

# **REGRET FOR THE PAST**

Lu Hsun



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#### *Chuan-sheng's Notes*

I want, if I can, to describe my remorse and grief for Tzuchun's sake as well as for my own. This shabby room, rucked away in a forgotten corner of the hostel, is so quiet and empty. Time really flies. A whole year has passed since I fell in love with Tzu-chun, and, thanks to her, escaped from this dead quiet and emptiness. On my return, as ill luck would have it, this was the only room vacant. The broken window with the half dead locust tree and old wistaria outside and square table inside are the same as before. The same too are the mouldering wall and wooden bed beside it. At night I lie in bed alone just as I did before I started living with Tzu-chun. The past year has been blotted out as if it had never been—as if I had never moved out of this shabby room so hopefully to set up a small home in Chichao Street.

Nor is that all. A year ago this silence and emptiness were different—there was often an expectancy about them. I was expecting Tzu-chun's arrival. As I waited long and impatiently, the tapping of high heels on the brick pavement would galvanize me into life. Then I would see her pale round face dimpling in a smile, her thin white arms, striped cotton blouse and black skirt. She would bring in a new leaf from the half withered locust tree outside the window for me to look at, or clusters of the mauve flowers that hung from the old wistaria tree, the trunk of which looked as if made of iron.

Now there is only the old silence and emptiness. Tzu-chun will not come again—never, never again.

In Tzu-chun's absence, I saw nothing in this shabby room. Out of sheer boredom I would pick up a book—science or literature, it was all the same to me—and read on and on, till I realized I had turned a dozen pages without taking in a word I had read. Only my ears were so sensitive, I seemed able to hear all the footsteps outside the gate, those of Tzu-chun among the rest. Her steps often sounded as if they were drawing nearer and nearer—only to grow fainter again, until they were lost in the tramping of other feet. I hated the servant's son who wore cloth-soled shoes which sounded quite different from Tzu-chun's. I hated the pansy next door who used face cream, who often wore new leather shoes, and whose steps sounded all too like Tzu-chun's.

Had her rickshaw been upset? Had she been knocked over by a tram? . . .

I would be on the point of putting on my hat to go and see her, then remember her uncle had cursed me to my face.

Suddenly I would hear her coming nearer step by step, and by the time I was out to meet her she would already have passed the wistaria trellis, her face dimpling in a smile. Probably she wasn't badly treated after all in her uncle's home. I would calm down and, after we had gazed at each other in silence for a moment, the shabby room would be filled with the sound of my voice as I held forth on the tyranny of the home, the need to break with tradition, the equality of men and women, Ibsen, Tagore and Shelley. . . . She would nod her head, smiling, her eyes filled with a childlike look of wonder. On the wall was nailed a copperplate bust of Shelley, cut out from a magazine. It was one of the best likenesses of him, but when I pointed it out to her she only gave it a hasty glance, then hung her head as if embarrassed. In matters like this, Tzuchun probably hadn't yet freed herself entirely from old ideas. It occurred to me later it might be better to substitute a picture of Shelley being drowned at sea, or a

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portrait of Ibsen. But I never got round to it. Now even this picture has vanished.

"I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me."

She came out with this statement clearly, firmly and gravely, after a thoughtful silence—we had been talking about her uncle who was here and her father who was at home. We had then known each other for half a year. I had already told her all my views, all that had happened to me, and what my failings were. I had hidden very little, and she understood me completely. These few words of hers stirred me to the bottom of my heart, and rang in my ears for many days after. I was unspeakably happy to know that Chinese women were not as hopeless as the pessimists made out, and that we should see them in the not too distant future in all their glory.

Each time I saw her out, I always kept several paces behind her. The old man's face with its whiskers like fishy tentacles was always pressed hard against the dirty windowpane, so that even the tip of his nose was flattened. When we reached the outer courtyard, against the bright glass window there was that little fellow's face, plastered with face cream. But walking out proudly, without looking right or left, Tzu-chun did not see them. And I walked proudly back.

