mah-li has asked of me money, and with it bought a great candle for each day, which she sends down the mountain-side to be placed before Kwan-yin. I asked her to tell me her prayer, that needed so large an offering. The unfilial girl said she prayed, "Kwan-yin, send me a husband with *no* family."

Such a lot of petty gossip I pour into thine ears, yet thou wouldst know the happenings of thine household. Of the world outside, thy brother writes thee. My world is here within these walls.

*Thy Wife*

### XVII

*My Dear One,*

Thine house is a house of intrigue. Deep, dark intrigue and plotting. Thy wife has lent herself to a most unwomanly thing, and doubtless thou wilt tell her so, but Mah-li begged so prettily, I could refuse her nothing. I told thee in my last



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letter that thine Honourable Mother had been regarding the family of Sheng Ta-jen with a view to his son as husband of Mah-li. It is settled, and Mah-li leaves us in the autumn. None of us except Chih-peh has seen the young man, and Mah-li did a most immodest thing the other day. She came to me and asked me to find out from Chih-peh if he were handsome, if he were young—all the questions that burn the tongue of a young girl, but which she must keep within tightly closed lips if she would not be thought unmaidenly. I asked thy brother; but his answer was not in regard to the questions Mah-li wished so much to know. So we arranged a plan—a plan that caused me many nights of sleeplessness. It was carried out and—still the sky is blue, the stars are bright at night, and the moon shines just as softly on the valley.

The first part of the plan was for Li-ti. She must persuade Chih-peh to ask Shen-go to spend the day with him at the Fir-tree Monastery. When he knew the meaning of the invitation he refused. He was shocked, and properly; as it was a thing unheard of. He could not understand why Mah-li would not be content with her mother's choice. Li-ti brought all her little ways to bear—and Chih-peh can refuse her nothing. At the Feast of the Moon thy brother asked three friends to join him at the monastery and stroll amongst its groves.

The rest of the plan was for me to carry out; and I, thy wife, displayed a talent for diplomacy. I noticed that the cheeks of our Honourable Mother were pale, that she seemed list-

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less, that her step was wearied. I said doubtless she was tired of being shut within the compound walls with three aimless, foolish women, and proposed a feast or pilgrimage. I mentioned the Goldfish Pond, knowing she was tired of it; spoke of the Pagoda on the Hills, knowing full well that she did not like the priests therein; then, by chance, read from a book the story of the two kings. It is the tale of the King of Hangchow and the King of Soochow who, in the old time, divided our great valley between them. The King of Hangchow was an old man, and the cares of state fell heavily upon his shoulders. The King of Soochow was a young man, eaten up with mad ambitions. He began to tread upon the lands of the old King, taking now a farmhouse, now a village, and at last a city, until the poor old King was threatened at his very gateway by the army of the young man. The young King had strength, but the old King had guile, so he made a peace with his enemy for one year. He sent him presents, costly silks and teas, and pearls and jade and ginseng, and, last and best, a beautiful slave-girl, the most beautiful in the province. The young King was delighted, and forgot his warring, passing all his days within the women's quarters.

As the winter waned and the spring came, the slave-girl sickened, said she panted for the hillsides, and she pointed to the mountain outside his city walls. He was a foolish King, and he builded for her a palace, and she moved there with her women. The King was lonely in the city, and he passed his days with the women in the palace on the mountain. While



THE LOTUS POOLS



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living there in pleasure, and his army in the city, the old King of Hangchow sent his soldiers; and soon there was no King of Soochow, only a slave-girl decked with many jewels was taken back with honour to the old King's city.

I read all this to thine Honourable Mother, and told her we could see the ruins of the fish-pond, of the palace, see the fallen marbles from the tea-house, and—the chairs were ordered, and we went. We wandered over deserted pathways, saw the lotus pools once filled with goldfish, picked our way through lonely courtyards, climbed the sunken steps of terraces that had once been gay with flowers. It all was melancholy, this palace built for pleasure, now a mass of crumbling ruins, and it saddened us. We sat upon the King's bench that overlooked the plain, and from it I pointed out the Fir-tree Monastery in the distance. I spoke of their famous tea, sun-dried with the flowers of jessamine, and said it might bring cheer and take away the gloom caused by the sight of death and vanished grandeurs now around us.

