

In Feng Meng-long's final collection of stories, *Constant Words to Awaken the World* (*Xing-shi heng-yan*), there appears a group of stories by another hand, a writer known only by his pseudonym Lang-xian, the "Wild Immortal," also tentatively identified as the author of another collection of vernacular stories entitled *The Rocks Nod Their Heads* (*Shi dian tou*). "Censor Xue Finds Immortality in the Guise of a Fish," based on a Tang tale, is one of the Lang-xian stories in Feng's collection.

The tale of heaven-sent suffering that leads to enlightenment and the renunciation of public life had a long history in the literary tradition, but rarely did it take on the comic dimensions it has here. Trapped in the body of a fish, Censor Xue rails helplessly against his friends and colleagues as they debate whether to dine on him. The mode of filling and preparation, in which Censor Xue had himself instructed his cook, is described in loving culinary detail, with the good censor himself as the main course under consideration.

Lang-xian, "Censor Xue Finds Immortality in the Guise of a Fish" (from *Constant Words to Awaken the World*)  
Translated by Robert Ashmore

Pray, how did that white dragon come to be?  
—all through a puny fish's sincerity.  
Though now the dragon sport in the broad stream,  
if rain and cloud's force failed him,  
wouldn't he be bogged in mire?

To learn the transformations of the airy soul,  
rest rudderless, always empty.  
It's not sudden joy that dulls the senses:  
Zhuang Zhou was once a butterfly,  
and Xue Wei became a fish.

The story has it that in the Qian-yuan era [A.D. 758–760] of the Tang emperor Su-zong there was an official by the name of Xue Wei. This Xue Wei was a native of the Wu district, who had passed the *jìn-shi* examination at the end of the Tian-bao era [A.D. 742–756]. He started out as a district prefect in Fu-feng, where he built up quite a reputation. Later he was transferred to the post of Censor in Qing-cheng district in Sichuan. His wife, a certain Madam Gu, from the leading family of Wu County, was a lovely woman with a kind and gentle temperament. The two of them were a perfect match, and lived together in mutual love and respect. Before they knew it three years had gone by at the new post, and the district magistrate left town on a promotion. Censor Xue's superiors, knowing well his character and ability, appointed him to take over the seal of the district administration.

Now this Qing-cheng district was made up of remote mountains and deep valleys with rocky and infertile soil. Years of poor harvests had left the people destitute, and from time to time there were outbreaks of banditry. As soon as Censor Xue took over the district administration, he instituted

a system of local accountability, and enlisted the cooperation of the citizenry in apprehending bandits wherever they cropped up. He also set up a public academy to foster young talent, and opened the relief granaries to assist the helpless and destitute. Every spring he would go personally into each village to supervise the plowing and planting, and would exhort the people with well-meaning words to do their best to play their allotted roles in the community. As a result of all this, crops flourished throughout the county and the very bandits were transformed into upright citizens. Truly, public order reached the point that "doors were left open at night, and lost valuables remained where they fell by the roadside." The common folk, out of gratitude for the benefit which had been bestowed on them, composed a ditty in praise of the Censor's achievements.

Which went,  
In autumn there's harvest,  
and plowing in spring.  
no overseer extorts rent;  
our doors lie unlatched at night.

The people set happily to their tasks,  
schools bring culture's blessings:  
moral and material benefit,  
all through Father Xue's goodness.

From this day on in our children's line,  
we vow to preserve his name.  
what will we call them?  
"Xue's son" and "Little Xue."

That Censor Xue was not only an upright and compassionate official who loved the people like his own children; in his dealings with his colleagues, too, he was respectful and modest, treating them well in every way. As it happens, in that district seat there were a deputy magistrate, a censor, and two prefects. The district magistrate was called Zou Pang. He was also a *jìn-shi* graduate—in fact, it happened that he was a good friend of Xue's from the same class. The two prefects were named Lei Ji and Pei Kuan, and they also performed their duties in a scrupulous and ethical manner. The four of them had so much in common in character and interest that whenever they had a spare moment, they could be found together discussing poetry, playing chess, or sitting beside flowers or in the shade of a bamboo grove, sharing a drink together. They were constant companions who got on splendidly.

One evening, just when the Seventh Night festival had come around, Censor Xue and his wife were together in their official quarters to "pray for skill" and hold their own private celebration . . . (Now as it happens, on the evening of the Seventh Night festival, every family of whatever social station would be sure to set out some wine and a few dainties for the banquet of "praying for skill and threading the needle." Now why do you imagine that was? It all came about because of a certain daughter of the Emperor of

Heaven, named the Weaver Woman, who worked away at her loom day and night. The Emperor of Heaven was fond of her for her industry, and married her to Oxherd to be his wife. But—who'd have guessed it!—once the Weaver Woman had married Oxherd, she was carried away with the joys of love, and spent the days combing her hair and making herself up; she never tended to loom and shuttle any more. The Emperor of Heaven was enraged, and banished the Weaver Woman to live on the east side of the Milky Way, and Oxherd to live on the west. In the whole year they were permitted to meet just once, on this seventh day of the seventh month. On this day, magpies were sent to fill in the Milky Way for them so that they could cross over. Because of this, the people of this world would keep track of the time when they were to cross, and, standing out beneath the stars and moon, would thread colored threads through needles' eyes—if one could thread it through, that meant "receiving skill," and if one couldn't that meant "missing skill." In this way they would predict their skill in handiwork during the year to come. Now just stop and think for a moment: Oxherd and Weaver Woman had been longing all year for this one night when they could finally meet. What's more, they were only given three or four hours to pour out their sincere longing all at once, still fearing there might not be time enough to tell it all. How could they possibly have enough spare time to come to the human world delivering skill? Is this not an absurd tale?)

Now on that evening, Censor Xue was in his courtyard, exchanging toasts with his wife. Losing track of the time, they sat up until deep in the night. Unexpectedly, Censor Xue took a little chill from the dewy night breezes, and this chill soon grew into a serious illness. His whole body felt as hot as if it were being roasted over coals and sweat poured from him like rain. Gradually he stopped eating altogether, and lost track of what was going on around him. He mumbled, "I can't hold out another instant! Why must you force me to stay here? Why don't you just let me go. . . ." Now you may well imagine that when a sick person begins speaking like this, it is not good news. It so frightened Madam Gu that her wits and courage both flew from her in an instant. But could she just sit there and watch him die? Of course she had to call in doctors and consult diviners, summoning spirits and offering up vows to the gods. As it happens, in that district there was a certain Qing-cheng Mountain—the fifth immortal grotto of the Daoist sect. On that mountain stood a temple in which there was an image of Lao-zi which had been proven to be of marvelous efficacy. Truly, if one prayed to it for clear skies one got clear skies, if for rain then it rained; if one prayed for a son one got a son, if for a daughter, a daughter. Pilgrims flocked there from far and wide. So Madam Gu wrote out a spirit-petition, and sent people to that Lao-zi temple to pray. She'd also heard that the fortune-slips of that temple were most accurate, so she had them on one hand pray for the protection of the Censor, to extend his lifespan and avert the calamity besetting him, and on the other to ask for a fortune-slip, to try to get some idea how the thing was likely to come out. And as for those three colleagues, who had long admired Censor Xue for his virtue, when they heard what had

happened, they went on foot to the mountain to present offerings of incense, and to express their willingness to forfeit part of their own allotted lifespans in order to release the Censor from his peril. And just when the three colleagues had turned back homeward, there came the elders of the entire country, leading the common folk, who came in a body to prostrate themselves and pray. It was proof of the good effect of the Censor's accustomed way of governing that he could win over the hearts of the people like this. Now the slip they drew was number thirty-two. The rhyme on that slip said:

A hundred streams flow down to the river,  
Peer down in the deep and hold back a shiver.  
Why wander to Longmen to seek what you wish?  
Three foot two, the enchanted fish.