"I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me." Her mind was completely made up on this point. She was by far the more thoroughgoing and resolute of the two of us. What did she care about the half pot of face cream or the flattened nose tip?

I can't remember clearly now how I expressed my true, passionate love for her. Nor only now—even just after it happened, my impression was very blurred. When I thought back at night, I could only remember snatches of what I had said; while during the month or two after we started living together, even these fragments vanished like a dream without a trace. I only remember how for about a fortnight beforehand I had reflected very carefully what attitude to adopt, prepared what to say, and decided what to do if I were refused. But when the time came it was all no use. In my nervousness, I unconsciously did what I had seen in the movies. The memory of this makes me thoroughly ashamed, yet this is the one thing I remember clearly. Even today it is like a solitary lamp in a dark room, lighting me up. I clasped her hand with tears in my eyes, and went down on one knee. . . .

I did not even see clearly how Tzu-chun reacted at the time. All I know was that she accepted me. However, I seem to remember her face first turned pale then gradually flushed red—redder than I have ever seen it before or since. Sadness and joy flashed from her childlike eyes, mingled with apprehension, although she struggled to avoid my gaze, looking, in her confusion, as if she would like to fly out of the window. Then I knew she consented, although I didn't know what she said, or whether she said anything at all.

She, however, remembered everything. She could recite all that I said non-stop, as if she had learned it by heart. She described all my actions in detail, to the life, like a film unfolding itself before my eyes, which included, naturally, that shallow scene from the movies which I was anxious to forget. At night, when all was still, it was our time for review. I was often questioned and examined, or ordered to retell all that had been said on that occasion; but she often had to fill up gaps and correct my mistakes, as if I were a Grade D student.

Gradually these reviews became few and far between. But whenever I saw her gazing raptly into space with a tender look and dimpling, I knew she was going over that old lesson again, and would be afraid she was seeing my ridiculous act from the movies. I knew, though, that she did see it, and that she insisted on seeing it.

But she didn't find it ridiculous. Though I thought it laughable, even contemptible, she didn't find it so at all. And I knew this was because she loved me so truly and passionately.

Late spring last year was our happiest and busiest time. I was calmer then, although one part of my mind became as active as my body. This was when we started going out together. We went several times to the park, but more often to look for lodgings. On the road I was conscious of searching looks, sarcastic smiles or lewd and contemptuous glances which tended, if I was not careful, to make me shiver. Every instant I had to summon all my pride and defiance to my support. She was quite fearless, however, and completely impervious to all this. She proceeded slowly, as calmly as if there were nobody in sight.

To find lodgings was no easy matter. In most cases we were refused on some pretext, while some places we turned down as unsuitable. In the beginning we were very particular—and yet not too particular either, because most of these lodgings were not places where we could live. Later on, all we asked was to be tolerated. We looked

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at over twenty places before we found one we could make do—two rooms facing north in a small house on Chichao Street. The owner of the house was a petty official, but an intelligent man, who only occupied the central and side rooms. His household consisted simply of a wife, a baby a few months old, and a maid from the country. As long as the child didn't cry, it would be very quiet.

Our furniture, simple as it was, had already taken the greater part of the money I had raised: and Tzu-chun had sold her only gold ring and ear-rings too. I tried to stop her, but she insisted, so I didn't press the point. I knew, if she hadn't a share in our home, she would feel uncomfortable.

She had already quarrelled with her uncle—in fact he was so angry that he had disowned her. I had also broken with several friends who thought they were giving me good advice but were actually either afraid for me, or jealous. Still, this meant we were very quiet. Although it was nearly dark when I left the office, and the rickshaw man went so slowly, the time finally came when we were together again. First we would look at each other in silence, then relax and talk intimately, and finally fall silent again, bowing our heads without thinking of anything in particular. Gradually I was able to read her soberly like a book, body and soul. In a mere three weeks I learned much more about her, and broke down barriers which I had not known existed, but then discovered had been real barriers.

