A Romance in the Flowery Kingdom.

ADAPTED FROM THE CHINESE.

By W. W. Yen.

WEN KWAI, which signifies in English a paragon of literature, was the only scion of the illustrious and historic Li family. Many were the scholars, statesmen and generals whom he could count among his ancestors, and while it was true there had been intervals in the history of his family when, through the machinations of bitter political and personal enemies, the horizon was darkened by official and social, as well as by financial reverses, prosperity and ascendancy in public life had been regained by the members of the two preceding generations. His father was Prime Minister for almost half a century, and though then retired from official service, was still known and addressed as Elder of the Imperial Council. Nor was his descent on his mother's side an humble one, for her lineage equalled, if not surpassed, that of her illustrious husband.

It was natural to expect that the wealth of the family was in proportion to its nobleness. The estate covered many acres, occupied by the mansion and the park. As befitting the rank of the occupants, the house was built in nine rows, each forming a suite, while a ten-foot wall surrounded the grounds completely protecting the inmates from the inquisitive eyes of the outside world. The furniture was, mostly, of the famous Cantonese blackwood, embellished with inlaid work; on account of its ponderous character, however, it was more elegant than comfortable. Scrolls, with felicitous expressions in well-turned antitheses, penned by scholars renowned for their caligraphy, and paintings by famous artists adorned the walls; at night, lanterns, square, octagonal, or of other shapes, with silk or stained-glass shades, cast a soft light on the appointments in the rooms.

The park, besides the usual horticultural department, could boast of an artificial lake and numerous grottoes. On the former, in summer time, the beautiful lotus flower with its huge, circular, green leaves, almost concealed the whole expanse of water. The gold-fish, too, found their home here, and
how very pretty they looked as they darted after one another under the crystalline water! In an octagonal cage near by, a peacock, having no glass to show itself, had to be satisfied with the open admiration of the chance observer, and the Darwinian man climbed untiringly up and down the solitary post, the only form of exercise open to his indulgence. A few deer, by long confinement dispossessed of their nimbleness and activity, completed the list of the zoological department.

Scattered here and there were kiosks of different sizes and styles of architecture, furnished with tables and stools formed out of pieces of natural stone. Many a time, on some flower's birthday, or a moonlight night, had parties of convivial scholars assembled round them, enjoying the bountiful hospitality of the host, with wine flowing freely, little formality, much cheer, and everybody in the best of spirits. Under the inspiration of Bacchus, extemporaneous poems of a brilliant flight were composed—poems produced without servile study, art, or pains. Then the beauties of nature, so freely imaged around them, appealed to their poetic strain, and invoking the Muse, they extolled the fragrance and colour of the chrysanthemum, or the lotus flower; the silvery mantle thrown o'er the dark by the moon; the virtues of the host; or even the pièce de résistance, some fish or game of epicurean fame.

Such being the circumstances and status of the family in which Wen Kwai was to be the heir, and destined as he was to attain the highest literary honour known in the land, to which only one favoured by the gods could aspire, was it to be marvelled at that propitious signs should accompany his birth? In the first place, an extraordinary fragrance which could be emitted only by rare flowers, or by the burning of priceless incense, was perceived in the house, but its cause and origin could not be ascertained. Then soft strains of music, which tradition holds could emanate only from instruments of gold and silver touched by heavenly beings, enraptured the members of the household. But the greatest attestation of the infant's future high station was the presence in his mouth of a piece of snow-white jadestone, a symbol of literary eminence. The child possessed a sonorous voice; his eyes were large and dreamy; he was characterised by a prominent forehead, a "lion's nose," a firm mouth, and large and fleshy ears. Such were his physical characteristics.

Nor were his mental powers less excellent in comparison. At the age of seven he commenced to study and was placed under the guardianship and instruction of his tutor, a teacher ripe in scholarship and experience. Such was his intelligence and power of memory that he remembered every "character" once it was pronounced to him. Books soon took the place of
fancise,* and the same brilliant success followed. It was said that he read ten lines at every glance, and what was more valuable remembered and assimilated the classical lore; he was, moreover, an adept in the art of writing essays on subjects, philosophical, historical and literary; in the composition of poetry; and in penmanship. At sixteen his education was practically completed, and at the district examinations, which led to the Bachelor's Degree, he passed first out of the twenty-odd successful men. The following year, at the provincial examinations, with similar ease and success, he won his Master's Degree, his name again standing at the head of the long list of "passed" men.