We were carried swiftly along the pathways that wound in and out past farm villages and rest-houses until we came to the monastery, which is like a yellow jewel in its setting of green fir-trees. The priests made us most welcome, and we drank of their tea, which has not been overpraised, sitting at a great open window looking down upon the valley. Strolling in the courtyard was Chih-peh with his three friends. Mah-li never raised here eyes; she sat as maidens sit in public, but—she saw.

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We came home another pathway, to pass the resting-place of Sheng-dong, the man who at the time of famine fed the poor and gave his all to help the needy. The Gods so loved him that when his body was carried along the roadway to the Resting-place of his Ancestors, all the stones stood up to pay him reverence. One can see them now, standing straight and stiff, as if waiting for his command to lie down again.

Art thou dissatisfied with me? Have I done wrong? Dear One, it means so much to Mah-li. Let her dream these months of waiting. It is hard to keep wondering, doubting, fearing one knows not what, hoping as young girls hope. But now she has seen him. To me he was just a straight-limbed, bright-faced boy; to her he is a God. There are no teeth so white, no hair so black, and man were not born who walked with such a noble stride. It will make the summer pass more quickly, and the thought of the marriage-chair will not be to her the gateway of a prison.

Art thou not tired of that far-off country? Each time I break the seal of thy dear letter I say, "Perhaps this time—it holds for me my happiness. It will say, 'I am coming home to thee.'" I am longing for that message.

*Thy Wife*

### XVIII

*My Dear One,*

It will soon be the Feast of the Springtime. Even now the roads are covered with the women coming to the temple



THE MONASTERY, LIKE A YELLOW JEWEL IN ITS SETTING OF  
GREEN FIR TREES





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carrying their baskets of spirit money and candles to lay before the Buddha.

Spring will soon be truly here; the buds are everywhere. Everything laughs from the sheer joy of laughter. The sun looks down upon the water in the canal and it breaks into a thousand little ripples from pure gladness. I too am happy, and I want to give of my happiness. I have put a great *kang* of tea down by the rest-house on the tow-path, so that they who thirst may drink. Each morning I send Chang-tai, the gate-keeper, down to the man who lives in the little reed hut he has builded by the grave of his father. For three years he will live there, to show to the world his sorrow. I think it very worthy and filial of him, so I send him rice each morning. I have also done another thing to express the joy that is deep within my heart. The old abbot, out of thankfulness that the tall poles were not erected before the monastery gateway, has turned the fields back of the temple into a freeing-place for animals. There one may acquire merit by buying a sheep, a horse, a dog, a bird, or a snake that is to be killed, and turning it loose where it may live and die a natural death, as the Gods intended from the beginning. I have given him a sum of money, large in his eyes but small when compared to my happiness, to aid him in this worthy work. I go over in the morning and look at the poor horses and the dogs, and wonder whose soul is regarding me from out of their tired eyes.

Let me hear that thou art coming, man of mine, and I will gather dewdrops from the cherry-trees and bathe me in

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their perfume to give me beauty that will hold thee close to me.

I am

*Thy Wife*

## XIX

*My Dear One,*

I have received thy letter telling me thou wilt not be here until the summer comes. Then, I must tell thee my news, as the springtime is here, the flowers are budding, the grass is green, soon the plum-tree in the courtyard will be white. I am jealous of this paper that will see the delight and joy in thine eyes. In the evening I watch the rice boats pass along the canal, where the water is green and silvery like the new leaves of the willow, and I say, "Perhaps when you return, I shall be the mother of a child." Ah!—I have told thee. Does it bring thee happiness, my lord? Does it make a quick little catch in thy breath? Does thy pulse quicken at the thought that soon thou wilt be a father?

Thou wilt never know what this has meant to me. It has made the creature live that was within my soul, and my whole being is bathed with its glory. Thou wilt never know how many times I have gone down the pathway to the temple and asked this great boon of our Lady of Mercy. She granted it, and my life is made perfect. I am indeed a woman, fulfilling a woman's destiny. If a woman bear not sons for her lord, what worth her life? Do we not know that the first of the



秋亭余画

“SOON THE PLUM TREE IN THE COURTYARD  
WILL BE WHITE”



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seven causes for putting away a wife is that she brings no sons into the world to worship at the graves of her husband's ancestors? But I, Kwei-li, that will not be said of me.