As the days passed, Tzu-chun became more lively. However, she didn't like flowers. I bought two pots of flowers at the fair, but after four days without water they died neglected in a corner. I hadn't the time to see to everything. She had a liking for animals, though, which she may have picked up from the official's wife; and in less than a month our household was greatly increased. Four chicks of ours started picking their way across the courtyard with the landlady's dozen. But the two mistresses could tell them apart, each able to spot her own. Then there was a spotted dog, bought at the fair. I believe he had a name to begin with, but Tzu-chun gave him a new one—Ahsui. I called him Ahsui too, though I didn't like the name.

It is true that love must be constantly renewed, must grow and create. When I spoke of this to Tzu-chun, she nodded understandingly.

Ah, what peaceful, happy evenings those were!

Tranquillity and happiness must be consolidated, so that they may last for ever. When we were in the hostel, we had occasional differences of opinion or misunderstandings; but after we moved into Chichao Street even these slight differences vanished. We just sat opposite each other in the lamplight, reminiscing, savouring again the joy of the new harmony which had followed our disputes.

Tzu-chun grew plumper and her cheeks became rosier; the only pity was she was too busy. Her house-keeping left her no time even to chat, much less to read or go out for walks. We often said we would have to get a maid.

Another thing that upset me when I got back in the evening, was to see her try to hide a look of unhappiness or—and this depressed me even more—force a smile on to her face. Luckily I discovered this was due to her secret feud with the petty official's wife, and the bone of contention was the chicks. But why wouldn't she tell me? People ought to have a home of their own. This was no place to live in.

I had my routine too. Six days of the week I went from home to the office and from the office home. In the office I sat at my desk endlessly copying official documents and letters. At home I kept her company or helped her light the stove, cook rice or steam bread. This was when I learned to cook.

Still, I ate much better than when I was in the hostel. Although cooking was not Tzu-chun's strongest point, she threw herself into it heart and soul. Her ceaseless anxieties on this score made me anxious too, and in this way we shared the sweet and the bitter together. She kept at it so hard all day, perspiration made her short hair stick to her head, and her hands grew rough.

And then she had to feed Ahsui and the chicks . . . nobody else could do this.

I told her, I would rather not eat than see her work herself to the bone like this. She just gazed at me without a word, rather wistfully; and I couldn't very well say any more. Still she went on working as hard as ever.

Finally the blow I had been expecting fell. The evening before the Double Tenth Festival, I was sitting idle while she washed the dishes, when we heard a knock on the door. When I went to open it, I found the messenger from our office who handed me a mimeographed slip of paper. I guessed what it was, and when I took it to the

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lamp, sure enough, it read:

By order of the commissioner, Shih Chuan–sheng is discharged.

*The Secretariat*

October 9th.

I had foreseen this while we were still in the hostel. That Face Cream was one of the gambling friends of the commissioner's son. He was bound to spread rumours and try to make trouble. I was only surprised this hadn't happened sooner. In fact this was really no blow, because I had already decided I could work as a clerk somewhere else or teach, or, although it was a little more difficult, do some translation work. I knew the editor of *Freedom's Friend*, and had corresponded with him a couple of months previously. All the same, my heart was thumping. What distressed me most was that even Tzu–chun, fearless as she was, had turned pale. Recently she seemed to have grown weaker.

"What does it matter?" she said. "We'll make a new start, won't we? We'll

She didn't finish, and her voice sounded flat. The lamplight seemed unusually dim. Men are really laughable creatures, so easily upset by trifles. First we gazed at each other in silence, then started discussing what to do. Finally we decided to live as economically as possible on the money we had, to advertise in the paper for a post as clerk or teacher, and to write at the same time to the editor of *Freedom's Friend*, explaining my present situation and asking him to accept a translation to help me out of this difficulty.

"As good said as done! Let's make a fresh start."

