

IN THE WINE SHOP

Lu Hsun

Table of Contents

IN THE WINE SHOP.....1
Lu Hsun.....1

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During my travels from the North to the Southeast I made a detour to my home, then to S . This town is only about ten miles from my native place, and by small boat can be reached in less than half a day. I had taught in a school here for a year. In the depth of winter, after snow, the landscape was bleak. Indolence and nostalgia combined finally made me put up for a short time in the Lo Szu Inn, one which had not been there before. The town was small. I looked for several old colleagues I thought I might find, but not one was there: they had long since gone their different ways. When I passed the gate of the school, I found that too had changed its name and appearance, which made me feel quite a stranger. In less than two hours my enthusiasm had waned, and I rather reproached myself for coming.

The inn in which I stayed let rooms but did not supply meals; rice and dishes could be ordered from outside, but they were quite unpalatable, tasting like mud. Outside the window was only a stained and spotted wall, covered with withered moss. Above was the slaty sky, dead white without any colouring; moreover a light flurry of snow had begun to fall. I had had a poor lunch to begin with, and had nothing to do to while away the time, so quite naturally I thought of a small wine shop I had known very well in the old days, called "One Barrel House," which, I reckoned, could not be far from the hotel. I immediately locked the door of my room and set out for this tavern. Actually, all I wanted was to escape the boredom of my stay. I did not really want to drink. "One Barrel House" was still there, its narrow, mouldering front and dilapidated signboard unchanged. But from the landlord down to the waiter there was not a single person I knew in "One Barrel House" too I had become a complete stranger. Still I walked up the familiar flight of stairs in the corner of the room to the little upper storey. Up here were the same five small wooden tables, unchanged. Only the back window, which had originally had a wooden lattice, had been fitted with panes of glass.

"A catty of yellow wine. Dishes? Ten slices of fried beancurd, with plenty of pepper sauce!"

As I gave the order to the waiter who had come up with me, I walked to the back and sat down at the table by the window. This upstairs room was absolutely empty, which enabled me to take possession of the best seat from which I could look out on to the deserted courtyard beneath. The courtyard probably did not belong to the wine shop. I had looked out at it many times before in the past, sometimes in snowy weather too. Now, to eyes accustomed to the North, the sight was sufficiently striking: several old plum trees, rivals of the snow, were actually in full blossom as if entirely oblivious of winter; while beside the crumbling pavilion there was still a camellia with a dozen crimson blossoms standing out against its thick, dark green foliage, blazing in the snow as bright as fire, indignant and arrogant, as if despising the wanderer's wanderlust. I suddenly remembered the moistness of the heaped snow here, clinging, glistening and shining, quite unlike the dry northern snow which, when a high wind blows, will fly up and fill the sky like mist. . . .

"Your wine, sir," said the waiter carelessly, and put down the cup, chopsticks, wine pot and dish. The wine had come. I turned to the table, set everything straight and filled my cup. I felt that the North was certainly not my home, yet when I came South I could only count as a stranger. The dry snow up there, which flew like powder, and the soft snow here, which clung lingeringly, seemed equally alien to me. In a slightly melancholy mood, I took a leisurely sip of wine. The wine was quite pure, and the fried beancurd was excellently cooked. The only

IN THE WINE SHOP

pity was that the pepper sauce was too thin, but then the people of S had never understood pungent flavours .

Probably because it was only afternoon, the place had none of the atmosphere of a tavern. I had already drunk three cups, but apart from myself there were still only four bare wooden tables in the place. Looking at the deserted courtyard I began to feel lonely, yet I did not want any other customers to come up. I could not help being irritated by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and was relieved to find it was only the waiter. And so I drank another two cups of wine.

"This time it must be a customer," I thought, for the footsteps sounded much slower than those of the waiter. When I judged that he must be at the top of the stairs, I raised my head rather apprehensively to look at this unwelcome company. I gave a start and stood up. I never guessed that here of all places I should unexpectedly meet a friend if such he would still let me call him. The newcomer was an old classmate who had been my colleague when I was a teacher, and although he had changed a great deal I knew him as soon as I saw him. Only he had become much slower in his movements, very unlike the nimble and active Lu Wei-fu of the old days.