A servant was sent to take a copy of this riddle back to the lady at the district seat, yet she could make no more of it than they. She thought to herself, "I have heard that the slips people have received in the past have always suited the person in question in every detail. How is it the one we've drawn speaks of some condition not the least like my husband's? Is this a good omen, or an evil one? It's really beyond me." Her hopes and fears grew more tangled and confused than ever, and her anxiety increased. But then she thought, "If's plain that this slip may have no bearing on the situation at all. Let me find a doctor to treat the disease—that at least is a sound approach." And she commissioned people to search about. Well, they found out about a certain Daoist adept named "Eight Hundred" Li, who lived in the prefectural capital of Cheng-du. He was said to have been the leading disciple of the great Master Sun;<sup>6</sup> and, since he'd received eight hundred secret cures from his teacher, people called him "Eight Hundred" Li. And truly, when he was called in to treat someone, the sickness would be gone as soon as he'd set his hand to it; he was uncannily effective. He'd hung a New Year's couplet over his door which read,

Like Druggist Kang, I never change my price;<sup>7</sup>  
Like Doctor Feng, I have apricots in groves.<sup>8</sup>

The thing was, when you called him in, you could never be quite sure he'd come. If he did agree to come, then you could bet there was some hope for that patient. The fees he required were also different from the common run of doctors: Sometimes he'd demand several hundred taels before he'd

<sup>6</sup>Master Sun: Sun Si-miao (581–682), a hermit-scholar famed during the early Tang Dynasty for his medical expertise. The dates given here are based on Sun's own report, but popular tradition suggested he had lived several hundred years.

<sup>7</sup>"Druggist Kang": Han Kang (mid-2nd c.), a hermit-sage who, hoping to avoid the public eye, supported himself selling herbal medicines in the Eastern Han capital of Chang-an. He became famous in spite of himself for never changing a price in thirty years.

<sup>8</sup>Doctor Feng was a legendary doctor said to have been active around the turn of the third century. He is supposed to have asked the patients he cured to plant apricot trees in lieu of monetary payment.

so much as opened up his medicine case; at other times even after curing the patient he would not ask for a single penny in compensation—he'd just want someone to treat him to one roaring drunk. Sometimes he'd set out as soon as he got the summons; at other times there was no bugging him no matter how one begged. He was a hard one to fathom. As a general rule, though, if one were sincere about it he'd be willing to come.

When Madam Gu learned of this medical man, she immediately dispatched a servant bearing tokens of earnest to set out in the middle of the night and invite that "Eight Hundred" Li. As luck would have it, he was in the prefectural capital, and came as soon as he was called. With this the lady's mind was eased somewhat. Who'd have known that as soon as he set foot in the door, before even taking a pulse, he said, "Though this illness looks mortal, it is nonetheless not mortal. What do you mean by asking me here?" Right away the lady related the whole story of the onset of the sickness, as well as the rhyme they'd drawn at the Lao-zi temple, for the doctor's consideration, begging him to prescribe a cure. That "Eight Hundred" Li just snorted sarcastically, saying, "This disease doesn't make it into the medical books. I've got no medicine to prescribe for it. All you can do is to keep feeling about his chest after he's dead—as long as he's not cold, you must not lay him in his coffin! After two weeks or three weeks or so, when he gets the hankering to eat something, he'll come around of his own. That slip from the Lao-zi temple, though accurate, will only become clear after the fact; it is not something we can make a guess about just now." He absolutely refused to administer any medicine, and set off again without further delay. There was no telling what to make of this. Would this disease of the Censor's really clear up of its own with no need for medicine? Or had the doctor simply made up an excuse to leave because the disease was already too advanced for a cure to be attempted?

Truly,

Green dragon and white tiger walk together;  
no way of knowing what your lot might be.

When the lady saw that "Eight Hundred" Li had gone, she sighed, "When a doctor with a reputation like his is unwilling to give treatment, could there be any other who would dare to try? It's sure the disease has progressed past cure! All that we can do is wait helplessly for death to come." She sat by the Censor as his fever raged for seven days and seven nights, growing steadily more severe. Then all at once he lost consciousness, and no amount of calling could bring him around again. The lady gave way to sobbing, and meanwhile sent word to the three colleagues, so they could set about preparations for the funeral. These three were just on their way to see how things stood, and when they heard the evil news they all shed tears. They hurried to the official residence to weep before the body, and then spoke with the lady, consoling her for a while. As it was early autumn and the weather was still hot, they set out separately to see to the coffin and

burial garments right away. By the third day all had been put in readiness, and it should have been time to close up the coffin.

But just then as the lady was weeping bitterly, slumped down over the body, she felt that, sure enough, there was a slight hint of warmth about the chest. For this she began to think there might be something to the words of "Eight Hundred" Li, and wanted to leave the body lying in the bed. But the domestics all said, "That's always been the way of it. Dead people can keep warm about the chest for as long as three or four days; they don't really turn cold right after they die. So what does that prove? It's now early September, and the heat has not yet abated. If there is so much as a thunderclap, that body will swell up in a second—then how will you ever get it into that coffin?" The lady said, "Master Li said that as long as his chest wasn't cold, he was not to be put in the coffin. Well, he's warm now, and even if I didn't believe what Master Li said, I'd keep watch over him for half a month or twenty days—how could I bear to shut him up after just three days, and still warm? Anyway, the coffin is all ready; just leave me to keep watch day and night. As soon as his chest grows cold I'll put him in—that won't be too late. O Heaven! Only let Master Li's words come true. If I can tend my man back to health, it won't be saving just one life, but, counting me, two lives."

They all tried again and again to dissuade her, but she just wouldn't listen. And since they couldn't outstubborn her, they had no choice but to go along with her: they left the Censor lying in his bed, with his wife keeping constant watch. Enough on that account for now.

Now when the Censor's illness entered the seventh day, his body grew extremely hot, so that he could not bear it for so much as another moment. His mind was completely taken up with the idea of finding a cool spot to relax a spell—perhaps then, he thought, there might be some hope of the sickness abating. So he slipped off quietly, evading the notice of his wife and colleagues, and, picking up a bamboo staff, quietly left the official quarters without calling anyone to wait on him. In a twinkling he'd reached the outside of the town walls. He felt like a bird leaving its cage, or a fish slipping free from a net. Filled with delight, he put all thought of sickness behind him.

Now you may be wondering how the Censor, being an official, was able to leave his quarters without a single person taking note of it. As it turns out, the depth of his longing had given rise to a dream, and it was his dreaming soul which felt all this was happening. His body remained behind as before on the bed—how could it have gone anywhere? Of course, this left the one watching over the body to weep and wait without cease day and night, hoping against hope to pull life back from the maw of death. How could she have known that the dreamer was drifting and floating without the least hindrance, himself in fact drawing joy from the heart of suffering?

Censor Xue went out the South Gate and then headed off into the mountains. He came to a certain mountain called Dragonscale. On that mountain there was a pavilion that had been built by the Sui emperor Wen on the occasion of the investiture of his son Yang Xiu as Duke of Shu. It was named

"Refuge from Heat." Around it on all four sides was lush forest and long bamboos. Breezes came from all directions, and there was not the least ray of sunlight. So that King of Shu, whenever the sultry days came, would marshal his court guests off to this pavilion to escape the heat. It was truly a fine cool spot! Just then when the Censor caught sight of it, he felt his spirits set at ease. "If I hadn't come out from the town, how should I ever have known that there was a setting like this in the mountains? I've been assigned to Qingcheng for a long while, yet I have never come to this place. And those colleagues of mine, how could they find out about it? I ought to tell them, so that we could bring wine goblets to this spot and hold a Heat-shunning Banquet. It's a shame that, in this worthy setting, I lack my worthy friends to share it—when all is said and done there's something missing."