I went straight to the table and pushed aside the bottle of vegetable oil and dish of vinegar, while Tzu–chun brought over the dim lamp. First I drew up the advertisement; then I made a selection of books to translate. I hadn't looked at my books since we moved house, and each volume was thick with dust. Finally I wrote the letter.

I hesitated for a long time over the wording of the letter, and when I stopped writing to think, and glanced at her in the dusky lamplight, she was looking very wistful again. I had never imagined a trifle like this could cause such a striking change in someone so firm and fearless as Tzu–chun. She really had grown much weaker lately—it wasn't something that had just started that evening. This made me feel more put out. I had a sudden vision of a peaceful life—the quiet of my shabby room in the hostel flashed before my eyes, and I was just going to take a good look at it when I found myself back in the dusky lamplight again.

After a long time the letter was finished. It was very lengthy, and I was so tired after writing it, I realized I must have grown weaker myself lately too. We decided to send in the advertisement and post the letter the next day. Then with one accord we straightened up, silently, as if conscious of each other's fortitude and strength, and able to see new hope growing from this fresh beginning.

Actually, this blow from outside infused a new spirit into us. In the office I had lived like a wild bird in a cage, given just enough canary–seed by its captor to keep alive, but not to grow fat. As time passed it would lose the use of its wings, so that if ever it were let out of the cage it could no longer fly. Now, at any rate, I had got out of the cage, and must soar anew in the wide sky before it was too late, while I could still flap my wings.

Of course we could not expect results from a small advertisement right away. However, translating is not so simple either. You read something and think you understand it, but when you come to translate it difficulties crop up everywhere, and it's very slow going. Still, I determined to do my best. In less than a fortnight, the edge of a fairly new dictionary was black with my finger–prints, which showed how seriously I took my work. The editor of *Freedom's Friend* had said that his magazine would never ignore a good manuscript.

Unfortunately, there was no room where I could be undisturbed, and Tzu–chun was not as quiet or considerate as she had been. Our room was so cluttered up with dishes and bowls and filled with smoke, it was impossible to

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work steadily there. Of course I had only myself to blame for this—it was my fault for not being able to afford a study. On top of this there was Ahsui and the chicks. The chicks had grown into hens now, and were more of a bone of contention than ever between the two families.

Then there was the never-ending business of eating every day. All Tzu-chun's efforts seemed to be devoted to our meals. One ate to earn, and earned to eat; while Ahsui and the hens had to be fed too. Apparently she had forgotten all she had ever learned, and did not realize that she was interrupting my train of thought when she called me to meals. And although as I sat down I sometimes showed a little displeasure, she paid no attention at all, but just went on munching away quite unconcerned.

It took her five weeks to learn that my work could not be restricted by regular eating hours. When she did realize it she was probably annoyed, but she said nothing. After that my work did go forward faster, and soon I had translated 50,000 words. I had only to polish the manuscript, and it could be sent in with two already completed shorter pieces to *Freedom's Friend*. Those meals were still a headache though. It didn't matter if the dishes were cold, but there weren't enough of them. My appetite was much smaller than before, now that I was sitting at home all day using my brain, but even so there wasn't always even enough rice. It had been given to Ahsui, sometimes along with the mutton which recently, I myself had rarely a chance to eat. She said Ahsui was so thin, it was really pathetic, and it made the landlady sneer at us. She couldn't stand being laughed at.

So there were only the hens to eat my left-overs. It was a long time before I realized this. I was very conscious, however, that my "place in the universe," as Huxley describes it, was only somewhere between the dog and the hens.

Later on, after much argument and insistence, the hens started appearing on our table, and we and Ahsui were able to enjoy them for over ten days. They were very thin, though, because for a long time they had only been fed a few grains of *kaoliang* a day. After that life became much more peaceful. Only Tzu-chun was very dispirited, and seemed so sad and bored without them, she grew rather sulky. How easily people change!