"Ah, Wei-fu, is it you? I never expected to meet you here."

"Oh, it's you? Neither did I ever. . . ."

I urged him to join me, but only after some hesitation did he seem willing to sit down. At first I thought this very strange, and felt rather hurt and displeased. When I looked closely at him he had still the same disorderly hair and beard and pale oblong face, but he was thinner and weaker. He looked very quiet, or perhaps dispirited, and his eyes beneath their thick black brows had lost their alertness; but when he looked slowly around in the direction of the deserted courtyard, from his eyes suddenly flashed one of those piercing looks which I had seen so often at school.

"Well," I said cheerfully but somewhat awkwardly, "we have not seen each other now for about ten years. I heard long ago that you were at Tsinan, but I was so wretchedly lazy I never wrote. . . ."

"I was just the same. I have been at Taiyuan for more than two years now, with my mother. When I came back to fetch her I learned that you had already left, left for good and all."

"What are you doing in Taiyuan?" I asked.

"Teaching in the family of a fellow-provincial."

"And before that?"

"Before that?" He took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and put it in his mouth, then, watching the smoke as he puffed, said reflectively, "Simply futile work, equivalent to doing nothing at all."

He also asked what had happened to me since we separated. I gave him a rough idea, at the same time calling the waiter to bring a cup and chopsticks, so that he could share my wine while we had another two cetties heated. We also ordered dishes. In the past we had never stood on ceremony, but now we began to be so formal that neither would choose a dish, and finally we fixed on four suggested by the waiter: peas spiced with aniseed, cold meat, fried beancurd, and salted fish.

"As soon as I came back I knew I was a fool." Holding his cigarette in one hand and the winecup in the other, he spoke with a bitter smile. "When I was young, I saw the way bees or flies stopped in one place. If they were frightened they would fly off, but after flying in a small circle they would come back again to stop in the same place; and I thought this really very foolish, as well as pathetic. But I didn't think that I would fly back myself,

IN THE WINE SHOP

after only flying in a small circle. And I didn't think you would come back either. Couldn't you have flown a little further?"

"That's difficult to say. Probably I too have simply flown in a small circle." I also spoke with a rather bitter smile. "But why did you fly back?"

"For something quite futile." In one gulp he emptied his cup, then took several pulls at his cigarette, and opened his eyes a little wider. "Futile but you may as well hear about it."

The waiter brought up the freshly heated wine and dishes, and set them on the table. The smoke and the fragrance of fried beancurd seemed to make the upstairs room more cheerful, while outside the snow fell still more thickly.

"Perhaps you knew," he went on, "that I had a little brother who died when he was three, and was buried here in the country. I can't even remember clearly what he looked like, but I have heard my mother say he was a very lovable child, and very fond of me. Even now it brings tears to her eyes to speak of him. This spring an elder cousin wrote to tell us that the ground beside his grave was gradually being swamped, and he was afraid before long it would slip into the river: we should go at once and do something about it. As soon as my mother knew this, she became very upset, and couldn't sleep for several nights she can read letters by herself, you know. But what could I do? I had no money, no time: there was nothing that could be done.

"Only now, taking advantage of my New Year's holiday, I have been able to come South to move his grave." He drained another cup of wine, looked out of the window and exclaimed: "Could you find anything like this up North? Flowers in thick snow, and beneath the snow unfrozen ground. So the day before yesterday I bought a small coffin, because I reckoned that the one under the ground must have rotted long ago I took cotton and bedding, hired four workmen, and went into the country to move his grave. At the time I suddenly felt very happy, eager to dig up the grave, eager to see the body of the little brother who had been so fond of me: this was a new sensation for me. When we reached the grave, sure enough, the river water was encroaching on it and was already less than two feet away. The poor grave had not had any earth added to it for two years, and had sunk in. I stood in the snow, firmly pointed it out to the workmen, and said: 'Dig it up!'