The scene which lay before him was lovely, and he composed a poem then and there. It went:

A half-day's leisure snatched from drifting life,  
on ruin's brink, I've scaled this slope alone.  
Though here I draw breath close to Heaven's gates,  
don't let me float away without return!

Censor Xue sat a while in the pavilion, and then set off once again into the mountains. There were no trees shading that mountain path, so it could not compare to the cool comfort of the pavilion and he felt more and more stifled as he went along. When bit by bit he'd covered three or four miles, off in the distance he made out a large river.

Now what river do you suppose that was? Back when Great Yu was taming the floods,<sup>9</sup> he channeled the Min River out of the Min Mountains. When he'd passed through the lands of Mao-zhou and Sheng-zhou, he further carved out this river, which is called the Tuo. To this very day, from the bank of this river hangs a great iron chain—there's no telling just how long it is, since it's sunk down in the riverbottom. This is the spot where Great Yu chained up Ying Dragon—it turns out that when Yu was taming the floods, whenever he came to a place where the watercourse was blocked, he'd send that Ying Dragon on ahead. Let those peaks and crags be never so tall, just one flip of Ying Dragon's tail, and in an instant they'd be split in two. That's why Great Yu is also referred to as "Wondrous Yu": if he did not know how to command such creatures, how could he have set the floods to rest within just eight years? To this day on the Si River there is another iron chain, which holds down Water Mother (the form of this creature is like a maequae). Now at this Tuo River, it was the Ying dragon. Both of these creatures were chained up after the work of taming the floods had been accomplished, in order to prevent any future trouble. Is that not a miraculous feat?

<sup>9</sup>Great Yu was the legendary founder of the Xia Dynasty, credited with saving the people from rampant flooding by digging China's system of rivers.

Just then the Censor was feeling oppressed by the heat as he walked along. Besides, he was suffering from a fever. When he suddenly caught sight of this stretch of the Tuo River, broad and rolling, extending without break to the horizon, he naturally felt a fresh coolness penetrating to his very marrow. He wished he could make every step into three and fly off at once like a sail-cart. He didn't realize, however, that though it looked very close from up on the mountain, once he'd come down, his path was cut off by East Pool before he could reach the Tuo. This pool was quite large. The water was clear as a mirror, and one could see right to the bottom even in the deepest parts. And the bamboos along the banks shone with a fresh greenness you could touch. The Censor took off his clothes and went into the pool to bathe.

It happens that the Censor was from the Wu region—he had grown up in the land of ponds and lakes. He had learned to dive from childhood. Since he'd become a grown man, this skill of his had fallen into long disuse. Unexpectedly coming here today, he felt the old joy come back to him with doubled force. As he splashed about, he happened to sigh to himself, "This swimming of humans can't compare with that of the fishes, after all! I wish I could borrow a suit of scales to grow onto my body, so I could swim about freely where I pleased—now that would be more like it!" Just then there appeared a little fish by his side who, eyeing the Censor, said to him, "If you want to be a fish, there's no problem to it. Why speak of 'borrowing'? Wait here while I go to He Bo to work on it for you." And almost before he'd finished saying this, the little fish was gone. This gave the Censor quite a scare, and he thought, "How was I to know there were magical creatures in this water? This is no place for swimming alone. I'd best get out of here with no delay!" Little did the Censor know that, having once felt such a desire, he could not but be subjected to such a course of karmic retribution.

It led to:

Robe and cap:  
doffed for a time along with human cares.  
Scaly armor:  
soon seen springing forth upon the water.

Censor Xue paused, sunk in thought, and was about to put his clothes back on and make his way home, when the little fish suddenly reappeared with news, saying, "Congratulations! He Bo has made his will known." And there came a fish-headed person, astride a large fish, with innumerable little fishes in attendance before and behind, who read out He Bo's decree.

Which said,

Town dwellers, water-wanderers: floaters and sinkers go by separate paths. If not through some special pendent, who could pass freely along both?

Yon Qing-cheng Censor Xue Wei, native of Wu, member of the lesser orders of officialdom, joys in the watery vastness of the clear river, and swims with happy abandon; wearied by the commotion of the dusty world, he shakes off

his robes and departs. Let him undergo for a time the scaly transfiguration, yet not for life. Let him assume the duties of Crimson Carp of East Pond.

Pay heed! Those who indulge in far-roving pleasures with no thought of return will surely be punished by the clear-eyed spirits; those who ignore the thin hook and gulp the sweet bait will find it hard to escape the calamity of block and blade. See that you do not, by some error, bring shame on our kind. Heed these words!

When the Censor had done listening to the reading of this decree, he glanced down at his body to find that it had already grown scales—from head to toe, he'd been transformed into a golden carp. Though he was shocked and amazed, still he thought to himself, "Since it's come to this, let me at least go and swim to my heart's content, to learn the pleasures of the watery life." And from that time on, there was no spot among the three rivers and five lakes which he did not visit in his travels as he wandered about according to his whim.

It turns out that as He Bo's decree had appointed him Crimson Carp of East Pool, that East Pool was like a fixed address to him; and no matter how far afield he traveled, he'd at least have to come back there to rest. Now being tied down to that one little place began in time to make him feel a bit restless. After a few days, that little fish came again and said to the Censor, "Have you not heard that in Ping-yang Prefecture in Shan-xi there is a mountain called Long-men, or Dragongate? It was drilled through by Great Yu when he was taming the floods. Beneath the mountain is the Yellow River. Now since there is a stream at the top of the mountain that joins up with the waters of the Milky Way, rushing down to become the headwaters of the Yellow River, that spot is named Riverford. As we speak, the eighth month is coming around, and the autumn floods will soon rush down, heralded by thunder. All the carp under Heaven will go there to jump Dragongate. Why don't you request a leave of absence from He Bo, and go yourself to jump? If you make it across you will become a dragon—wouldn't that beat being a carp?"

Now it just happened that right then the Censor was beginning to grow a bit fed up with living in East Pool; when he heard about this, he was overjoyed. Right away, he took leave of the little fish, and headed straight for He Bo's place. Now He Bo's palatial halls all have coral columns and tortoise-shell rafters—a real dragon castle, a sea treasury, different in its own way in every detail from the ones of this world. At this time, carp from all the regions under He Bo's jurisdiction—the Min, Tuo, Ba, Yu, Fu, Qian, Ping-jiang, She-hong, Zhuo-jin, Ji-ling, and Qing-yi rivers, along with the Five Streams, the Lu Waters, the Sevengate Shallows, and the Three Straits of Qu-tang—had come to request leaves of absence to go and jump Dragongate. The Censor, as the only golden carp present, was appointed their representative, to lead them in to their audience with He Bo. In keeping with ancient custom, a general banquet was held, just like those held in this world to see off the candidates for the civil service exams. The Censor and the carp of the various regions partook of the banquet, gave thanks for imperial bounty, and set off together for Dragongate to jump. Who'd have guessed, they couldn't make it over, and returned

with dotted foreheads. Now you may ask, "What's this about 'dotted foreheads'?" That is because when the carp try to jump through Dragongate they have to fight their way against the current, concentrating all their blood and vital spirits in the center of their foreheads, so that it looks as if they've been dotted there with a red brush. That's why people of this world refer to unsuccessful exam candidates as having "dotted foreheads"—it all stems from this. Truly,

Hardpressed to pass through Dragongate's fierce flood,  
in shame they bear the forehead's splotch of blood.