Sometimes I think, "If something should happen; if the God should be jealous of my happiness and I should not see thee more?" Then the heart of the woman throbs with fear, and I throw myself at the feet of Kwan-yin and beg for strength. She gives me peace and brings to my remembrance that the bond of fate is sealed within the moon. There is no place for fear, for aught but love; my heart is filled so with its happiness.

*Thy Wife*

## XX

*My Dear One,*

The spring has come, and with it some new pulse of life beats through my quiet veins. I spend long hours upon the terrace, breathing in the perfume of the many flowers. The cherry-blossoms are a glory. The whole steep hillside is covered with a fairy lace, as if some God knew how we hungered after beauty and gave us these pink blossoms to help us to forget the bare cold earth of winter.

It is the time of praying, and all the women with their candles and their incense are bending knees and chanting prayers to Kwan-yin for the blessing of a son. There is a pilgrimage to the Kwem-li Pagoda. I can see it in the distance,

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with its lotus bells that sway and ring with each light breath of wind. One does not think of it as a thing of brick and mortar, or as a many-storied temple, but as a casket whose jewels are the prayers of waiting, hoping women.

You ask me how I pass my days? I cannot tell. At dawn, I wake with hope and listen to the song of the meadow-lark. At noon, I dream of my great happiness to come. At sunset, I am swept away into the land of my golden dreams, into the heart of my golden world that is peopled with but three—Thou, Him, and Me. I am drifting happily, sleepily, forgetting care, waiting for the Gods to bring my joy.

*Thy Wife*

### XXI

*My Dear One,*

My courtyard is filled with the sounds of chatting women. I have sent for the sewing-women and those who do embroidery, and the days are passed in making little garments. We are all so busy; Li-ti, Mah-li, even thine Honourable Mother takes again the needle and shows us how she broidered jackets for thee when thou wert young. The piles of clothing grow each day, and I touch them and caress them and imagine I can see them folding close a tiny form. There are jackets, trousers, shoes, tiny caps and thick warm blankets.

I send for Blind Chun, the story-teller, and he makes the hours pass quickly with his tales of bygone days. The singers

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and the fortune-tellers all have found the path that leads up to our gateway, knowing they will find a welcome.

I am

*Thy Happy Wife*

### XXII

I send thee cherry-blossoms. They grew within thy courtyard, and each tiny petal will bring to thee remembrance of thy wife who loves thee well.

### XXIII

If thou couldst see my courtyard! It seems carpeted with snow, so many are the cherry-blossoms on its pavement. They say I am untidy that I permit it to be untouched by broom or brush. It is cleaned and spotless all the year, save at this the time of cherry-blossoms, when 'tis untrodden and unswept.

I cannot write thee merely household cares and gossip. I am so filled with happiness, I can only dream and wonder. Joy is beating with his wings just outside my open window, and soon all the gates of Heaven will be opened wide to me.

*Thy Wife*

### XXIV

He is here, beloved, thy son! I put out my hand and touch him, and the breath of the wind through the pine-

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trees brings the music of the Gods to me. He is big and strong and beautiful. I see in his eyes as in a mirror the reflection of thy dear face, and I know he is thine and mine, and we three are one. He is my joy, my son, my first-born. I am tired, my lord, the brush is heavy, but it is such a happy, happy tired.

*Thy Wife*

### XXV

Is there anything so wonderful as being the mother of a son? I simply sing, and laugh, and live—oh, how I *live* the long days through. I have happiness enough for all the world, and I want to give and give and give. Thy mother says that all the beggars within the province know there is rice outside our gateway; but when I look into my son's eyes, and feel his tiny fingers groping in my neck, I feel I must give of my plenty to those who have no joy.

Oh, husband mine, come back and see thy son!