"I really am a commonplace fellow. I felt that my voice at this juncture was rather unnatural, and that this order was the greatest I had given in all my life. But the workmen didn't find it at all strange, and simply set to work to dig. When they reached the enclosure I had a look, and indeed the wood of the coffin had rotted almost completely away, leaving only a heap of splinters and small fragments of wood. My heart beat faster and I set these aside myself very carefully, wanting to see my little brother. However, I was taken by surprise. Bedding, clothes, skeleton, all had gone! I thought: 'These have all rotted away, but I always heard that the most difficult substance to rot is hair; perhaps there is still some hair.' So I bent down and looked carefully in the mud where the pillow should have been, but there was none. Not a trace remained." I suddenly noticed that the rims of his eyes had become rather red, but realized at once that this was the effect of the wine. He had scarcely touched the dishes, but had been drinking incessantly, so that he had already drunk more than a catty, and his looks and gestures had all become more vigorous, so that he gradually resembled the Lu Wei-fu I had known. I called the waiter to heat two more measures of wine, then turned back and, taking my winecup, face to face with him, listened in silence to what he had to tell.

"Actually it need not really have been moved again; I had only to level the ground, sell the coffin, and that would have been the end of it. Although there would have been something rather singular in my going to sell the coffin, still, if the price were low enough the shop from which I bought it would have taken it, and at least I could have saved a little money for wine. But I didn't do so. I still spread out the bedding, wrapped up in cotton some of the clay where his body had been, covered it up, put it in the new coffin, moved it to the grave where my father was

IN THE WINE SHOP

buried, and buried it beside him. Because I used bricks for an enclosure of the coffin I was busy again most of yesterday, supervising the work. In this way I can count the affair ended, at least enough to deceive my mother and set her mind at rest. Well, well, you look at me like that! Do you blame me for being so changed? Yes, I still remember the time when we went together to the Tutelary God's Temple to pull off the images' beards, how all day long we used to discuss methods of revolutionizing China until we even came to blows. But now I am like this, willing to let things slide and to compromise. Sometimes I think: 'If my old friends were to see me now, probably they would no longer acknowledge me as a friend.' But this is what I am like now."

He took out another cigarette, put it in his mouth and lit it.

"Judging by your expression, you still seem to have hope for me. Naturally I am much more obtuse than before, but there are still some things I realize. This makes me grateful to you, at the same time rather uneasy. I am afraid I am only letting down the old friends who even now still have some hope for me. . . ." He stopped and puffed several times at his cigarette before going on slowly: "Only today, just before coming to this 'One Barrel House,' I did something futile, and yet it was something I was glad to do. My former neighbour on the east side was called Chang Fu. He was a boatman and had a daughter called Ah Shun. When you came to my house in those days you might have seen her, but you certainly wouldn't have paid any attention to her, because she was so small then. Nor did she grow up to be pretty, having just an ordinary thin oval face and pale skin. Only her eyes were unusually large, with very long lashes, and the whites were as clear as a cloudless night sky I mean the cloudless sky of the North when there is no wind; here it is not so clear. She was very capable. She lost her mother when she was in her teens, and it was her job to look after a small brother and sister; also she had to wait on her father, and all this she did very competently. She was economical too, so that the family gradually grew better off. There was scarcely a neighbour who did not praise her, and even Chang Fu often expressed his appreciation. When I left on my journey this time, my mother remembered her old people's memories are so long. She recalled that in the past Ah Shun once saw someone wearing artificial red flowers in her hair, and wanted a spray for herself. When she couldn't get one she cried nearly all night, so that she was beaten by her father, and her eyes remained red and swollen for two or three days. These red flowers came from another province, and couldn't be bought even in S , so how could she ever hope to have any? Since I was coming South this time, my mother told me to buy two sprays to give her.