Now in Qing-jiang County there lived a fisherman named Zhao Gan, who made his living, along with his wife, netting fish out on the Tuo River. All unexpectedly he'd netted a great snapping turtle that had dragged the net along with it—even Zhao Gan himself was nearly pulled into the river. His wife berated him, saying, "We depended on that net as our sole capital, to keep the two of us alive. Now that you've gone and lost our only fixed asset, how do you expect to come by any liquid assets to buy a new one? What's more, those people from the district government come by every so often to pick up a fish. What will you come up with to satisfy them now?" The two of them argued over this the whole night. Zhao Gan could not stand up to her browbeating, and had nothing for it but to rig up a fishing pole and make ready to come fish at East Pool. Now why do you suppose that Zhao Gan left that great river behind, and came instead to this pool to fish? As it happens, the current of the Tuo River is of the fastest, and thus perfect for netting, but unsuited to pole-fishing. So he thought of coming to East Pool to try his luck at this new line of work. He struck a fragrant lump of oily dough on the end of that pole and tossed it into the water.

Now Censor Xue, ever since his return from getting his forehead dotted at Dragongate, had been out of sorts, and had hidden himself away in East Pool for several days without venturing out to look for something to eat. His belly was just then aching with hunger. When Zhao Gan's fishing boat came paddling up, he couldn't resist following after it, just to see what was afoot. As soon as he smelled the fragrance of that bait, he felt a great longing to eat it. He already had it up to his lips when he thought to himself, "I know good and well that there's a hook in this bait. If I swallow it, won't he have then caught me? Though I've turned for a time into a fish, is there really no other place for me to look for food, that I must eat only what's on his hook?" And he returned to play about in the shadows of the boat's hull. But how could he resist the overpowering fragrance of that bait, which seemed to bore its way right into his nostrils? What's more, he was very hungry—he really couldn't hold out any longer. He thought, "I am a human being, and who knows how much I weigh. And this little hook is going to drag me away? And what if he does pull me out? I'm a third-grade magistrate in the district government, and he is the fisherman Zhao Gan. He cannot fail to know me, and will naturally send me on my way home to the dis-

trict seat. So won't I still end up eating his bait for free?" He'd barely closed his mouth around the bait, and hadn't even had time to swallow when Zhao Gan gave a tug, and pulled him out. This is what is known as:

the eyes see through the trick,  
but the belly can't hold back.

When that Zhao Gan saw he'd hooked a golden carp about three feet long, he clapped both hands to his head and cried out, "Heavenly day! If only I can catch a few more like this, I'll have enough money to tie a new net in no time!" The Censor called out to him repeatedly, "Zhao Gan! You are a fisherman under my jurisdiction. Hurry up and send me back to my office." But that Zhao Gan paid him no attention, and went right ahead and strung a straw rope through the Censor's gills and threw him into the hold. Then his wife said to him, "The district government is always sending people at odd intervals to pick up fish. Now as I see it, with a fish as big as this one, if some ministry errand-runner catches sight of it and takes it away, just how much government compensation do you think you'll get for it? We'd do better to hide it away among the reeds along the bank and wait for a peddler to come along, so we can sell it on the free market. And we'll have that much more to spend ourselves." Zhao Gan said, "Good idea," and took the fish off to hide in the reeds, covering it with an old straw poncho. He came back and said to his wife, "If we can get a good price for this one, I'll take some of the money and buy some beer for the two of us to get good and drunk. If our luck holds through the night, who's to say tomorrow I won't catch two?"

Now not too long after that Zhao Gan had hidden the fish and brought the boat back, sure enough there came an errand-runner from the district administration, named Zhang Bi, who called out to Zhao Gan, saying, "Fifth-Granddad Pei wants an extra large carp to poach. I came out to the search high and low for you, but now you've moved over here, making me search high and low for you, till I'm all sweaty and out of breath. Hurry up now and pick me out a big one, and come along with me to deliver it." Zhao Gan said, "I'm much to blame for making you go out of your way, sir. It's not that I wanted to move to this spot. But the other day I lost my net, and have no money to buy a new one, so I had no choice. I have to hook a few here until I can make up the money. But no big fish will take my hook—all I've got is three or four pounds of small ones. If you want those, take them." Zhang Bi said, "Fifth-Granddad Pei's orders were to get a big one. How can I report back with small ones?"

With a lunge he jumped down onto the boat and lifted up the well cover to look. Sure enough, they were all small ones. He was about to take those and try and make do. But then he thought to himself, "In a big wide stretch like this, how could there really be no big fish? It's certain this guy is up to something. He must have the big ones hidden away somewhere." With that he went ashore and searched all around, but couldn't find anything. Next, he went over to look among the reeds. There was an old straw poncho flap-

ping wildly up and down. Zhang Bi guessed there must be a fish under there. When he strode up and lifted the poncho to look, it was a golden carp about three feet long. When Zhao Gan and his wife saw what had happened they could only curse their luck. Zhang Bi paid them no mind, but simply picked up that fish and stalked off. He looked back over his shoulder and said, "A fine job of deception! You just wait till I've reported this to Fifth-Granddad Pei—you'll get a sound beating, you rascal!"

The Censor cried out in a loud voice, "Zhang Bi! Zhang Bi! You too must certainly know me. I've come by chance to East Pool, and am amusing myself as a fish. How is it that seeing me you do not kowtow, but just sweep me up and rush off?" Zhang Bi paid not the slightest attention. He made straight for the district seat, with that fish dangling by his side. Zhao Gan followed at a distance. And all the while Zhang Bi was walking, the Censor was cursing him.

Zhang Bi carried the fish up to the town gate, where there was a soldier named Hu Jian on guard. Hu Jian said to Zhang Bi, "What a huge fish! Fifth-Granddad Pei has called all the granddads to a banquet, and they're all waiting just for that fish, so they can make poached carp. They say you've been gone a long time with no word, and they just sent out an express message to summon you. You'd sure enough better make it quick." When the Censor lifted his head to look, it was that same south gate, called the "Greeting Fragrance Gate," through which he'd gone out the other day. He called out to the gatekeeper, saying, "Hu Jian! Hu Jian! The other day when I left town, I instructed you that I was leaving on my own and that you needn't notify the other granddads, or send anyone along to attend on me. Can it be that before I've been gone even one month, you've already forgotten? Now you should go and notify the other granddads, and assign someone to attend on me. How is it that you pay me no heed—such impudence!" Yet oddly the gatekeeper seemed not to hear, just like Zhang Bi. That Zhang Bi went straight on with the fish into the town gate, Censor Xue all the while yelling and cursing without break.

There inside the gate were a clerk of the Households Bureau and a clerk of the Penal Bureau, sitting opposite each other over a chessboard. That Households Bureau clerk said, "Yugh! A fish that size must weigh over ten pounds!" The Penal Bureau clerk said, "What a lovely golden carp! He should be put in the 'Emerald Ripples' Pool of rear hall in the ministry compound just for the pleasure of looking at him—what a shame to waste him just to make poached carp!" The Censor bellowed, "You two clerks wait on me all day in the ministry. Though I may have turned into a fish, you should recognize me. How is it that on seeing me you don't stand up, or run to make report to the other granddads?" Those two clerks just sat there as before playing chess, as if they hadn't heard a thing. The Censor thought, "The saying has it that 'a dog's obeyed in office.' Can it be that now that I've no control over you, you've lost all fear of me whatsoever? Do you think that since I've been away these few days, my office has been taken away? And even if it had been taken away, I have still not left my post; when it



comes down to it I do have power over you. Just wait till I meet my colleagues. We'll write up reprimands against the lot of you slaves, and have you flogged till skin splits and flesh bursts. . . ."