### XXVI

Dost thou know what love is? Thou canst not till thou holdest Love itself within thy very arms. I thought I loved thee. I smile now at the remembrance of that feeble flickering flame that was as like unto the real love as the faint, cold beam of the candle is to the rays of the glorious sun. Now—now—thou art the father of my son. Thou hast a new place



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in my heart. The tie that binds our hearts together is stronger than a rope of twisted bamboo, it is a bond, a love bond, that never can be severed. I am the mother of thy first-born—thou hast given me my man-child. Love thee—love thee!—now I *know!*

*I am Thine Own*

### XXVII

I am wroth with thy brother Chih-peh. He is a man of very small discernment. He does not see the wonders of thy son. He says he cannot see that he is a child of more than mortal beauty. I sorrow for him. The Gods have surely drawn a film before his eyes.

But I cannot bear resentment, there is no room in me for aught but love and the days are far too short to hold my happiness. I pass them near my baby. I croon to him sweet lullabies at which the others laugh. I say, "Thou dost not understand? Of course not, 'tis the language of the Gods," and as he sleeps I watch his small face grow each day more like to thine. I give long hours to thinking of his future. He must be a man like thee, strong, noble, kindly, bearing thy great name with honour, so that in years to come it will be said, "The first-born son of Kwei-li was a great and worthy man."

At night I lie beside him and am jealous of the sleep that takes him from my sight. The morning comes and sets my

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heart to beating at the thought that one more long, sweet day has come to me in which to guard, and love, and cherish him.

*Thy Happy Wife*

### XXVIII

It has been a wonderful day. Thyson has had his first reception. It is just one moon ago since I found him lying by my side, and now we have had the feast of the shaving of the head. All our friends came, and they brought him beautiful presents. Chih-lo gave a cap with all the Gods upon the front and long red tassels to hang down by each ear. Li-ti gave him shoes that she herself had broidered, with a cat's face on the toes and the ears and whiskers outstanding. They will make him careful of his steps and sure-footed as the cat. Mah-li gave him a most wonderful silver box to hang around his neck and in which I will keep his amulets. There were many things which I will not take the time to tell thee. I am sorry to say that thyson behaved himself unseemly. He screamed and kicked as the barber shaved his tiny head. I was much distressed, but they tell me it is a sign that he will grow to be a valiant man.

I gave a feast, and such a feast! It will be remembered for many moons. Even thine Honourable Mothersaid I showed the knowledge of what was due my guests upon so great an occasion. We also gave to him his milk name. It is Ten Thousand Springtimes, as he came at blossom-time; but I

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call him that only within my heart, as I do not wish the jealous Gods to hear. When I speak of him, I say "The Stupid One," "The Late-born," so they will think I do not care for him and will not covet me my treasure.

I am tired; it has been a happy day. The Gods are good to

*Kwei-li*

### XXIX

*My Dear One,*

Another marriage within our compound. Dost thou remember the servant Cho-to, who came to us soon after I became thy bride? She will soon marry a man in the village of Soong-tong, and she is very happy. She has not seen him, of course, but her mother says he is good and honest and will make for her a suitable husband. I talked to her quite seriously, as my age and many moons of marriage allow me. I told her that only by practising modesty, humility and gentleness could she walk safely on the path that leads to being the mother of sons.

To be the mother of sons is not always a happiness. Ling-ti, the shoemaker, was here this morning, and he was in great distress. His baby, three months old, died with a fever and he had no money to pay for burial. This morning he arose early, before the mother awakened, and took it to the baby tower outside the city. It is lying in there now, with all the other little children whose parents were too

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poor to give them proper burial. It made a quick, sad hurt within me, and I went quickly to find my baby. Thou wilt not laugh, but I have pierced his right ear and put a ring therein, so the Godswill think he is a girl and not desire him.

I hear thy son.

*Thy Wife*

### XXX

*My Dear One,*

There has been great talk of evil eyes. Not that I believe the servants' tales; but—thine Honourable Mother, Li-ti, and thy wife have been to the Holy Man who dwells underneath the Great Magnolia-tree near the street of the Leaning Willow. He lives alone within a little house of matting, and has acquired great merit by his virtuous acts. He wears around his unbound hair a band of metal that is the outward sign of his great holiness. He lives alone in peace and with untroubled mind. In his great wisdom he has learned that peace is the end and aim of life; not triumph, success, nor riches, but that the greatest gift from all the Gods is peace. I purchased from him an amulet for my "Stupid One," my treasure, as some one *might* come within our courtyard and cast his eye upon our child with bad intent.