"Far from feeling vexed at this commission, I was actually delighted. I was really glad to do something for Ah Shun. The year before last, I came back to fetch my mother, and one day when Chang Fu was at home I happened to start chatting with him. He wanted to invite me to take a bowl of gruel made of buckwheat flour, telling me that they added white sugar to it. You see, a boatman who could keep white sugar in his house was obviously not poor, and must eat very well. I let myself be persuaded and accepted, but begged that they would only give me a small bowl. He quite understood, and said to Ah Shun: 'These scholars have no appetite. You can use a small bowl, but add more sugar!' However when she had prepared the concoction and brought it in, I gave a start, for it was a large bowl, as much as I would eat in a whole day. Compared with Chang Fu's bowl, it is true, it did appear small. In all my life I had never eaten this buckwheat gruel, and now that I tasted it, it was really unpalatable, though extremely sweet. I carelessly swallowed a few mouthfuls, and had decided not to eat any more when I happened to catch a glimpse of Ah Shun standing far off in one corner of the room. Then I hadn't the heart to put down my chopsticks. I saw in her face both hope and fear, no doubt, that she had prepared it badly, and hope that we would find it to our liking. I knew that if I left most of mine she would feel very disappointed and apologetic. So I screwed up my courage, opened my mouth wide and shovelled it down, eating almost as fast as Chang Fu. It was then that I learned the agony of forcing oneself to eat; I remember when I was a child and had to finish a bowl of brown sugar mixed with medicine for worms I experienced the same difficulty. I felt no resentment, though, because her half suppressed smile of satisfaction, when she came to take away our empty bowls, repaid me amply for all my discomfort. That night, although indigestion kept me from sleeping well and I had a series of nightmares, I still wished her a lifetime of happiness, and hoped the world would change for the better for her sake. Such thoughts were only the traces of my dreams in the old days. The next instant I laughed at myself, and promptly forgot them.

IN THE WINE SHOP

"I did not know before that she had been beaten on account of a spray of artificial flowers, but when my mother spoke of it I remembered the buckwheat gruel incident, and became unaccountably diligent. First I made a search in Taiyuan, but none of the shops had them. It was only when I went to Tsinan. . . ."

There was a rustle outside the window, as a pile of snow slipped down from the camellia which it had bent beneath its weight; then the branches of the tree straightened themselves, showing even more clearly their dark thick foliage and bloodred flowers. The colour of the sky became more slaty. Small sparrows chirped, probably because evening was near, and since the ground was covered with snow they could find nothing to eat and would go early to their nests to sleep.

"It was only when I went to Tsinan," he looked out of the window for a moment, turned back and drained a cup of wine, took several puffs at his cigarette, and went on, "only then did I buy the artificial flowers. I didn't know whether those she had been beaten for were this kind or not; but at least these were also made of velvet. I didn't know either whether she liked a deep or a light colour, so I bought one spray of red, one spray of pink, and brought them both here.

"Just this afternoon, as soon as I had finished lunch, I went to see Chang Fu, having specially stayed an extra day for this. His house was there all right, only looking rather gloomy; or perhaps that was simply my imagination. His son and second daughter Ah Chao were standing at the gate. Both of them had grown. Ah Chao was quite different from her sister, and looked very plain; but when she saw me come up to their house, she quickly ran inside. When I asked the little boy, I found that Chang Fu was not at home. 'And your elder sister?' At once he stared at me wide-eyed, and asked me what I wanted her for; moreover he seemed very fierce, as if he wanted to attack me. Hesitantly I walked away. Nowadays I just let things slide. . . ."

"You have no idea how much more afraid I am of calling on people than I used to be. Because I know very well how unwelcome I am, I have even come to dislike myself and, knowing this, why should I inflict myself on others? But this time I felt my errand had to be carried out, so after some reflection I went back to the firewood shop almost opposite their house. The shopkeeper's mother, Old Mrs. Fa, was there at least, and still recognized me. She actually asked me into the shop to sit down. After an exchange of polite remarks I told her why I had come back to S and was looking for Chang Fu. I was taken aback when she heaved a sigh and said:

"What a pity Ah Shun had not the good luck to wear these flowers you have brought.'