Hitherto, the question of his marriage had not been mentioned on account of his youth and education, but now that he had obtained his M.A. degree and was on the highway to the most honourable public offices in the land, proposals of alliance through "matchmakers" from the parents of marriageable daughters rained on the household. With eloquence and energy these useful but often much abused creatures depicted to our young friend's parents the wealth, beauty, virtues and accomplishments of their respective young ladies.

Wen Kwai was, however, of an independent nature, and actually expressed the desire to see the young woman, whose graces and accomplishments a "matchmaker" had advocated with gestures and language most eloquent. The remark shocked the old gentleman, who departed rather abruptly, with a comment of undisguised contempt that his young lady, reared in silk and satin, whose feet had never touched anything but rosewood, into whose boudoir not even a male fly could find admittance, was no common girl who would expose herself to the gaze of the curious. News of this sensational incident spread rapidly, and the other "matchmakers" deemed it expedient to stay away, afraid of being similarly insulted. In vain did the parents entreat and threaten, for they feared that their son would never secure the hand of a lady of quality, if he persisted in his queer notion. Being their only son they finally gave way, and the question of his marriage was for the time abandoned.

The time came when young Li left home to attend the Metropolitan Examinations for the third and fourth degrees. The capital was some five hundred miles from his native town, and in those days, when steamships and railways were unknown, travelling was extremely slow, being done either in houseboats, rowed or towed along the numerous canals; or, as was more common, on horseback or on foot. A wealthy student would take his time on such journeys, or rather pleasure trips, to his examinations, tarrying at various places of interest on the way. Our friend chose a day in the first

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* The square character (냥) used by Chinese children at the commencement of their studies.
part of the ninth moon for his departure, and banquets were celebrated by his friends and companions in his honour, many a cup being drunk to his safe journey and success in the examinations.

The party consisted of himself, on horseback, his valet, and a porter, who was in charge of the luggage. Thus the three travelled without mishap or unusual incident. Near the end of the following moon, the travellers, after a somewhat wearisome day's journey, discerned in the dim twilight the uncertain outlines of a flourishing town; approaching it with joyful hearts and lightened steps, they were soon lodged in its best inn.

Recuperated and strengthened by a hearty meal and a good night's rest, the young scholar sallied forth the following morn to "do" the town. It was one of those ideal villages that had through commercial prosperity attained to the size and importance of a town, but had not lost much of its sylvan characteristics. "Nature here still played at will her virgin fancies," and the day too was an ideal one; the sun shone smilingly on the lovely works of nature, wrought to perfection, and there was an air of peace on earth.

Along the main thoroughfare he wandered, till he came to the road leading into the country, and right where the latter began, he was surprised to see a handsome residence in the centre of a prettily laid out park. The gates were invitingly wide open, but not a soul was in sight. The place looked too tempting; it reminded him of his home and he went in. Almost an hour passed, during which time he wandered along flowery paths, through mysterious grottoes, and round artificial ponds, seeing much and admiring more. Not a human creature did he encounter in his rambling in the garden, though the place showed every sign of occupation. Reluctantly he was about to seek the gate to leave when, hearing a rustle, he looked up and caught a glimpse of a lovely face in an upper window of the house. Of course, the fair individual disappeared almost immediately behind the curtains, as modest ladies always do, when they become aware of the presence of a gentleman stranger. Li was dazed by her beauty, excelling that of "morning roses washed with dew," and as was decreed in the Book of Fate, fell in love with her at first sight.

Who is this fascinating maiden that steals the heart of our young friend and warms him, charms him, heats him, beats him, and sets him "a' on flame," as Burns would say? Her name was Sweet Lilies, the daughter of a wealthy scholar who, after winning the highest literary honour in the empire, declined to enter official life. The night before her birth, her mother dreamt that a fairy presented her with a bunch of beautiful lilies, and the baby was named accordingly. Having early evinced a love for study, she was carefully educated under her father, who used to declare that her literary attainments
were equal, if not superior, to the best scholar in the land, and only regretted
that, being a girl, she could not compete in the Imperial Examinations. When
she was sixteen her learned father died, and she lived alone with her mother.
She was as beautiful as she was talented, and numerous young suitors, sons of
wealthy and aristocratic families, sought to obtain her hand. They were,
however, all gay spendthrifts, caring to glorify neither themselves nor their
ancestors by attaining literary honours, and it was not surprising that the
widow lady refused to consider their proposals. The result was, when our
friend Li appeared on the scene, there was still a possibility of her leading
her graces to the grave, and leaving the world no copy.