Come to me, my husband. Tell me thou art coming. Thou wilt find me standing in the outer archway with thy son within mine arms. I long for thee.

*Thy Wife*

# LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

## XXXI

My days are filled with happiness. I go out on the terrace and look far down the hillside that is covered with azaleas, pink and orange and mauve. I hold my son and say, "Look, thy father will come to us from the city yonder. Our eyes of love will see him from far away, there by the willow-pattern tea-house. He will come nearer—nearer—and we will not hear the beat of his bearers' feet upon the pathway because of the beating of our hearts." He smiles at me, he understands. He is so wonderful, thy son. I would "string the sunbeams for his necklace or draw down the moon with cords to canopy his bed."

Come back and see thy son.

*Kwei-li*

## XXXII

*My Dear One,*

Thy letter has come saying thou wilt be here soon. It came on the day I went to the temple to make my offering of thanks for the gift of our son.

I put on my richest gown, the blue one with the broidery of gold. I dressed my hair with jessamine flowers, and wore all the jewels thou hast given me. My boy was in his jacket of red, his trousers of mauve, his shoes of purple, and his cap with the many Gods. When I was seated in the chair he was placed in my lap, and a man was sent ahead with *cash*

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

to give the beggars, because I wished all the world to be happy on this my day of rejoicing.

My bearers carried me to the very steps of the throne on which Kwan-yin was seated. I made my obeisance, I lighted the large red candles and placed them before the Goddess of Heaven. Then I took our son before the Buddha, the Name, the Lord of Light, the All-Powerful, and touched his head three times to the mat, to show that he would be a faithful follower and learn to keep the law.

We went home by the valley road, and my heart kept beating in tune to the pat-pat of the bearers' feet on the pathway. It was all so beautiful. The trailing vines on the mountain-side, the ferns in the cool dark places, the rich green leaves of the mulberry-trees, the farmers in the paddy fields, all seemed filled with the joy of life. And I, Kwei-li, going along in my chair with my son on my knee, was the happiest of them all. The Gods have given me everything; they have nothing more to bestow. I am glad I have gone to the mountain-side each day to thank them for their gifts.

The Gods are good, my loved one, they are good to thy

*Kwei-li*

### XXXIII

I am alone on the mountain-top. I have gone the pathway the last time to lay my offering at the feet of Kwan-yin. She does not hear my voice. There is no Goddess of

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Mercy. She is a thing of gold and wood, and she has mocked my despair, has laughed at the heart that is within me, that is alive and full of an anguish such as she has never known.

My son, my man-child is dead. The life has gone from his body, the breath from his lips. I have held him all the night close to my heart and it does not give him warmth. They have taken him from me and told me he has gone to the Gods. There are no Gods. There are no Gods. I am alone.

### XXXIV

He had thine eyes—he was like to thee. Thou wilt never know thy son and mine, my Springtime. Why could they not have left thy son for thee to see? He was so strong and beautiful, my first-born.

### XXXV

Do not chide me. I cannot write. What do I do? I do not know. I lie long hours and watch the tiny mites that live within the sun's bright golden rays, and say, "Why could I not exchange my womanhood, that hopes and loves and sorrows, for one of those small dancing spots within the sunbeams? At least they do not feel."

At night sleep does not touch my eyelids. I lie upon the

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

terrace. I will not go within my chamber, where 'tis gloom and darkness. I watch the stars, a silver, mocking throng, that twinkle at me coldly, and then I see the moon mount slowly her pathway of the skies. The noises of the night come to me softly, as if they knew my sorrow, and the croaking frogs and the crickets that find lodging by the lotus pool seem to feel with me my loneliness, so plaintive is their cry.

I feel the dawn will never come, as if 'twere dead or slumbered; but when at last he comes, I watch him touch the hillside, trees, and temples with soft grey fingers, and bring to me a beauty one does not see by day. The night winds pass with sighs among the pine-trees, and in passing give a loving touch to bells upon pagodas that bring their music faint to me. The dawn is not the golden door of happiness. It only means another day has come and I must smile and talk and live as if my heart were here.