Dear Audience: take careful note of this situation, for in the next installment the outcome will be made clear.

Now Madam Gu kept careful watch over Censor Xue's corpse, and before she knew it, more than twenty days had gone by. Yet the flesh remained as firm as ever, showing no signs of deterioration. When she stretched out her hand to feel the region of his heart, it seemed as if it had grown if anything warmer than before. Bit by bit, the warmth extended, till up as far as the throat and down as far as the navel the body was not very cold at all. When she thought back on the words of Master "Eight Hundred" Li, it seemed as if they really were coming at least partly true. Thereupon she pricked out some blood from her forehead and wrote out a spirit-petition. She asked a few advanced Daoist adepts to hold a service to pray for a magical cure, and protection for the Censor in his return to life. She made vows to rebuild the Lao-zi temple, and to erect a golden image if her prayers were answered. On the day when her petition was to be submitted, the three colleagues and the civil functionaries and common people of the entire district all burned incense and prayed on the Censor's behalf, as they had on that former day.

I'm reminded of that old saying, "The blessed person bears the stamp of Heaven": now with an official as virtuous as Censor Xue, and with all the civil servants and commoners of the county praying on his behalf, could there be any fear that it would all come to nothing? It was just that this was a person who'd been dead over twenty days whom they were trying to restore to life. Though no one who ever made a petition at that Lao-zi temple ever had it go unanswered, still, of those souls that report before the hall of King Yama, not a single one can ever return.

Truly,

I trust that good will ever come of good,  
doubt not the power of the unseen gods.

Now on that night the adepts laid out seven bright lamps on the altar, in the form of the seven stars of the Big Dipper. As it happens, the seventh star of the Big Dipper is called the "dipper handle." In spring it points to the east, in summer to the south, in autumn to the west, and in winter to the north, spinning about up there in Heaven. Only the fourth star, called "Heaven's Hinge," never moves. For this reason, the lamp in the position corresponding to "Heaven's Hinge" is specially designated as the "Life-lamp." If this lamp is bright, then the person concerned will have no trouble; if it is dark, then that person will be beleaguered by illness; and if that lamp goes out, then one can be sure that person has little chance of recovery.

Now on that evening the presiding adept raised the ritual implements in

his hands and chanted incantations, praying fervently for the dispersal of the evil influences. He entered into a trance, and personally submitted the petition to the star-official, requesting that Censor Xue's soul be permitted to return to the world of light. When the others went to look at the seven lamps, they were all burning brightly, and one felt that the Life-lamp was especially brilliant—manifesting the truth of the saying that he was not yet meant to die. The adept congratulated the lady on her good fortune, saying, "The Censor's Life-lamp is glowing with doubled brilliance. His return to life will be at any time now. Above all you must remember not to give way to excessive grieving, for fear that you may disturb the peace of his spirit and make his return more difficult." The lady thanked him with tears in her eyes, saying, "If it comes out in this way, then I will not have gone through this ceremony and the bitterness of these long days and nights of watching in vain." When she'd heard this news, she felt her spirits lighten somewhat. Without knowing it she grew groggy and fell asleep, and dreamed a dream:

As clear as day she saw the Censor all in a panic, rushing in at the gate as naked as a newborn infant, his entire body stained with fresh blood. Covering his neck with both hands, he said, "Confounded luck! I was sailing out on the river in high spirits, when all at once a wild wind rose up and great waves stirred. My boat was overturned, throwing me into the water. By good fortune the river god took compassion on me, seeing as my allotted span was not yet up, and sent me out of the river and on my way, bestowing on me a suit of golden chainmail. Just as I made to seek out the road into town, I unexpectedly encountered a gang of robbers blocking the way. With designs on my golden armor, they killed me with a single stroke. If you have a thought for our marital bond, take care to keep watch over my soul and bring me back."

When the lady heard this in her dream, she unwittingly let out a great cry, and with this awoke. She thought, "Just now that Daoist priest said that he would not die; how comes it that I've had such a horrible dream? Yet I remember that phrase from the book of dream interpretation: 'Those dreamed dead will live.' For all I can tell it may be that he has just now escaped calamity through penitence, and for this reason appeared without a stitch of clothing. All I can do is keep close watch over the body every moment."

The next day the lady divided up the offerings from the votive altar and sent them over to the three colleagues—this is known as "scattering fortune." Prefect Pei, acting as host, invited the others to his home for a ceremonial banquet. This is known as "drinking fortune." It was for this reason that Prefect Pei had sent Zhang Bi to the fisherman's home to fetch a big fish to poach, to go along with the wine.

In the end it was Second-grade Zou whose feelings for his old classmate proved the stronger, as he sighed before the laden board, "This is no ordinary drinking party, but has been called for the purpose of summoning Cen-

sor Xue back to life—half of the very dishes on this table come from the votive altar. Not knowing whether Censor Xue is to live or die, how can we call up any appetite for food?” Fifth-grade Pei then said, “The ancients did not sigh over their food. Do you think that you are alone in your worry for your classmate? Do we not also worry for our colleague? I hear the priests said that his return to life would occur either last night or today. Let’s wait until that fish comes so we have something to chase our drink, drink ourselves silly, and wait here for news of him. Won’t that fulfill both our public and our private obligations?”

That day it was not until the early afternoon that Zhang Bi came into the courtyard with the fish dangling at his side. As it came out, Fifth-grade Pei had been made to wait just for that fish, and he was sitting there eating peaches as he watched Second-grade Zou and Fourth-grade Lei play backgammon. When he glanced up and saw Zhang Bi sitting there, he flew off the handle and yelled out, “I sent you to get fish and bring it here—how is it you’ve been gone so long? You mean to tell me that if I hadn’t sent out that express message to summon you, you wouldn’t have come at all?” Zhang Bi kowtowed and told in detail the story of how Zhao Gan had hidden the big fish away. Then Fifth-grade Pei ordered the attendant on duty to drag Zhao Gan down and give him fifty good lashes with a whip. Zhao Gan was left with skin in tatters and broken flesh, fresh blood streaming down his legs. Now why do you think that Zhao Gan didn’t go away earlier, but instead had to follow Zhang Bi all the way back to the county seat, as if just to come looking for this beating? It was those few pennies of government compensation he was thinking of! Yet in the end he got fifty lashes and never saw any payment. Wasn’t he just like that golden carp that had taken his hook? Truly,

In this world life and death are all for gain,  
no thought of pause until our final day.

Fifth-grade Pei ran Zhao Gan off. When he lifted that fish to look, he saw it was a golden carp, over three feet long. He happily exclaimed, “This fish is excellent! Send it at once to the kitchen to poach.” Censor Xue cried out, “What do you mean ‘fish’? I am your colleague. How can you fail to recognize me? Now I have endured a great number of insults and have been waiting just to complain to you gentlemen, so that you can help me to exact revenge. How is it that you too take me for a fish, and send me off to the kitchen to poach? If I am poached, will that not be a case of wrongful death? For nothing I’ve worked side by side with you all these years—you don’t show the least sympathy!” But while he said all this, those colleagues of his paid no attention whatsoever. The Censor was then worked up in the extreme and burst out, “Classmate Zou, we were *jìn-shì* graduates together back in the Tong-bao era. We used to be the best of friends back at the capital and have now been made colleagues here. You’re not like the rest of them—how can you sit there and see me taken off to death without a word?” Then Second-grade Zou said to Fifth-grade Pei, “In my humble opinion, this

fish should not be poached. There is a big pond for releasing life up at the Lao-zi temple on Qing-cheng Mountain, and a lot of the people who go up there to hold services buy fish, turtles, and shellfish to release in the pond. Since today’s feast is made up partly of the ‘scattered fortune’ from Censor Xue’s service, we would do better to release this fish there as well, to plant this karmic seed.”