We are told that dreams "are the children of an idle brain, begot of
nothing but vain fantasy," but did not another singer say that they "full oft
are found of real events the forms and shadows"? At any rate, our sweet
young lady was inclined to the latter interpretation, and when the night
before Wen Kwai's visit to her garden she dreamt that she would lay eyes
on her future husband the following morn, she did not doubt the least that
the "vain fantasy" was something more than fiction. She, therefore, arrayed
herself in a becoming gown, and after having inspected herself in the glass,
not without a wee bit of vanity, repaired to a seat by the window of her
boudoir, where she could command a view of the front entrance. Young Li
did not know that, from the moment he hesitated before the gate, a pair of
bright and interested eyes was fastened on him, and in fact followed his
every movement. As he approached the house, what was her joy and
excitement to find that he was the counterpart of the person she saw in her
dream. His costume and bearing proclaimed him to be a scholar and gentle-
man of family. She was well satisfied with the appearance of her groom-elect,
and her next thought was how to communicate with him. There was no man
in the house who could act as her representative: she was on the verge
of despair on account of her helplessness, when a bright idea flashed across
her mind. Why could she not be attired in her father's apparel and be her
own representative? But, horrors! just at that moment, Li turned and was
about to depart. A thousand apprehensions rushed through her head.
Suppose he should not return to the place; suppose he should leave the neigh-
bourhood; suppose she should not be able to discover his name and address—
why, her future happiness would be imperilled, she would be disregarding
the kindly premonition of her guardian fairy; in short, everything would be
ruined. There was one way of detaining him; she was sure of its success,
but... However, circumstances demanded that she should for once violate
the proprieties, and she yielded. She shook the curtains; Li heard the
rustle, looked up and—saw her. It was a case of love at first sight.
To change her dress was the work of a few moments, and did not involve the loss of modesty, as in those days both men and women wore long, flowing gowns. Slipping her tiny feet into a pair of black satin boots, and crowning her hair with a student's cap, she descended the stairs, and slowly and unconcernedly stepped out of the house. Li woke up from his enchantment on hearing footsteps, and retreated guiltily from the direction of the window, expecting to face some self-important servant and be ordered off the premises. To his surprise he saw approaching him a young student, fair and graceful as a girl, and he concluded it must be the young master of the house. Bows were exchanged, and Li, who was profuse in his apologies, was invited to take a seat in a neighbouring kiosk. Information relating to "honourable patronymics," "distinguished residences," "important mission," and so forth, having been duly inquired for and given, the conversation drifted to literature, and each was surprised and charmed with the knowledge of the other. Naturally a bond of sympathy sprang up between the two.

Li decided to prolong his stay in that town, partly to improve his acquaintance with his newly-made friend, and partly, it must be confessed, to ascertain something of the fair damsel he caught sight of in the window. The subsequent meetings were occasions of great happiness to both parties. As an American poet would have said, "A day for toil, an hour for sport, but for a friend, life is too short." So thought Li, as the time drew near for him to resume his journey. To Sweet Lilies the separation was still harder to bear. "What shall I do when he is gone? When will that sunny smile once more cheer my lonely life? To know, to esteem, to love, and then—to part!"

On his last visit she formally proposed the engagement between him and her "sister," as she said. She politely confessed that her family was not wealthy, but she assured him that her "sister" was not lacking in beauty, virtues or accomplishments. She added that the alliance was much desired by her mother, who was impressed by his gentlemanly demeanour and scholarly attainments. Li expatiated on his unworthiness of the honour, though secretly he heard the proposal with indescribable joy. Although he had only a glance of her he had no doubt she was all that she was described, for did not the proverb say, "Judge a sister by the brother?" Tokens were exchanged to signalize the happy event, and promises made by Li that as soon as the examinations were over, he would persuade his parents to despatch formal proposals of marriage. Thus he departed, and Sweet Lilies felt both sad and happy, sad because of the many morrows she would be separated from him, and happy because of the successful issue of the premonitions of her guardian fairy.
In the meantime, misfortune had overtaken the Li family: a personal enemy, a favourite of the young Emperor, accused them of conspiracy with design to overthrow the government. The Emperor was weak-minded and inexperienced and the charges frightened him. He ordered the family to be placed under surveillance, pending the investigation of the accusations. Naturally the affair created a sensation.