"Then she told me the whole story, saying, 'It was probably last spring that Ah Shun began to look pale and thin. Later she would often start crying suddenly, and if you asked her why, she wouldn't say. Sometimes she even cried all night, until Chang Fu lost his temper and scolded her, saying she had waited too long to marry and had gone mad. When autumn came, first she had a slight cold and then she took to her bed, and after that she never got up again. Only a few days before she died, she told Chang Fu that she had long ago become like her mother, often spitting blood and perspiring at night. She had hidden it, afraid that he would worry about her. One evening her uncle Chang Keng came to demand money he was always doing that and when she would not give him any he smiled coldly and said, "Don't be so proud; your man is not even up to me!" That upset her, but she was too shy to ask, and could only cry. As soon as Chang Fu knew this, he told her what a decent fellow her future husband was; but it was too late. Besides, she didn't believe him. "It's a good thing I'm already like this," she said. "Now nothing matters any more."

"The old woman also said, 'If her man was really not as good as Chang Keng, that would be truly frightful! He would not be up to a chicken thief, and what sort of fellow would that be! But when he came to the funeral I saw him with my own eyes: his clothes were clean and he was very presentable. He said with tears in his eyes that he had worked hard all those years on the boat to save up money to marry, but now the girl was dead. Obviously he must really have been a good man, and everything Chang Keng said was false. It was only a pity Ah Shun believed such a rascally liar, and died for nothing. But we can't blame anyone else: this was Ah Shun's fate.'

IN THE WINE SHOP

"Since that was the case, my business was finished too. But what about the two sprays of artificial flowers I had brought with me? Well, I asked her to give them to Ah Chao. This Ah Chao no sooner saw me than she fled as if I were a wolf or some monster; I really didn't want to give them to her. However, I did give them to her, and I have only to tell my mother that Ah Shun was delighted with them, and that will be that. Who cares about such futile affairs anyway? One only wants to muddle through them somehow. When I have muddled through New Year I shall go back to teaching the Confucian classics as before."

"Are you teaching that?" I asked in astonishment.

"Of course. Did you think I was teaching English? First I had two pupils, one studying the *Book of Songs*, the other *Mencius*. Recently I have got another, a girl, who is studying the *Canon for Girls*. I don't even teach mathematics; not that I wouldn't teach it, but they don't want it taught."

"I could really never have guessed that you would be teaching such books."

"Their father wants them to study these. I'm an outsider, so it's all the same to me. Who cares about such futile affairs anyway? There's no need to take them seriously."

His whole face was scarlet as if he were quite drunk, but the gleam in his eyes had died down. I gave a slight sigh, and for a time found nothing to say. There was a clatter on the stairs as several customers came up. The first was short, with a round bloated face; the second was tall with a conspicuous, red nose. Behind them were others, and as they walked up the small upper floor shook. I turned to Lu Wei-fu, who was trying to catch my eyes; then I called the waiter to bring the bill.

"Is your salary enough to live on?" I asked as I prepared to leave.

"I have twenty dollars a month, not quite enough to manage on."

"Then what do you mean to do in future?"

"In future? I don't know. Just think: Has any single thing turned out as we hoped of all we planned in the past? I'm not sure of anything now, not even of what I will do tomorrow, nor even of the next minute. . . ."

The waiter brought up the bill and gave it to me. Wei-fu did not behave so formally as before, just glanced at me, then went on smoking and allowed me to pay.

We went out of the wine shop together. His hotel lay in the opposite direction to mine, so we said goodbye at the door. As I walked alone towards my hotel, the cold wind and snow beat against my face, but I felt refreshed. I saw that the sky was already dark, woven together with houses and streets into the white, shifting web of thick snow.