Fourth-grade Lei interjected, “Releasing the fish is a noble idea! The teaching of karmic retribution does not permit of doubt. Furthermore, we have plenty of delicacies for our banquet as it is; what need have we to eat poached carp as well?” At this, Censor Xue, who was still lying out in the courtyard, said, “Classmate Zou, you really are a scatterbrain! If you’ve a mind to save me, why not just send me back to my quarters? What is the point of sending me back up into the mountains—won’t I perish of thirst? Still, that would bear dying at the hands of the cook. Just wait till I’ve got to the pool for releasing life and have returned to my true form, and put on my robes and trappings to be an official again. Forget about Zhao Gan and that lot of cuss—let’s just see which of you will have the nerve to come and look me in the eye!”

As he was blustering to this effect, Fifth-grade Pei replied again, saying, “Old man, if you want to release this fish, that is a manifestation of the sacred call to cherish life—how should I presume to interfere? But that ceremony of intercession was performed according to the tenets of Daoism, bearing no relation to Buddhist teachings. If you wish to establish good karma, this is not the proper occasion. Just think: Heaven brings all things to fruition expressly for the sustenance of humankind. Take fish, for example: if they were not caught and eaten by people, then all would be fish beneath the sky, and even the riverways would be blocked up. Everyone does what they can to make themselves good, but this is a matter of the heart and not of the mouth. Thus the old saw has it: ‘The Buddha sits within the heart; meat and liquor pass by through the gullet.’ And: ‘If you would abide by Buddhist law, then abandon the desire of even a sip of cool water.’ Do you really believe that just eating this fish will do harm to the sincerity of our feelings for our departed colleague? A perfectly good fish, and you won’t poach it, but want to release it to no good purpose? How are we to know just because we don’t eat it that it will not be eaten by an otter instead? It will die just the same. So when all is said and done, it is better that we eat it.” When the Censor heard this, he yelled out, “Look, your two guests both want to release me. You really are mule-headed! Not only is your feeling for a colleague most tepid, it turns out that you also utterly lack any understanding of the deference due of a host to his guests!”

Now it turns out that Fourth-grade Lei was diffident by nature. Seeing how Fifth-grade Pei really had his heart set on making poached carp, he said to Second-grade Zou, “Mr. Pei does not go in for karmic retribution, so it looks as if there is no saving this fish. Yet today as he is acting as our host, and wants to take this fish to offer us, how can we be adamant in refusing



him? As I see it, it is not that we really mean to kill this fish, let's just say that its allotted span has run out today and there is thus no saving it." Immediately the Censor burst out, "Mr. Lei, you really are spineless! How do you come to be arguing on both sides at once? If you want him to release me and he proves unwilling, you should continue to reason with him. How can you turn around and persuade Classmate Zou to give up the thought of rescuing me? Is it that you've been living on a tight budget and haven't had any fish to eat in a long time, so that you're hoping for a chance to eat your fill when the poached carp is ready?"

All the Censor could do was to turn again to Second-grade Zou, saying, "Classmate! Classmate! Don't tell me you're just putting on a show of friendship! A few insincere high-sounding words, and that's that? Will you not let out so much as another peep on my behalf? Of old it's been truly said, 'When one is to die and the other to live, the true depth of feeling comes clear.' If it were not that today I come to die and you to live, how should I ever have known that your feelings for your classmate are as shallow as this? If one day the term of my release comes, you just wait till I've returned to my old form—can I not do as that Secretary Zhai did and hang those words of spite up at my door for you to see? Classmate, classmate, I only fear that when you come to regret this, it will be too late!" Though the Censor was shouting and making quite a racket, host and guests all behaved exactly as if they had not heard a thing.

Then Fifth-grade Pei called in the kitchen servant Wang Shi-liang, since he was a skilled cook and made the best poached carp. Pei handed the fish over to him, saying, "We want it to be both good and fast. Otherwise we'll take you out just like that Zhao Gan and serve you up fifty lashes of the whip." Wang Shi-liang answered that he understood and reached over to pick up the fish. The Censor was so terrified that the three souls flew out the top of his head and the seven spirits sank through the floor. He wept pitiously, and said, "In the old days, we colleagues were as inseparable as brothers. Why is it that today no matter how I beg you, you think only of killing me? Ah, I have it: you surely envy me the administrative seal—that's why you have brewed up this villainy. I'll have you know, this seal was bestowed on me by the authorities; I did not come by it through plotting! But if you'll only agree to let me go home, I'll resign this instant. What is so hard about that?" When he'd said this, he once more burst into tears. Yet, who'd have imagined, his colleagues acted as if they had not heard! And the Censor was rushed straight off to the kitchen.

In no time at all a chopping block had been brought over and the Censor laid on top of it. When he looked up, he saw it was the very man who had always served him as cook. He yelled out, "Wang Shi-liang! Can you not see that I am Third-Granddad Xue? If I hadn't passed all those Wu regional recipes on to you, what dishes would you have been able to come up with on your own, that all your masters should play up to you so? Now you should consider the debt of gratitude you owe to me for bringing you up in the world. Hurry now, and report who I am to all the granddads, and have

me sent along home! What do you mean by putting me up on the chopping board like this?"

Yet strangely Wang Shi-liang paid not the least attention. Picking up the knife in his right hand, he pushed down with his left on the fish's head. This so discomfited the Censor that he flew into a rage. He snarled, "You cur! So you save all your fawning for Fifth-grade Pei and have no fear of me! Do you imagine I have no means of getting back at you?" He began to thrash about, and flipped his tail right up in Wang Shi-liang's face, catching him just like the slap of an open palm to the side of the head, leaving him with eyes dimmed and ears ringing. The cook brought both hands up to cover his face and let the knife fall clattering to the floor. As he stooped back down to pick up the knife, he sneered, "All right, fish! If you're so sassy, let's just wait and see how you like swimming around in my pot!"

It turns out that making poached carp calls for the sharpest knife possible—the fish must be sliced as thin as snowflakes, to be dipped into boiling water for just a moment and then scooped out. With the addition of a little pepper and some sesame oil, it comes out naturally tender and fresh-tasting. So Wang Shi-liang went once more to whet his knife. The Censor, when his repeated calls still brought no response, let out a mournful sigh, and thought, "When that knife is sharpened, my life is at an end. Thinking back now on the time I lay sick at home, that seems bearable compared to this. Why did I ever steal out alone, to undergo this torment? If only I'd never seen East Pool, or, even if I'd seen it, if only I'd never thought to go in bathing. Or having gone in, if only I'd never wished to turn into a fish! If I hadn't wished for that, I'd never have received He Bo's summons, and all this would never have happened. Still, before I'd become a fish there was the little fish egging me on; after I'd become a fish, that Zhao Gan came along to trick me. It is all the workings of fate, and I've brought it on myself. How can I blame anyone else? I only pity my poor wife, left alone in our residence, without son or daughter—on whom can she rely? If only I could somehow get a message to her, so that I could die without regrets!" As he was moaning and weeping like this, Wang Shi-liang took the freshly honed blade and chopped off his head with a single stroke. Truly,

While three inches of breath remain,  
who's willing to give up the least advantage?  
When the six-foot body passes,  
it all fades like a dream on a spring day.

Alas, poor Censor!