However, Ahsui too would have to be given up. We had stopped hoping for a letter from anywhere, and for a long time Tzu-chun had had no food left to make the dog beg or stand on his hind legs. Besides, winter was coming on very fast, and we didn't know what to do about a stove. His appetite had long been a heavy liability, of which we were all too conscious. So even the dog had to go.

If we had tied a tag on him and taken him to the market to sell, we might have made a few coppers. But neither of us could bring ourselves to do this.

Finally I muffled his head in a cloth and took him outside the West Gate where I let him loose. When he ran after me, I pushed him into a pit that wasn't too deep.

When I got home, I found it more peaceful; but I was quite taken aback by Tzu-chun's tragic expression. I had never seen her so woebegone. Of course, it was because of Ahsui, but why take it so to heart? I didn't tell her about pushing him into the pit.

That night, something icy crept into her expression too.

"Really!" I couldn't help saying. "What's got into you today, Tzu-chun?"

"What?" She didn't even look at me.

"You look so. . . ."

"It's nothing—nothing at all."

Eventually I realized she must consider me callous. Actually, when I was on my own I had got along very well, although I was too proud to mix much with family acquaintances. But since my move I had become estranged from all my old friends. Still, if I could only get away from all this, there were plenty of ways open to me. Now I had to put up with all these hardships mainly because of her—getting rid of Ahsui was a case in point. But Tzu-chun seemed too obtuse now even to understand that.

When I took an opportunity to hint this to her, she nodded as if she understood. But judging by her behaviour later, she either didn't take it in or else didn't believe me.

The cold weather and her cold looks made it impossible for me to be comfortable at home. But where could I go? I could get away from her icy looks in the street and parks, but the cold wind outside whistled through me. Finally I found a haven in the public library.

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Admission was free, and there were two stoves in the reading room. Although the fire was very low, the mere sight of the stoves made me warm. There were no books worth reading: the old ones were out of date, and there were practically no new ones.

But I didn't go there to read. There were usually a few other people there, sometimes as many as a dozen, all thinly clad like me. We kept up a pretence of reading, in order to keep out of the cold. This suited me down to the ground. You were liable to meet people you knew on the road who would glance at you contemptuously, but here there was no trouble of that kind, because my acquaintances were all gathered round other stoves or warming themselves at the stoves in their own homes.

Although there were no books for me to read there, I found quiet in which to think. As I sat there alone thinking over the past, I felt that during the last half year for love—blind love—I had neglected all the important things in life. First and foremost, livelihood. A man must make a living before there can be any place for love. There must be a way out for those who struggle, and I hadn't yet forgotten how to flap my wings, though I was much weaker than before. . . .

The room and readers gradually faded. I saw fishermen in the angry sea, soldiers in the trenches, dignitaries in their ears, speculators at the stock exchange, heroes in mountain forests, teachers on their platforms, night prowlers, thieves in the dark. . . . Tzu-chun was far away. She had lost all her courage in her resentment over Ahsui and absorption in her cooking. The strange thing was that she didn't look particularly thin. . . .

It grew colder. The few lumps of slow-burning hard coal in the stove had at last burned out, and it was closing time. I had to go back to Chichao Street, to expose myself to that icy look. Of late I had sometimes been met with warmth, but this only upset me more. I remember one evening, the childlike look I had not seen for so long flashed from Tzu-chun's eyes as she reminded me with a smile of something that had happened at the hostel. But there was a constant look of fear in her eyes too. The fact that I had treated her more coldly recently than she had me worried her. Sometimes I forced myself to talk and laugh to comfort her. But the emptiness of my laughter and speech, and the way it immediately re-echoed in my ears like a hateful sneer, was more than I could bear.

Tzu-chun might have felt it too, for after this she lost her wooden calm and, though she tried her best to hide it, often showed anxiety. She treated me, however, much more tenderly.