Oh, man of mine, if but thy dream touch would come and bid me slumber, I would obey.

*Thy Wife*

### XXXVI

They have put a baby in my arms, a child found on the tow-path, a beggar child. I felt I could not place another head where our dear boy had lain, and I sat stiff and still, and tried to push away the little body pressing close against



## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

me; but at touch of baby mouth and fingers, springs that were dead seemed stirring in my heart again. At last I could not bear it, and I leaned my face against her head and crooned His lullaby:

“The Gods on the roof-tree guard pigeons from harm  
And my little pigeon is safe in my arms.”

I cannot tell thee more. My heart is breaking.

### XXXVII

I have given to this stranger-child, this child left to die upon the tow-path, the clothes that were our son's. She was cold, and thy Mother came to me so gently and said, “Kwei-li, hast thou no clothing for the child that was found by thy servants?” I saw her meaning, and I said, “Wouldst thou have me put the clothing over which I have wept, and that is now carefully laid away in the camphor-wood box, upon this child?” She said — and thou wouldst not know thy Mother's voice, her bitter words are only as the rough shell of the lichee nut that covers the sweetmeat hidden within — she said, “Why not, dear one? This one needs them, and the hours thou passest with them are only filled with saddened memories.” I said to her, “This is a girl, a beggar child. I will not give to her the clothing of my son. Each time I looked upon her it would be a knife plunged in my heart.” She said to me, “Kwei-li, thou art not a child, thou art a woman. Of what worth that clothing lying in that box

## LOVE LETTERS OF A CHINESE LADY

of camphor-wood? Does it bring back thy son? Some day thou wilt open it, and there will be nothing but dust which will reproach thee. Get them and give them to this child which has come to us out of the night."

I went to the box and opened it, and they lay there, the little things that had touched his tiny body. I gave them, the trousers of purple, the jackets of red, the embroidered shoes, the caps with the many Buddhas. I gave them all to the beggar child.

I am :

*Thy Wife*

### XXXVIII

I am reproached because I will not go to the temple. It is filled with the sounds of chanting which comes to me faintly as I lie upon the terrace. There are women there, happy women, with their babies in their arms, while mine are empty. There are others there in sorrow, laying their offerings at the feet of Kwan-yin. They do not know that she does not feel, nor care, for womankind. She sits upon her lotus throne and laughs at mothers in despair. How *can* she feel, how can she know, that thing of gilded wood and plaster?

I stay upon my terrace, I live alone within my court of silent dreams. For me there are no Gods.



“THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS HAVE BLOOMED  
AND PASSED AWAY”



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## XXXIX

They have brought to me from the market-place a book of a new God. I would not read it. I said, "There are too many Gods—why add a new one? I have no candles or incense to lay before an image." But—I read and saw within its pages that He gave rest and love and peace. Peace—what the holy man desired, the end of all things—peace. And I, I do not want to lose the gift of memory; I want remembrance, but I want it without pain.

The cherry-blossoms have bloomed and passed away. They lingered but a moment's space, and, like my dream of spring, they died. But, passing, they have left behind the knowledge that we'll see them once again. There must be something, *somewhere*, to speak to despairing mothers and say, "Weep not! You will see your own again."

I do not want a God of temples. I have cried my prayers to Kwan-yin, and they have come back to me like echoes from a deadened wall. I want a God to come to me at night-time, when I am lying lonely, wide-eyed, staring into darkness, with all my body aching for the touch of tiny hands. I want that God who says, "I give thee Peace," to stand close by my pillow and touch my wearied eyelids and bring me rest.

I have been dead—enclosed within a tomb of sorrow and despair; but now, at words but dimly understood, a faint new life seems stirring deep within me. A Voice speaks to me

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from out these pages, a Voice that says, "Come unto Me all ye weary and heavy-laden, and I will give thee rest." My longing soul cries out, "Oh, great and unknown God, give *me* this rest!" I am alone, a woman, helpless, stretching out my arms in darkness, but into my world of gloom has come a faint dim star, a star of hope that says to me, "There *is* a God."



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