Now while over here Wang Shi-liang had just chopped off the fish's head, back in the official residence in the district administration compound, Censor Xue suddenly sprang upright on his bier. Forget about Madam Gu, who, being a woman, was nearly frightened to death—even all those household servants watching over the body wagged their heads and let their tongues loll out, saying, "Strange! We've been keeping close watch all along, and no

cat has jumped over the body. How is it then that the corpse has been drawn upright?" Then the Censor gave a sigh and said, "How many days is it that I've been unconscious?" His wife replied, "Don't try to scare me! You've been dead for over twenty days, and we wondered whether you could ever live again." The Censor said, "When did I ever die? I just had a dream. I never guessed I'd been dreaming that long." Then he called out to the servants, "Go over to look in on my three colleagues. Right now they're sitting in the hall, getting ready to eat poached carp. You tell them to put down their chopsticks and not to eat it. Have them come over right away to my residence to have a word with me."

Sure enough, the colleagues were in the hall drinking, and the poached carp had just been brought in. They were just making ready to pick up their chopsticks, when suddenly Censor Xue's messenger announced, "The Censor has come around. He requests that you three gentlemen not eat the fish, but come at once to the ministry to have a word." Those three were so shocked they all leapt to their feet, saying, "To think that Doctor 'Eight Hundred' Li's diagnosis and the lamps in the Lao-zi temple were so uncannily accurate!" They rushed over to the Xue residence, calling out, "Congratulations, congratulations!" The Censor said, "Gentlemen, do you know what has happened? That golden carp you poached just now was yours truly. If it had not been for that knife stroke of Wang Shi-liang's, it's more than likely there would have been no waking from that dream."

The three of them stared vacantly, not taking in what he was saying. They said, "How could such a thing be possible? If it please Your Excellency, try telling it to us from the beginning, so that we may give you our undivided attention." Censor Xue said, "Just now when Zhang Bi arrived with the fish, Classmate Zou and Mr. Lei were playing backgammon, while you, Mr. Pei, were sitting to one side eating peaches, were you not? Zhang Bi reported that the fisherman Zhao Gan had hidden away the big fish and tried to pass off some little ones. Mr. Pei was furious, and had Zhao Gan given fifty lashes. Did this happen?" The three of them said, "Sure enough, it is as you say. But how is it that Your Excellency knows this in such detail?" The Censor said, "Now go and summon Zhao Gan, Zhang Bi, that soldier Hu Jian who watches the Greeting Fragrance Gate, and those two clerks of the Households and Penal Bureaus, along with the cook Wang Shi-liang, and let me ask them a few questions."

The three colleagues sent off servants to call the lot of them in. When they had all been assembled there, the Censor said, "Zhao Gan, you were fishing in East Pool and caught a golden carp about three feet long; on your wife's instructions, you hid it among the reeds, covered with an old straw poncho. When Zhang Bi came for fish you claimed not to have any large ones. But the fish was discovered by Zhang Bi, who carried it up to the Welcoming Fragrance Gate. There the gatekeeper Hu Jian said that Fifth Granddad Pei had sent an express note to summon him and he'd better make it quick. He then went inside the gate, where these two clerks were sitting facing each other, playing chess. One said, 'That fish is frightfully large! It will

certainly make good poached carp!' The other said, 'Such a lovely fish! It should be kept in the pond of the rear hall, not wasted on poaching.' When Wang Shi-liang held the fish down on the chopping board, the fish flipped its tail up and hit him in the face. He went again to sharpen his knife before letting the blade fall. Now, did all those things happen?"

Zhao Gan and the others all said in amazement, "Every one of them. But how did Granddad Xue come to know all this?" The Censor said, "I was that fish. Ever since being caught, I've been yelling without pause, demanding to be sent home, yet none of you paid me any heed. What was the meaning of that?"

Zhao Gan and the rest of them all kowtowed, saying, "Your servants truly heard nothing. If we had heard, how should we have dared not to send your eminence back to the ministry?" The Censor also asked Prefect Pei, "When you, sir, wanted to make poached carp, Classmate Zou repeatedly urged you to release the fish, and Mr. Lei chimed in to the same effect. Yet you would not listen, instead calling Wang Shi-liang and urging him to set about his business. Thereupon I burst out crying, saying, 'In vain have I been your colleague all this while, that today you are hell-bent on killing me! Was this the action of a man of humane sentiments? Now forget for the time being Mr. Pei's lack of courtesy; Classmate Zou, and you too, Mr. Lei, did not intercede with a single word on my behalf. What am I to make of this?"

The three of them simply looked at one another, saying, "When did we ever hear the least sound?" And they rose together to beg forgiveness. The Censor laughed, saying, "As long as this fish did not die, I could not live. What's past is past; there is no need to mention the matter further." With this he dismissed Zhao Gan and the others. The three colleagues also took their leave and returned to their homes. They threw the fish into the water and swore that from that moment on they would never eat fish again.

It turns out that when the Censor had been crying out and weeping, there had never been any sound at all; all that happened was that the fish's mouth opened and closed. So there was good reason for the three colleagues and Zhao Gan and the rest to have heard nothing.

Now when Madam Gu reflected back on the wording of the slip from the Lao-zi temple, there was not one thing which had not been fulfilled. So she told the Censor in full detail of the matter of the fortune-slip and the votive offering she'd made; she hoped to see to the fulfilling of the vows she'd made. The Censor said in amazement, "After all the time I've been here, I'd only heard that there was a Lao-zi temple on Qing-cheng Mountain, which drew quite a number of pilgrims. How could I have known that it possessed magical efficacy like this?"

Right away he began seven days of fasting and prayer, and then, setting lamps and incense in readiness, prepared to go in person to the temple to fulfill the vows. At the same time he sent people to make cost estimates for lumber, for the setting up of the golden image, and for all the necessary labor. Drawing on his personal fortune and on his government salary, he made the

necessary purchases, and awaited an auspicious day to begin the work. On the morning of the seventh day, he dismissed his servants, and, accompanied only by a pageboy of twelve or thirteen, set out alone from his residence, prostrating himself at every step, toward Qing-cheng Mountain. Just when he'd got halfway up the mountain slope, as he was making his obeisance, he suddenly heard someone calling out to him, saying, "Censor Xue. You know what?" The Censor gave a start, and when he looked up, there was a herdboy in a broad straw hat, holding a small flute in his hand, seated sideways on the back of a blue cow, who had just rounded a bend in the mountain slope. Censor Xue said, "And what is it that you'd have me know?" That herdboy said, "Did you know that among the immortals there was a certain Qin Gao, who first ascended to Heaven astride a scarlet carp? One night at the table of the Queen Mother of the West, he stole a glance at that Tian Si-fei who plays the Cloud-glockenspiel, and succumbed to worldly thoughts. For this the two of them were banished into the mortal world. Now, your former self was just this Qin Gao; and that wife of yours was Tian Si-fei. Since your arrival at your post here, you've been enamored of the realm of the senses, unable to leave it behind. So you were sent to act temporarily as Crimson Carp of East Pool and to undergo all manner of sufferings, so that you might change your ways. Why do you still not come to your senses? Can it be that you still have not awakened from your dream?"

The Censor said, "According to what you say, I was once an immortal. Yet now I've fallen into delusion. What I need, then, is a teacher to prompt my memory." The herdboy said, "If it's prompting you want, the person is closer than a thousand leagues; in fact, as close as the end of your nose. That master 'Eight Hundred' Li of Cheng-du Prefecture—is he not an immortal? Back in Han times, he was called Han Kang; and was there in Chang-an all along, selling medicines and never changing his price. Later on a woman saw through his disguise, and he changed his name to 'Eight Hundred' Li. People all say it's because he received eight hundred secret cures from Sun Si-miao. What they don't know is that his skills are far superior to those of Sage Sun; in fact, he's been alive for over eight hundred years. Now the term of your banishment and that of your wife will soon be at an end, and you are both due to be restored to the register of immortals. Why don't you ask that 'Eight Hundred' Li, and have him clear away your worldly delusion?"