I wanted to speak to her plainly, but hadn't the courage. Whenever I made up my mind to speak, the sight of those childlike eyes compelled me, for the time being, to smile. But my smile turned straightway into a sneer at myself, and made me lose my cold composure.

After that she revived the old questions and started new tests, forcing me to give all sorts of hypocritical answers to show my affection for her. Hypocrisy became branded on my heart, so filling it with falseness it was hard to breathe. I often felt, in my depression, that really great courage was needed to tell the truth; for a man who lacked courage and reconciled himself to hypocrisy would never find a new path. What's more, he just could not exist.

Then Tzu-chun started looking resentful. This happened for the first time one morning, one bitterly cold morning, or so I imagined. I smiled secretly to myself, cold with indignation. All the ideas and intelligent, fearless phrases she had learned were empty after all. Yet she did not know this. She had given up reading long ago, and did not realize the first thing in life is to make a living, that to do this people must advance hand in hand, or go forward singly. All she could do was cling to someone else's clothing, making it difficult even for a fighter to struggle, and bringing ruin on both.

I felt that our only hope lay in parting. She ought to make a clean break. Suddenly I thought of her death, but immediately was ashamed and reproached myself. Happily it was morning, and there was plenty of time for me to tell her the truth. Whether or not we could make a fresh start depended on this.

I deliberately brought up the past. I spoke of literature, then of foreign authors and their works, of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *The Lady from the Sea*. I praised Nora for being strong-minded, . . . All this had been said the previous year in the shabby room in the hostel, but now it rang hollow. As the words left my mouth I could not free myself from the suspicion that there was an unseen urchin behind me maliciously parroting all I said.

She listened, nodding in agreement, then was silent. I finished what I had to say abruptly, and my voice died away in the emptiness.

"Yes," she said after another silence, "but ... Chuansheng, I feel you've changed a lot lately. Is it true? Tell

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me!"

This was a blow, but I took a grip on myself, and explained my views and proposals: to make a fresh start and turn over a new leaf, to avoid being ruined together.

To clinch the matter, I said firmly:

". . . Besides, you need have no more scruples but go boldly ahead. You asked me to tell the truth. Yes, we shouldn't be hypocritical. Well, to tell the truth—it's because I don't love you any more! Actually, this makes it better for you, because it'll be easier for you to work without any regret. . . ."

I was expecting a scene, but all that followed was silence. Her face turned ashy pale, like a corpse; but in a moment her colour came back, and that childlike look darted from her eyes. She looked all round, like a hungry child searching for its kind mother, but only looked into space. Fearfully she avoided my eyes.

The sight was more than I could stand. Fortunately it was still early. I braved the cold wind to hurry to the library.

There I saw *Freedom's Friend*, with all my short articles in it. This took me by surprise, and seemed to bring me new life. "There are plenty of ways open to me," I thought. "But things can't go on like this."

I started calling on old friends with whom I had had nothing to do for a long time, but didn't go more than once or twice. Naturally, their rooms were warm, but I felt chilled to the marrow there. In the evenings I huddled in a room colder than ice.

An icy needle pierced my heart, making me suffer continually from numb wretchedness. "There are plenty of ways open to me," I thought. "I haven't forgotten how to flap my wings." Suddenly I thought of her death, but immediately was ashamed and reproached myself.

In the library I often saw like a flash a new path ahead of me. I imagined she had faced up bravely to the facts and boldly left this icy home. Left it, what was more, without any malice towards me. Then I felt light as a cloud floating in the void, with the blue sky above and high mountains and great oceans below, big buildings and skyscrapers, battlefields, motorcars, thoroughfares, rich men's houses, bright, bustling markets, and the dark night.

...

What's more, I really felt this new life was just round the corner.

Somehow we managed to live through the bitter Peking winter. But we were like dragonflies that had fallen into the hands of mischievous imps, been tied with threads, played with and tormented at will. Although we had come through alive, we were prostrate, and the end was only a matter of time.