On reaching the capital, our young friend was warned by his well-wishers to lie low till the storm blew over; to enter the examinations at such a juncture was out of the question. He repaired to a village just outside the capital, and secretly but vigorously took steps to establish the innocence of his venerable parent of any disloyal sentiments or actions as were imputed to him.

In parting the one who stays behind suffers more. Sweet Lilies, after the departure of her lover, passed her time in praying for his success at the capital, and looked forward impatiently to the time when her happiness would be crowned with a brilliant wedding. To her surprise, when the list of successful candidates was published, Li's name was not on it. That he could have failed she did not for an instant believe possible. No doubt, she said to herself, he was prevented by accident from competing in the examinations. At any rate, she would soon hear from him when a satisfactory explanation would be forthcoming. Weeks, months, one year glided by, and not a word or line was received: she became restless, then anxious, and finally desperate. There was no other way of discovering his whereabouts or learning his fate than to journey to the capital and hunt him up herself, and this she resolved to do.

She arrived there without any difficulty, disguised as a student, and in a few days ascertained the reason of her lover's silence. The father was still under surveillance, while the whereabouts of the son was unknown. Through the lapse of time and the absence of convincing evidence, the feelings of the Emperor against the family had greatly softened, and no proceedings had been instituted. The importance of the affair had, in fact, so diminished that the whole family would be restored to its former glory and honour, if some responsible person would only vouch for its future fidelity. Could she be the person, thought our heroine, and thus ingratiate herself with her sweetheart's people? And this was the way she tried.

Under her assumed name she entered as a candidate in that year's examination for the highest literary degree, and such was her knowledge and training that she succeeded, and was accordingly proclaimed as the first scholar in the land. The Emperor granted her special audiences, and was so pleased with her handsome person and graceful address, that she at once became a favourite. On several occasions the Imperial Master, being
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ignorant of her true sex, walked hand in hand with her to the throne room, to the envy of the remaining courtiers. One honour after another was bestowed on her, till finally, at the next examination for the same degree which she herself had won, she was appointed Chief Examiner. Already she had espoused the cause of the unjustly-treated Li family, and so ably presented the true facts of the case before the Emperor that the old gentleman was at once liberated, the confiscated property restored, the innocence of the family proclaimed, and the false accusers punished.

This office of Chief Examiner was not at this time unacceptable to her, for she hoped to see young Li among the competitors. After the examination, the papers were nervously scanned, and her heart throbbed with no little violence as she caught sight of the one with Li's name on it. The paper was a masterpiece, and worthy of winning the coveted honour. It was shown to his august majesty and met his warm approval.

The custom was for the successful students to call individually on the Examiners, and Sweet Lilies decided to disclose herself to Li on that occasion. If the latter was astonished to find the Chief Examiner no other than the handsome stranger, whom he met several years ago, and to whose charming sister he was engaged, he was more astonished, when the retainers having been ordered to withdraw, Sweet Lilies removed her satin boots, and a pair of "golden lilies," in tiny red slippers, appeared. The truth then flashed across his mind. While overwhelmed with happiness at this sudden turn of events, he trembled as he pictured to himself the enormity of her crime in disguising herself and deceiving the Emperor. She, however, was confident of a full pardon, for reasons which shall appear later.

Next morning the pair approached the throne hall on their knees, arrayed in prisoner's garments and handcuffed, as is the custom when suing for pardon. The Emperor was enraged when he heard the confession, but then his better judgment prevailed, for was not he himself to blame? Did he not walk up the court hand in hand with the young woman, thus flagrantly violating the rules of propriety? Besides, had not both been successively proclaimed the first scholars in the land? Would not the courtiers laugh at his own stupidity if he should punish them? For these and similar reasons, he graciously pardoned them.

A month after, the grandest wedding that ever took place at the capital was celebrated, and was the talk for years. All the grandees were present, and gifts were even received from the Imperial family. The reader will perhaps guess who the contracting parties were.