Now it just happened that Madam Gu had only told him about the matter of the votive offering, and hadn't told him yet about "Eight Hundred" Li and his diagnosis. Thus when the herdboy mentioned the name "Eight Hundred," the Censor had not the least idea who that was. He thought to himself, "What does a herdboy in the mountain wilds know? He's just making up this whole outlandish tale; it's not worth taking seriously. Let me just stick to fulfilling these vows, prostrating myself at every step—that is the important thing." He'd hardly expected that as soon as his head was turned, that herdboy and ox would both change into a wisp of purple mist, which floated up into the sky. Truly,

Face to face with immortals, you still don't know them;  
how can you hope to know your former lives?

The Censor, already somewhat mystified by the uncanny nature of his transformation into a fish, on seeing this herdboy float away on a breeze, was even more at a loss. He tried to settle his doubts, thinking, "Was even that herdboy part of a dream? Yet in the end he couldn't make up his mind just what to think."

In time he'd made his way all the way to the Lao-zi shrine at the top of the mountain, and kowtowed in thanks for the protection of the spirits which had allowed him to return to life. All that remained was to fix an auspicious day to fulfill the vow to rebuild the temple. When he'd paid his respects and rose to leave, he noticed that the spirit-image of Lao-zi had exactly the appearance of that herdboy. And there by the dais was an image of a blue cow just like the one the herdboy had been riding. Only then did the realization come to him who it was who had appeared to him, and he exclaimed, "It's clear as can be that that herdboy just now was the supreme Lao-zi, guiding me to return to the ranks of immortals. Yet I've got eyes in my head to no good purpose, and let this chance slip by me! With that he threw himself down again and begged forgiveness."

When he'd returned home, he told his wife in full detail all that the herdboy had said. Only then did she say, "When you were dangerously ill, we invited in the master 'Eight Hundred' Li from Cheng-du Prefecture to come examine you. He said the case was 'mortal yet not mortal,' and that we must wait after your death for half a month to twenty-odd days, and you'd gradually come back around of your own accord; there was no need to administer medicines. When he was about to leave, he said again, 'That fortune-slip is true as true can be. Only after you've seen the fish will it become clear.' As I see it, if he can tell the past and future like that, he really must be an immortal. Never mind about Lord Lao-zi appearing to you and directing you to go to him; even if he were not an immortal, just for his trouble in coming to diagnose you, and so accurately at that, you ought to go and thank him."

When the Censor had heard all this, he said, "So there was this layer of circumstance as well! Indeed, how should I fail to go and thank him?" He performed seven more days of ritual purification, and set off on foot for Cheng-du to seek out Master "Eight Hundred" Li. Just by luck, on the day he arrived, "Eight Hundred" Li was sitting in his medicine shop. As soon as he saw the Censor, he asked him, "So have you woken from your dream yet?" The Censor threw himself down on the ground and said, "Your disciple has now awakened. I only request, Master, that you instruct me, so that I may free myself of this world and quickly hear of the great way." "Eight Hundred" Li laughed and said, "Now you're not some novice with no spiritual root who needs to learn about alchemical philters and all that. In your former existence you were a banished immortal—the supreme Lord Lao-zi has already explicitly revealed as much to you. You don't recognize

yourself, and come asking another to recognize you? Can it be that you know only a certain Censor of Qing-cheng County?"

On hearing these words, realization came to the Censor in a flood, and he prostrated himself in thanks, saying, "Now your disciple has well and truly awakened! Yet there remains the matter of the vow at the Lao-zi temple. When I have fulfilled this vow, I'll quit my post and bring my wife along, so that together with Master we may make good our return to the immortal rolls!" With that he took leave of "Eight Hundred" Li and hurried back to Qing-cheng County, where he told his wife all that "Eight Hundred" Li had said. She also realized the truth upon hearing these words, that she had been that Tian Si-fei who played the Cloud-glockenspiel before the Western Queen Mother, who had fallen from that state as a result of worldly stirring. That night she and the Censor settled down in separate chambers, burning incense and meditating, striving to realize their karmic destiny. The next day, the Censor sent his seal of office over to Second-grade Zou, asking him to take over the post, and submitted a report to his superiors. In the meanwhile, he was urging on the workers in the construction of the great halls and courts, and of the golden image. It was all most impressive and orderly.

At last the day came when the work was completed, and Second-grade Zou, in order to fulfill a vow of his own, wanted to pitch in part of his salary to help with the costs. He arranged to meet with the two county prefects, whereupon they all went over to the Censor's quarters to inform him of their wishes. The servants thought he was in his room meditating, and went in to announce the visitors. But all they saw was a poem left lying on the writing desk. There was no telling where the Censor and the lady had gone. The servants handed that poem to Second-grade Zou to read. It was composed by the Censor as a farewell to his colleagues and to the clerks and people of the county. The poem read:

Through dreamed fish-body, happily unscathed;  
if I'd been truly fish, then death too would be true.  
Wherever life is death must be as well;

I long to part from life and death, free from this world's red dust.

When Second-grade Zou had done reading, he could not contain his sighs, and said, "If my classmate meant to take orders and cultivate his soul, he ought to have left us with at least a word of farewell. As it is, I cannot help feeling a deep regret. Still, I'll wager he's not gone far." And he sent people to search all around, yet there was no further trace of him. Just as Zou was standing there dumbfounded, Fifth-grade Pei laughed, saying, "You two gentlemen are really dense! I'll bet he's still unable to shake off his love of the aquatic life; more than likely he's gone to play carp again. Just go down to East Pool and catch him, and there'll be an end of it. . . ."

Enough of these wild speculations of the three colleagues. To return to Censor Xue and his wife, they were headed to nowhere else but to call on "Eight

Hundred" Li. That "Eight Hundred" Li laughed and said to the Censor, "Your former self was Qin Gao. Since you've not too far to go in your rise to immortality, you should have a red carp waiting for you at East Pool. Today, we'll return your red carp to you as before. What say you to that?" And to the lady, "Since your banishment, Dong Shuang-cheng has temporarily filled in for you playing the Cloud-glockenspiel before the Queen Mother of the West. Now it is time for you to play again."

Naturally the race of immortals are in on all the secrets, and there's no need for any incantations or spiritual techniques—with a laugh they understand all. At that time, the Censor and his wife said in turn to "Eight Hundred" Li, "Through all these years of selling cures and practicing medicine, saving and enlightening the multitudes, your accumulated merit is quite considerable. What need have you to linger in the world of mortals?" "Eight Hundred" Li said, "It is my destiny to make the ascent along with you. I have been waiting for you here." In a moment, auspicious clouds twined about them and prodigious mists appeared in profusion. The music of immortals rang out in the heavens, and phoenixes and cranes soared about. Immortal boys and girls clasping banners and canopies came forward to lead them on their way. The Censor on his red carp, the lady riding a lavender haze, and "Eight Hundred" Li astride a white crane, they ascended into Heaven together. Young and old throughout the city of Cheng-du all saw it and made obeisance toward the skies, with no end of sighing at the marvel. To this day, the wondrous "Bridge of Immortal Ascent" marks the spot where they ascended.

The poem says,

Confused and churning, this plot is novel;  
a man turned fish, and fish made man again.  
Once recognized, dream form can't hinder nature;  
through form to perfect nature is the way of the immortal.