Three letters were sent to the editor of *Freedom's Friend* before he replied. The envelope contained two book tokens, one for twenty cents, one for thirty cents. But I had spent nine cents on postage to press for payment, and gone hungry for a whole day, all for nothing.

However, I felt that at last I had got what I expected.

Winter was giving place to spring, and the wind was not quite so icy now. I spent more time wandering outside, and generally did not reach home till dusk. One dark evening, I came home listlessly as usual and, as usual, grew so depressed at the sight of our gate that I slowed down. Eventually, however, I reached my room. It was dark inside, and as I groped for the matches to strike a light, the place seemed extraordinarily quiet and empty.

I was standing there in bewilderment, when the official's wife called to me through the window.

"Tzu-chun's father came today," she said simply, "and took her away."

This was not what I had expected. I felt as if hit on the back of the head, and stood speechless.

"She went?" I finally managed to ask.

"Yes."

"Did—did she say anything?"

"No. Just asked me to tell you when you came back that she had gone."

I couldn't believe it; yet the room was so extraordinarily quiet and empty. I looked everywhere for Tzu-chun, but all I could see was the old, discoloured furniture which appeared very scattered, to show that it was incapable of hiding anyone or anything. It occurred to me she might have left a letter or at least jotted down a few words,

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but no. Only salt, dried paprika, flour and half a cabbage had been placed together, with a few dozen coppers at the side. These were all our worldly goods, and now she had carefully left all this to me, bidding me without words to use this to eke out my existence a little longer.

Feeling my surroundings pressing in on me, I hurried out to the middle of the courtyard, where all around was dark. Bright lamplight showed on the window paper of the central rooms, where they were teasing the baby to make her laugh. My heart grew calmer, and I began to glimpse a way out of this heavy oppression: high mountains and great marshlands, thoroughfares, brightly lit feasts, trenches, pitch-black night, the thrust of a sharp knife, noiseless footsteps. . . .

I relaxed, thought about travelling expenses, and sighed.

I conjured up a picture of my future as I lay with closed eyes, but before the night was half over it had vanished. In the gloom I suddenly seemed to see a pile of groceries, then Tzu-chun's ashen face appeared to gaze at me beseechingly with childlike eyes. But as soon as I took a grip on myself, there was nothing there.

However, my heart still felt heavy. Why couldn't I have waited a few days instead of blurting out the truth like that to her? Now she knew all that was left to her was the passionate sternness of her father—who was as heartless as a creditor with his children—and the icy cold looks of bystanders. Apart from this there was only emptiness. How terrible to bear the heavy burden of emptiness, treading out one's life amid sternness and cold looks! And at the end not even a tombstone to your grave!

I shouldn't have told Tzu-chun the truth. Since we had loved each other, I should have gone on lying to her. If truth is a treasure, it shouldn't have proved such a heavy burden of emptiness to Tzu-chun. Of course, lies are empty too, but at least they wouldn't have proved so crushing a burden in the end.

I thought if I told Tzu-chun the truth, she could go forward boldly without scruples, just as when we started living together. But I was wrong. She was fearless then because of her love.

I hadn't the courage to shoulder the heavy burden of hypocrisy, so I thrust the burden of the truth on to her. Because she had loved me, she had to bear this heavy burden, amid sternness and cold glances to the end of her days.

I had thought of her death. . . . I realized I was a weakling. I deserved to be cast out by the strong, no matter whether they were truthful or hypocritical. Yet she, from first to last, had hoped that I could live longer. . . .

I wanted to leave Chichao Street; it was too empty and lonely here. I thought, if once I could get away, it would be as if Tzu-chun were still at my side. Or at least as if she were still in town, and might drop in on me any time, as she had when I lived in the hostel.

However, all my letters went unanswered, as did my applications to friends to find me a post. There was nothing for it but to go to see a family acquaintance I hadn't visited for a long time. This was an old classmate of my uncle's, a highly respected senior licentiate, who had lived in Peking for many years and had a wide circle of acquaintances.

The gatekeeper stared at me scornfully—no doubt because my clothes were shabby—and only with difficulty was I admitted. My uncle's friend still remembered me, but treated me very coldly. He knew all about us.

"Obviously, you can't stay here," he said coldly, after I asked him to recommend me to a job somewhere else. "But where will you go? It's extremely difficult. That—er—that friend of yours, Tzu-chun, I suppose you know, is dead."

I was dumbfounded.

"Are you sure?" I finally blurted out.

He gave an artificial laugh. "Of course I am. My servant Wang Sheng comes from the same village as her family."

"But—how did she die?"

"Who knows? At any rate, she's dead."

I have forgotten how I took my leave and went home. I knew he wouldn't lie. Tzu-chun would never be with me again, as she had last year. Although she wanted to bear the burden of emptiness amid sternness and cold glances till the end of her days, it had been too much for her. Fate had decided that she should die knowing the truth I had told her—die unloved!

## REGRET FOR THE PAST

Obviously, I could not stay there. But where could I go?

All around was a great void, quiet as death. I seemed to see the darkness before the eyes of every single person who had died unloved, and to hear all the bitter and despairing cries of their struggle.

I was waiting for something new, something nameless and unexpected. But day after day passed in the same deadly quiet.

I went out now much less than before, sitting or lying in this great void, allowing this deathly quiet to eat away my soul. Sometimes the silence itself seemed afraid, seemed to recoil. At such times there would flash up nameless, unexpected, new hope.

One overcast morning, when the sun was unable to struggle out from behind the clouds and the very air was tired, the patter of tiny feet and a snuffling sound made me open my eyes. A glance round the room revealed nothing, but when I looked down I saw a small creature pattering around—thin, covered with dust, more dead than alive. . . .

When I looked harder, my heart missed a beat. I jumped up.

It was Ahsui. He had come back.

I left Chichao Street not just because of the cold glances of my landlord and the maid, but largely on account of Ahsui. But where could I go? I realized, naturally, there were many ways open to me, and sometimes seemed to see them stretching before me. I didn't know, though, how to take the first step.

After much deliberation, I decided the hostel was the only place where I could put up. Here is the same shabby room as before, the same wooden bed, half dead locust tree and wistaria. But what gave me love and life, hope and happiness before has vanished. There is nothing but emptiness, the empty existence I exchanged for the truth.

There are many ways open to me, and I must take one of them because I am still living. I don't know, though, how to take the first step. Sometimes the road seems like a great, grey serpent, writhing and darting at me. I wait and wait and watch it approach, but it always disappears suddenly in the darkness.

The early spring nights are as long as ever. I sit idly for a long time and recall a funeral procession I saw on the street this morning. There were paper figures and paper horses in front, and behind crying that sounded like a lilt. I see how clever they are—this is so simple.

Then Tzu-chun's funeral springs to my mind. She bore the heavy burden of emptiness alone, advancing down the long grey road, only to be swallowed up amid sternness and cold glances.

I wish we really had ghosts and there really were a hell. Then, no matter how the wind of hell roared, I would go to find Tzu-chun, tell her of my remorse and grief, and beg her forgiveness. Otherwise, the poisonous flames of hell would surround me, and fiercely devour my remorse and grief.

In the whirlwind and flames I would put my arms round Tzu-chun, and ask her pardon, or try to make her happy. . . .

However, this is emptier than the new life. Now there is only the early spring night which is still as long as ever. Since I am living, I must make a fresh start. The first step is just to describe my remorse and grief, for Tzu-chun's sake as well as for my own.

All I can do is to cry. It sounds like a lilt as I mourn for Tzu-chun, burying her in oblivion.

I want to forget. For my own sake I don't want to remember the oblivion I gave Tzu-chun for her burial.

I must make a fresh start in life. I must hide the truth deep in my wounded heart, and advance silently, taking oblivion and falsehood as my guide. . . .

*October 21, 1925*